

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822): *The Defence of Poetry*

- I. Background and Biography
 - A. Shelley was the son of a baronet, but he developed a radical reputation
 - B. Expelled from Oxford for his tract, *The Necessity of Atheism*
 - C. A friend of Lord Byron's
 - D. Eloped with William Godwin's 16-year-old daughter, Mary, in 1814 (though already married)
 - E. Drowned in Italy in 1822
- II. *Defence of Poetry*: Publication history
 - A. Completed in 1821, but not published until 1840, after Shelley's death
 - B. Written in response to Thomas Love Peacock's "The Four Ages of Poetry," published 1820
- III. Peacock's "The Four Ages of Poetry"
 - A. Begins with a survey of four poetic ages from the ancient world
 - B. Compares ancient poetic ages to four ages of poetry in the modern world
 - C. Four Ages of Poetry (Ancient)
 1. Iron: age of the rude bards, before written letters
 2. Gold: Homer (poetry became an art form)
 3. Silver: Vergil, Aristophanes, Horace, and Juvenal (poetry of civilized life)
 4. Brass: poets rejected the polish and learning of the silver age
 - D. Four Ages of Poetry (Modern)
 1. Theme is degeneration; quality of poetry has declined since ancient times
 2. Iron: songs of the troubadours and rhymes of the minstrels
 3. Gold: Ariosto and Shakespeare
 4. Milton: Peacock places Milton between the Gold and Silver Ages
 5. Silver: Dryden, Pope, Goldsmith, and Collins
 6. Brass: Poets of Peacock's own time (artificial and anti-poetical)
 - E. Memorable quotations
 1. "The egregious confraternity of rhymesters, known by the name of the Lake Poets"
 2. "A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are past."
- IV. Shelley's response
 - A. Like Wordsworth, Shelley has a very high view of poets and poetry
 - B. Goes back to beginnings of society and language: "In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry"
 - C. "To be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful"
 - D. Poet also apprehends "the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression." (Very Coleridgian idea!)
 - E. Poets
 1. Are "the founders of civil society"
 2. Are "the institutors of laws"
 - F. A poet
 1. Sees the present as it is
 2. Also sees "the future in the present," that is, the present as it ought to be
 3. "participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one"
 - G. Poetry
 1. "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar."

- 2. “makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world.”
- 3. “is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge.”
- H. In contrast to Peacock
- I. Poetry is never more needed than when selfishness and the “calculating principle” (a reference to utilitarianism) lead to an accumulation of materials (i.e., materialism)
- J. [His] Present age is not an age of decay, but rather an age of great achievement.
- K. Closing statement: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”
- V. Similarities between Wordsworth (“Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*) and Shelley:
 - A. Both have a very high opinion of poetry and poets
 - B. Both argue that poets have an uncommon sensitivity that sets them apart from the common people
 - C. Both argue that poetry is universal and encompasses all other fields of knowledge
 - D. Both argue that the poet has a broader temporal perspective