Sidney's Bad Poetry

By Brad Tuggle (University of Alabama)

What constitutes bad poetry? Well, its name is legion: *schmaltz*, *pabulum*, *hokum*. When the "poet" resorts to the melodramatic and trite. Like a Hallmark card—vapid and sentimental. All of these terms of opprobrium call out poetry for its emotional imbecility. Other terms focus on prosody: plodding, workaday, stale, repetitive. Both the intellectual stupidity and the immature metrical form of such poems are largely matters of style, failures of aesthetics. Some poets are simply bad, namelessly turning out drivel for the masses. These are the poets that lie behind the Hallmark card industry, or the bubblegum pop factories of old. Many have also turned out drivel privately in countless teenage journals (your humble author among them). These are all simple cases of bad poetry, easy to recognize and condemn, so obviously lacking in originality and energy. But what happens when a good poet writes bad verse? What are we to make of Bob Dylan's "Wiggle Wiggle"[1]? Could only a great poet write such awfully bad verse? Is there in fact something ironically masterful in this song's stupidity? "Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle like a bowl of soup. / Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle like a rolling hoop."[2] To borrow the opening line of Greil Marcus's

[1] *Under the Red Sky* (1990).
[2] https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/wiggle-wiggle/.

negative review of another Dylan album, "What is this shit?"[3] Devotees will tie themselves in knots to show how brilliant a song like "Wiggle Wiggle" is, whether as parody or not.

Similarly, devotees of English Renaissance verse have for over a century been responding to C.S. Lewis's notion of "drab" verse by rescuing their favorite poetry from the charge.[4] It has been as if it were somehow important to show that Sidney and his company are incapable of bad verse. In the last two centuries, Sidney's *Arcadia*, in particular, has attracted plenty of detractors who see in its sprawling lack of form (in the *New Arcadia* at least) a lack of proper style and a lack of engagement. Thus, in a rescuing response, both the eclogues and the scattered songs and sonnets have received well-deserved, corrective close analysis and praise. In 1967, Neil Rudenstine could claim that the "poetry of the *Arcadia* has received very little critical comment, and most of that has been adverse."[5] Rudenstine and David Kalstone remedied this situation with their book-length treatments of Sidney's poetic development.[6] The impetus for these books was, as Rudenstine's comment suggests, to foster interest in Sidney's Arcadian poems as good poetry. Their readings of these poems emphasize the well-ordered, decorous, and effective combinations of form and content, and the energetic use of ornament, in order to establish their reputation as good poetry. Other books have focused on specific groups of poems in the *Arcadia*, most notably Robert Stillman's monograph on the Arcadian eclogues.[7] Appreciation for the Arcadian poems in particular has thus been established.

But might we also take at least some of the badness for what it is? Mightn't it be time to return to some of the old complaints, such as Hazlitt's that the Arcadian sonnets are "jejune, far-fetched and frigid"?[8] In the critical revival of so many Arcadian poems as good, we risk losing perspective on the poems in the *Arcadia* that are intentionally, creatively *bad*. Such aesthetic failures might be fruitfully examined under the aegis of style as described by, for example, David Wilson-Okamura in *Spenser's International*

[3] Review of *Self Portrait*, *Rolling Stone*, June 8, 1970. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/self-portrait-107056/.

[4] As did Lewis himself, who saw Sidney and Spenser as the first "Golden" poets after the "Drab" age of the earlier sixteenth century. See *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century: Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954).

[5] Neil L. Rudenstine, *Sidney's Poetic Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 53.

[6] David Kalstone, *Sidney's Poetry: Contexts and Interpretations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

[7] Robert E. Stillman, *Sidney's Poetic Justice: The Old Arcadia, Its Eclogues, and Renaissance Pastoral Traditions* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986).

[8] *Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth*, in *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, vol. 5 (London: J. M. Dent, 1902), 326.

