

*A Defence of Poetry* – Shelley's Philosophy and Other Observations

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In order to understand P. B. Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (1821, 1840) it is important for us to look into the aesthetic/cultural/literary situation of the contemporary period. William Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) had already established the position of the poet as an integral part of the society. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) had confirmed the powers of a secondary imagination behind the workings of a poetic mind. The 'defence' for and of poetry was already a contemporary issue in an atmosphere which was flooded by empirical knowledge and scientific advancement. To many, poetry was redundant and 'useless' in a society which was progressing. Poetry seemed to belong to a former and more 'primitive' world where scientific knowledge had not yet made a presence. Hence, there was a conflict between the modern, the contemporary, and the world of poetry. In other words, the spirit of the age did not seem favourable to poetry.

Thomas Love Peacock's (1785 – 1866) *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820), was written with precisely this picture in mind. He had evolved four repetitive cycles for the evolution of poetry, the iron, gold, silver and brass ages, from the primitive to the modern in order to show how poetry dwindled, with time. Peacock's style was jocular and condescending, to say the least. He was a man specialising in satire and was an unsuccessful poet. His essay had no redeeming feature for poetry.

While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age. ... Mr. Wordsworth picks up village legends from old women and sextons; and Mr. Coleridge, ... superadds the dreams of crazy theologians and the mysticism of German metaphysics, and favors the world with visions in verse, in which the quadruple elements of sexton, old woman, Jeremy Taylor, and Immanuel Kant are harmonized into a delicious poetical compound. (Wimsatt and Brooks, 416)

This essay was 'provocative', to say the least.

Percy B. Shelley was a close friend of Thomas Love Peacock and there are many letters that the former wrote to the latter, on several issues. Peacock's 'The Four Ages of Poetry' was published in Charles Ollier's *Literary Miscellany*, in 1820. This was, interestingly, the only edition of the periodical. Reading his friend's essay Shelley had written to him on February 15, 1821.

The world is pale with the sickness of such stuff. At the same time your anathemas against poetry itself excited me to a sacred rage, or *caloëthes scribendi* of vindicating the insulted Muses. I had the greatest possible desire to break a lance with you, within the lists of a magazine, in honour of my mistress, Urania; but God willed that I should be too lazy, and wrested the victory from your hope: since first having unhorsed poetry, and the universal sense of the wisest in all ages, an easy conquest would have remained to you in me, the knight of the shield of shadow and the lance of gossamere. (qtd. Dowden, 383)

A few days later, Shelley's biographer Edward Dowden assures us, that the lethargy was thrown away and *A Defence of Poetry* was written in February - March 1821. The essay was ready for the next issue