

IV. Poetry

(1) Poesy is a part of learning in measure of words, for the most part restrained, but in all other points extremely licensed, and doth truly refer to the imagination; which, being not tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure join that which nature hath severed, and sever that which nature hath joined, and so make unlawful matches and divorces of things—*Pictoribus atque poetis*, &c. It is taken in two senses in respect of words or matter. In the first sense, it is but a character of style, and belongeth to arts of speech, and is not pertinent for the present. In the latter, it is—as hath been said—one of the principal portions of learning, and is nothing else but feigned history, which may be styled as well in prose as in verse.

(2) The use of this feigned history hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul; by reason whereof there is, agreeable to the spirit of man, a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety, than can be found in the nature of things. Therefore, because the acts or events of true history have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, poesy feigneth acts and events greater and more heroical. Because true history propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice, therefore poesy feigns them more just in retribution, and more according to revealed Providence. Because true history representeth actions and events more ordinary and less interchanged, therefore poesy endueth them with more rareness and more unexpected and alternative variations. So as it appeareth that poesy serveth and conferreth to magnanimity, morality and to delectation. And therefore, it was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things. And we see that by these insinuations and congruities with man's nature and pleasure, joined also with the agreement and consort it hath with music, it hath had access and estimation in rude times and barbarous regions, where other learning stood excluded.

(3) The division of poesy which is aptest in the propriety thereof (besides those divisions which are common unto it with history, as feigned chronicles, feigned lives, and the appendices of history, as feigned epistles, feigned orations, and the rest) is into poesy narrative, representative, and allusive. The narrative is a mere imitation of history, with the excesses before remembered, choosing for subjects commonly wars and love, rarely state, and sometimes pleasure or mirth. Representative is as a visible history, and is an image of actions as if they were present, as history is of actions in nature as they are (that is) past. Allusive, or parabolical, is a narration applied only to express some special purpose or conceit; which latter kind of parabolical wisdom was much more in use in the ancient times, as by the fables of Æsop, and the brief sentences of the seven, and the use of hieroglyphics may appear. And the cause was (for that it was then of necessity to express any point of reason which was more sharp or subtle than the vulgar in that manner) because men in those times wanted both variety of examples and subtlety of conceit. And as hieroglyphics were before letters, so parables were before arguments; and nevertheless now and at all times they do retain much life and rigour, because reason cannot be so sensible nor examples so fit.

(4) But there remaineth yet another use of poesy parabolical, opposite to that which we last mentioned; for that tendeth to demonstrate and illustrate that which is taught or delivered, and this other to retire and obscure it—that is, when the secrets and mysteries of religion, policy, or philosophy, are involved

in fables or parables. Of this in divine poesy we see the use is authorised. In heathen poesy we see the exposition of fables doth fall out sometimes with great felicity: as in the fable that the giants being overthrown in their war against the gods, the earth their mother in revenge thereof brought forth Fame:

“Illam terra parens, ira irritat Deorum,
Extremam, ut perhibent, Cæo Enceladoque soroem,
Progeniuit.”

Expounded that when princes and monarchs have suppressed actual and open rebels, then the malignity of people (which is the mother of rebellion) doth bring forth libels and slanders, and taxations of the states, which is of the same kind with rebellion but more feminine. So in the fable that the rest of the gods having conspired to bind Jupiter, Pallas called Briareus with his hundred hands to his aid: expounded that monarchies need not fear any curbing of their absoluteness by mighty subjects, as long as by wisdom they keep the hearts of the people, who will be sure to come in on their side. So in the fable that Achilles was brought up under Chiron, the centaur, who was part a man and part a beast, expounded ingeniously but corruptly by Machiavel, that it belongeth to the education and discipline of princes to know as well how to play the part of a lion in violence, and the fox in guile, as of the man in virtue and justice. Nevertheless, in many the like encounters, I do rather think that the fable was first, and the exposition devised, than that the moral was first, and thereupon the fable framed; for I find it was an ancient vanity in Chrysippus, that troubled himself with great contention to fasten the assertions of the Stoics upon the fictions of the ancient poets; but yet that all the fables and fictions of the poets were but pleasure and not figure, I interpose no opinion. Surely of these poets which are now extant, even Homer himself (notwithstanding he was made a kind of scripture by the later schools of the Grecians), yet I should without any difficulty pronounce that his fables had no such inwardness in his own meaning. But what they might have upon a more original tradition is not easy to affirm, for he was not the inventor of many of them.

(5) In this third part of learning, which is poesy, I can report no deficiency; for being as a plant that cometh of the lust of the earth, without a formal seed, it hath sprung up and spread abroad more than any other kind. But to ascribe unto it that which is due, for the expressing of affections, passions, corruptions, and customs, we are beholding to poets more than to the philosophers' works; and for wit and eloquence, not much less than to orators' harangues. But it is not good to stay too long in the theatre. Let us now pass on to the judicial place or palace of the mind, which we are to approach and view with more reverence and attention.