Style and Richard Danson Brown in *The Art of the Faerie Queene*.[9] Stylistics is a helpful way to categorize and interpret bad poetry as well as good. And as both Wilson-Okamura and Brown show time and again the best stylistics to apply to poetry is the stylistics contemporary with the poet. How do the poems fit the stylistic theories and terminologies of their contemporary aesthetic culture? Much work has been done recently (by Wilson-Okamura, Brown, and others) on the style of Spenser. Less recent work has been done on the style of Sidney. And whereas the recent stylistic criticism of Spenser's works is heavily involved in a revision and complication of earlier stylistic pronouncements (by C.S. Lewis, for example), so too should a renewed look at stylistics in Sidney refresh the canonical views of such stylistically-minded scholars of Sidney as Kalstone, Rudenstine, Richard Lanham,[10] and Stillman. And just as Wilson-Okamura and Brown have situated their stylistic analyses within the poet's own stylistic pronouncements, scholars of Sidney should look to Sidney's aesthetic criticism for the terms with which to examine his own practice.

Sidney himself relishes a good and colorful description of bad and dull poetry, as readers can see in the diatribes at the end of the *Defence of Poesy*, a treatise which is largely dependent on answering the critics of poetry by claiming that poetry itself is not the problem—bad poetry is the problem. And so Sidney spends ample time describing that bad poetry, which is bad for two broad reasons. First poetry is bad when it is *morally* dubious. Instead of moving readers (if it moves them at all) to good, it moves them to evil. Instead of presenting an ideal golden world, it presents an all-too-real brazen one. Its morally vacuous universe is simply a waste of time when compared to the mimetically successful poetry that raises readers to magnanimity. There is plenty of morally bad poetry in the two *Arcadia*s and *Astrophil and Stella*. In fact the canvas is so large for such criticism that I will confine myself in this brief essay to a different strain of badness—the *stylistically* bad.

Sidney has much, too, to say about stylistically good and bad poetry in *The Defence of Poesy*. Sidney's *Defence* makes the claim that the hallmark virtue of poetry is its ability

[9] Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Brown, *The Art of the Faerie Queene* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

[10] For Lanham's treatments of the style of Sidney's Arcadian poetry, see, for example, "Opaque Style in Elizabethan Fiction," *Pacific Coast Philology* 1 (1966), 25-31; and *The Old Arcadia*, in Walter R. Davis, *Sidney's Arcadia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

to *move*.[11] Several times in the *Defence*, Sidney uses the language of movement to describe the efficacy of poetry *contra* history and philosophy. The philosopher can define virtue. "But to be moved to do that which we know, or to be moved with desire to know: *hoc opus, hic labor est*" (226).[12] "It is not *gnosis* but *praxis* must be the fruit. And how *praxis* can be, without being moved to practice, it is no hard matter to consider" (226). The ability to *move* rather than simply *teach* is what Sidney calls poetry's "most excellent work" (228). The classical technical term Sidney uses for this moving ability is "*energeia*" which he translates as "forcibleness." For George Puttenham, *energeia* is poetry's ability for "inwardly working a stir to the mind . . . with a strong and virtuous operation."[13] Poetry without such *energeia* is, according to Sidney, bad poetry. In speaking of erotic lyric poetry in particular, Sidney decries the lack of *energeia* in so much Petrarchanist poetry:

> But truly many of such writings as come under the banner of unresistible love, if I were a mistress, would never persuade me they were in love: so coldly they apply fiery speeches, as men that had rather read lovers' writings—and so caught up certain swelling phrases which hang together, like a man that once told my father that the wind was at north-west and by south, because he would be sure to name winds enough—than that in truth they feel those passions, which easily (as I think) may be bewrayed by that same forcibleness or *energia* (as the Greeks call it) of the writer.
>
> (*Defence* 246)

In Aristotle, *energeia* means action or (bringing to) actuality, the movement towards bringing into reality.[14] In Sidney, it means poetry's ability to *cause change*, whether to elicit real emotion or spur to real action. Though mentioned just once in the *Defence*, *energeia* has often been considered central to Sidney's conception of poetry. Rudenstine invokes the term constantly in his appraisal of Sidney's poetic development. More recently, a special issue of *The Sidney Journal* was dedicated to *energeia*.[15] Though each article in that issue presents a different conception of *energeia*, all of them share the idea

[11] Overtly at least, *pace* Bates's insistence on a second, insistent, ironizing voice in the *Defence*. See Catherine Bates, *On Not Defending Poetry: Defence and Indefensibility in Sidney's* Defence of Poesy (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017).

