
Areopagitica

Areopagitica; A Speech of Mr. John Milton, For the Liberty of Vnlicen'd Printing, To The Parliament of England was printed in November 1644 without a license and without a printer's or a publisher's name. The material object itself was thus an act of civil disobedience in violation of the licensing order of 1643, for whose repeal it calls. Licensing, which requires books to be approved *before* they are printed, was a long-standing practice in England that had largely broken down during the Long Parliament's disputes with King Charles I. Although enforcement had become lax as the conflict between king and Parliament intensified, the Licensing Act of 1637, the most recent in a long line of censorship regimes, remained technically in effect even after the king had fled London and civil war between king and Parliament had begun. But because licensing was traditionally a matter of royal prerogative, Parliament's abolition of the Star Chamber on July 5, 1641, effectively ended regulation of the press.

In 1643, with Charles's forces, for the time being, no longer a threat, and England effectively under its governance, the Long Parliament convened a large group of clergy – the Westminster Assembly of Divines – to address the issues of church governance that had been among the principal causes of the Civil War.¹ Like the Long Parliament itself, this assembly was dominated by Presbyterians, who favored establishing a Presbyterian Church of England, along the lines of the Scottish Kirk. For them, the issues of theology and church government that had divided king and Parliament were not a matter of choice between compelled religious uniformity and religious freedom but of imposing the correct theology and church government. To defeat the king and his High Church archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, the Presbyterians had formed a united front with various sectarians or Independents, many

of whom did not want any established church, but rather, desired the right to worship according to their consciences. Independents held a minority of seats in the Long Parliament and had considerable strength in the army. As typically happens when a revolution is fought by a popular front united only by its opposition to the existing government, the removal of the common enemy allowed allies to once again emerge as rivals. With the king no longer a threat, the Presbyterians wanted to establish what they saw as true religion, enforced by a proper and responsible church government. Concerned by the spread of the sects and of social as well as religious radicalism in the army, Parliament, spurred on by complaints from the Assembly and the Company of Stationers, which had responsibility for enforcing press regulations, the parliament passed into law the Licensing Act of 1643. Addressing “the great late abuses and frequent disorders in Printing many false forged, scandalous, seditious, libellous, and unlicensed Papers, Pamphlets, and Books to the great defamation of Religion and government,” the “Lords and Commons” ordered that no

Book, Pamphlet, or paper, shall from henceforth be printed, bound, stitched or put to sale by any person or persons whatsoever, unlesse the same be first approved of and licensed under the hands of such person or persons as both, or either of the said Houses shall appoint for the licensing of the same, and entred in the Register Book of the Company of *Stationers*, according to Ancient custom, and the Printer thereof to put his name thereto. And that no person or persons shall hereafter print, or cause to be reprinted any Book or Books, or part of Book, or Books heretofore allowed of and granted to the said Company of *Stationers*.²

The order, which reaffirmed the terms of the Licensing Act of 1637, transferring the responsibility for censorship from king to Parliament, prohibits the printing of books without prior approval. The *Areopagitica*, printed in open defiance of the act – signed by the author but unlicensed and with no printer named – urges its repeal.

Areopagitica is, on some level, a response to the hostile reception of Milton’s first two books on divorce, and the occasions for both the argument against licensing and the liberalization of the divorce laws were both personal and political. In the spring of 1642 Milton had married Mary Powell. Shortly after the marriage, Mary went from their home in London to Oxford to visit her parents. It would be three years before she returned. Divorce in England at that time was governed by canon law, which would not permit an abandoned husband to remarry. We do not know much about what happened between Milton and his bride, but one has to imagine that Milton’s personal predicament during his period of marital estrangement was a factor in his undertaking a reconsideration of the laws governing divorce.³ In the period