[12] All quotations from the *Defence* are cited by page number in *Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[13] *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 227.

[14] For Aristotle's use and discussion of *energeia*, see, first, *Metaphysics* 1050. But compare with his use of the term elsewhere (e.g., *Rhetoric* 1410-13 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b). For secondary sources on the complications inherent in Aristotle's use of the term, including the tension with the related term *entelecheia*, see Daniel Lochman, "'The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia is for the body . . .' and soul: Energeia and Enaction in Sidney's Apology and Arcadia," *Sidney Journal* 38.2 (2020), 9-10, footnotes 11 and 12.

[15] *Sidney Journal* 38.2 (2020).

that it entails movement. According to Aristotle, as Ilona Bell writes, it is "activity which brings the capacity for action to life."[16] Bell writes, in her Sidneian reading of Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, "*Energeia* creates a sense of movement, process, and coming-into-being, or coming-into-presence" ("Drunk" 105-06). What is created, moved into actuality, by poetry is, according to Sidney, "many Cyruses," the real-life mimetic force of golden ideals, the human enactment of fictional examples. *Energeia* is a term for this ethico-poetic effect. Thus, it is treated as a moral term, a way to describe the moral effectiveness of poetry that, in the words of Daniel Lochman, "aims at the actualization of virtue in characters and readers by setting in motion a transformative process wherein virtue unfolds into presence in a complex, sometimes vicious yet beautifully complex fictive world" ("Countess" 27-28).

But elsewhere in the issue the same authors adumbrate more stylistic notions of "vitality and power" (Bell, "Drunk" 101). And Stillman admits that the actual use of the word in the *Defence* is stylistic, the moral argument only showing up in other parts of the *Defence*.[17] The word has thus been taken out of context as a convenient way of describing something *else* in the *Defence*. That something else (movement towards morally good action) is indeed perhaps the cornerstone, the architectonic idea of the entire treatise. But of all the authors in this special issue it is Christian Anton Gerard who returns our reading of the word in the *Defence* to its native context of amorously delightful *style*. In contrast to the other authors in the issue, Gerard claims that "*energeia* is rightly understood as a lover's relationship between poetic theory and poetic practice."[18] Gerard tries to show how Sidney's use of the word in the context of a stylistic judgement about erotic poetry cannot be ignored; rather, that context must be built into our understanding of Sidney's use of the word. Gerard, himself a poet, thus provides the loving, stylistic analysis of *Astrophil and Stella* as a test case for *energeia*, a task that many have undertaken and that Gerard accomplishes in passages such as this:

> The sonnet as a received form provides the structure for the making of a line, but not for the sentence's deployment over lines. Sidney's language becomes sharp as he works the syllabic movement of the line, but he is able to achieve emotional honesty only if each line

[16] Ilona Bell, "'Drunk with Delight of Change'--the Play of *Energeia* in Wroth's 'Pamphilia to Amphilanthus,'" *Sidney Journal* 38.2 (2020): 102.

[17] Robert E. Stillman, "Ripening the Fiction: Arcadian Repentance and *Energeia*," *Sidney Journal* 38.2 (2020): 56-57.

[18] Christian Anton Gerard, "Energic Pillow Talk: Philip Sidney's *Defence* in Bed with Sweet Poesy," *Sidney Journal* 38.2 (2020): 71.

> becomes part of the whole experience, much like each thought is part of the experience of love.[19]

Gerard notes the sharp affective and stylistic distinction between energetic and non-energetic poems:

> *Energeia*, for Sidney, is what separates one kind of poesy from another, one kind of prayer one says because it's been trained in them from the kind of prayer one makes in conversation with God.[20]

In other words, *energeia* involves mimetically produced emotional authenticity. Such poetry, Gerard writes, "makes a consecrated union between reader and writer, poem and reader" ("Energic" 80). Such consecration can be difficult to describe, and difficult to account for. But its inscrutability, its inexplicability, should not blind us to its importance. True, one can sometimes only point to success with wonder, as Gerard sometimes does: "If one cannot call [Sidney's] Psalm IV's last three lines in quintain 4 'forcible,' then I don't know what is" ("Energic" 89). Aesthetic sensibility and judgment cannot always be logically argued. But this does not mean a poem's particular *energeia* cannot or should not be noted. When Sidney faults erotic poetry for its lack of *energeia*, he is calling it bad poetry. We might learn from this audacity.

The songs and sonnets scattered throughout the *Old Arcadia* present a wonderful occasion to practice one's ability to discern good poetry from bad.[21] Fifty poems of varying length, the majority attributed to one of the six main characters (Basilius, Gynecia, Pyrocles/Cleophila, Musidorus/Dorus, Pamela, and Philoclea), present a wonderful cornucopia of verse forms equal to that of the eclogues. Stylistically, many of the poems are good. In my own evaluation, I label twenty-two "strong" or "strong-ish." But what about the ones that are bad, the twenty-four I find "weak" or "weak-ish." What makes them bad? Why and how did Sidney make them bad? To begin to answer these questions I want to consider just two of the weak poems: Charita's sonnet, "My true love hath my heart, and I have his" (*OA* 45); and Basilius's sonnet, "Let not old age disgrace my high desire" (*OA* 15). Charita's poem is an invention of Musidorus meant to distract Miso. This context is important, since the badness of the poem fits the uncritical listener:

[19] Ibid., 75.

[20] Ibid., 76.

[21] The poems of the *Old Arcadia* (*OA*) are quoted and cited from *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).

My true love hath my heart, and I have his,
By just exchange, one for the other given.
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss:
There never was a better bargain driven.

His heart in me, keeps me and him in one,
My heart in him, his thoughts and senses guides.
He loves my heart, for once it was his own:
I cherish his, because in me it bides.

His heart his wound received from my sight:
My heart was wounded, with his wounded heart,
For as from me on him his hurt did light,
So still methought in me his hurt did smart:
  Both equal hurt, in this change sought our blisse:
  My true love hath my heart, and I have his.

(*OA* 45)

Ringler (and Puttenham, though citing a version edited for musical performance) cites this as an example of *serpentina carmina*, but it is certainly not a great example. The classic example of *serpentina carmina* to which Ringler points is Ovid, *Fasti* ii.235-36, but Ovid's chiastic, elegant repetition (*una dies Fabios ad bellum miserat omnes: / ad bellum missos perdidit una dies*) gives the lie to Charita's" stunted, inartistic version. *Astrophil and Stella* 24 is a better example, the first line's "Rich fooles" being chiastically transformed at the end of the poem into "folly rich."[22] Most good examples, like the Ovidian example just cited, involve pieces of lines being rearranged, not whole lines being repeated verbatim as in poetic *coronas*. And the only examples of Sidney exactly repeating the beginning and ending of a poem are *Certain Sonnets* 26 (in which the initial "No, no, no, no" of each stanza is repeated at the end) and the two poems of the *Four Foster Children of Desire* (which use a similar repetition). These three instances of long *epanalepsis*, being exact repetitions, do not fit the spirit of *serpentina carmina*. Though early readers of the poem thought it beautiful enough to set to music, and Ringler follows their lead by praising the poem as one of Sidney's "most exquisite lyrics," I disagree. Instead, I see Sidney deliberately putting a bad poem into the mouth of Charita, an invented character created in the romance for a parodic effect, much like the poems of

[22] All quotations from *Astrophil and Stella* are cited by poem number in *Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Dametas in the rest of the *Arcadia*. Strikingly, Ringler notes the "comic buffoonery" of the tale that Musidorus tells Miso to make her jealous; he even compares Charita's silly embrace of Dametas to "Titania caressing the translated Bottom" (*Poems* 406-07). Indeed, I see in Charita's lyric an obvious moment of satirical bad poetry very similar to the terrible verse of Bottom ("The raging rocks / And shivering shocks / Shall break the locks / Of prison gates" [*MND* 1.2.31-34]).[23]

If readers of Sidney are not open to the possibility of bad poetry in his *oeuvre* they miss some of Sidney's creative poetic variation (and much of his humor). Sidney, like Shakespeare, is a great poet who writes bad poetry strategically. In the case of "My true love hath my heart, and I have his," the placement of the poem in its narrative context can leave little doubt that it is a bad poem, a poem sung by an imagined, immoral, low-born character who is used merely to mock Miso. Charita is not a poet, but a poetaster, and her poem is not an instance of mastery but of poetastery. The insipid, tedious repetition in almost every line of some variation of the sentiment that their two hearts are intertwined is sickening to a refined aesthetic appetite. Far from being a "most exquisite lyric," Charita's poem is exactly the kind of poem Sidney decries in the *Defence*, a poem lacking in the energy or forcibleness required to convince a reader of the authenticity of the emotion. The last line falls bathetically, in a way that could make only a Shadwell (or a Miso) proud. Charita's poem is an early modern version of "Roses are red, violets are blue," nothing more. We misread Charita, and Musidorus's invention of this imagined character, if we think otherwise.

Though Charita's lyric is bad, it is a badness we expect. We might dismiss its badness as a trick Sidney is intentionally performing, a *good* example of form matching context. We expect a bad poem, and Sidney effectively delivers. However, not all of the bad poems in *Arcadia* come from the pens or mouths of dullards. Though some of Basilius's behavior is certainly childish, he is capable of love poetry of the highest order: for example, *OA* 38, "Phoebus farewell, a sweeter saint I serve"; the beautiful English madrigals *OA* 52 and 55; and several others. Basilius is capable of good poetry. But *OA* 15, I submit, is not good poetry:

> Let not old age disgrace my high desire,
> O heav'nly soul in human shape contained.

[23] *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

Old wood inflamed doth yield the bravest fire,
  When younger doth in smoke his virtue spend.

Ne let white hairs (which on my face do grow)
  Seem to your eyes of a disgraceful hue;
Since whiteness doth present the sweetest show,
  Which makes all eyes do honour unto you.

Old age is wise and full of constant truth;
  Old age well stayed from ranging humour lives;
Old age hath known whatever was in youth;
  Old age o'ercome, the greater honour gives.
    And to old age since you yourself aspire,
    Let not old age disgrace my high desire.

(*OA* 15)

This poem has a direct formal link to Charita's lyric— these are the only two poems in the *Arcadia* that repeat their first lines as their last. The reliance on dumb repetition is evident in *OA* 15's repeated "old age" phrases, which mirror the repeated "his heart/my heart" phrases of Charita's lyric. Such repetitions are not always dumb in Sidney. One of the more energetic examples is the repetition of "true" in *AS* 5. In that poem the list of true things in the first thirteen lines does real work that perfectly, poignantly sets up the volta in the last line: "and yet true, that I must *Stella* love." This repetition with a difference has verve, energy, and pathos precisely because it is not mere tired repetition like we get in the Polonius-like drone of Basilius's poem. Once again, Sidney strategically composes bad poetry that encourages a bathetic reading of the character uttering the poem. For Basilius is *precisely* a target for ridicule as an old lecher, *precisely* acting disgracefully in his grayer years. His poem requests a reprieve from harsh judgment, but the badness of the poem merely sharpens the criticism leveled at him. The badness of the poem reenforces his ridiculousness in a way that only a bad poem can. If we miss its badness, we miss some of the *Arcadia*'s poetic characterizations (both heroic and bathetic) of its lovers.

Thus, while Sidneians rightly take it as our given role to proselytize for the excellence of Sidney's poetry, we do both Sidney and his poems a disservice if we fail to recognize just how excellently he composes and employs bad poetry. Such poetry calls for critical consideration, nuanced appreciation, and careful evaluation. The criticism of bad

poetry is among the most important duties of the Sidneian scholar, a task that calls upon the objectivity and honesty of the critic in ways that seem to contradict our intelligent love-affair with the poet. But it is precisely in our attention to Sidney's bad poetry that we show both our *bona fides* as critics and our critical enjoyment of the work of the poet.