1643–1645, Milton published four books advocating liberalization of the divorce law: *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, *The Judgement of Martin Bucer*, *Tetrachordon*, and *Colasterion*. The publication in 1643 of the first of these tracts, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, provoked an intense response from the Presbyterians, including those who had been Milton's allies in the movement to abolish episcopacy.⁴ Although the book was a closely argued exegesis of relevant statements in Scripture, Milton was depicted as a libertine, and *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* was the target of particular complaints calling for its suppression and using it to illustrate the need for renewed control of the press. For example, a Presbyterian member of the Westminster Assembly, Herbert Palmer, preaching before Parliament on August 13, 1643, cited a “wicked booke [of *Divorce*, which] is abroad and *uncensured*, though *deserving to be burnt*, whose *Author* hath been so *impudent* as to *set his Name* to it” as evidence of the need for restored control of the press, and the Stationer's Company complained to the House of Lords about the unregulated “Printing of scandalous Books by divers[e authors], as *Hezechia Woodward* and *Jo[h]n. Milton*.” Milton was called in to be examined by the lords, but the substance of what took place is not known.⁵ The personal attack on Milton, marking the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* as a book to be suppressed, coincided with the political divide between him and his former allies. An underlying issue in the divorce tracts is what role civil authorities might have in enforcing divinely instituted laws. If the civil authorities could not use state power to enforce a particular reading of the Scriptures in the matter of marriage, a subject on which both Moses and Jesus may be cited, then toleration of all Christian belief becomes a logical conclusion.⁶ *Areopagitica* makes it clear that toleration does not equal approbation or even sanction. Milton does not argue against censorship, but only against prepublication censorship: “I deny not,” he writes, “but that it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how Bookes demean themselves, as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors” (1953–1982, 2:492). Once published, a bad book can be arraigned and its author punished. As we shall see, Milton's concern is that prepublication censorship precludes the orderly airing of ideas so that they may be judged according to reason.

Despite the title, the *Areopagitica* was never a speech delivered in Parliament, nor was it intended that one should be. The name derives from the *Areopagus* (Rock of Ares) in ancient Athens, a hill on which first a council and then a criminal court met in ancient times. Milton's title alludes to the *Areopagus* as the site of an ancient court, to the *Areopagiticus*, an oration written by Isocrates circa 355 BCE, designed, like Milton's, to be read rather

than heard, and perhaps to St Paul's speech to the pagans at the Areopagus, recorded in Acts 17–34. By the fourth century BCE, the court of the Areopagus had been greatly restricted in its jurisdiction. Isocrates urges the *ecclesia* or popular assembly to restore to the court of the Areopagus to its former control over education and manners. The form of Isocrates's speech is more pertinent than its content, as Isocrates is credited with inventing the form Milton uses: a speech intended to be read, but including the marks of oral delivery to a specific audience. Milton sees a parallel between Isocrates "who from his private house wrote that discourse to the Parliament of Athens, that persuades them to change the forme of *Democracy* which was then establisht" (1953–1982, 2:489) and himself, as a private citizen, writing an address to the parliament of England.

The Pauline reference is more complex and more substantive.⁷ Preaching in Athens, Paul encounters

certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks. . . [of whom] some said "What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection."

¹⁹And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?

²⁰For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean. (Acts 17:18–20)

Preaching from or to the Areopagus, Paul refers to the Athenian practice of making sacrifices not only to their named gods, but also to gods whose identities they have not yet discovered. Paul says that he has seen in Athens an altar inscribed to "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;" (Acts 17:23–24). Here Paul begins with an idolatrous text, the writing on the pagan altar, but that text becomes the occasion for a true one. The false unknown god superstitiously believed to dwell about the stone altar provides Paul with the occasion to proclaim the true God "that dwelleth not in temples made with hands."⁸

Milton divides his argument against licensing into three principal parts, which he sets out as follows:

I shall now attend with such a Homily, as shall lay before ye, first the inventors of it to bee those whom ye will be loath to own; next what is to be thought in generall of reading, what ever sort the Books be; and that this Order avails nothing to the suppressing of scandalous, seditious, and libelous Books, which

were mainly intended to be suppress. Last, that it will be primely to the discouragement of all learning, and the stop of Truth, not only by disexercising and blunting our abilities in what we know already, but by hindring and cropping the discovery that might bee yet further made both in religious and civill Wisdome. (1953–1982, 2:491–492).

We can paraphrase this as a promise to show that (i) the history of licensing is unsavory – Milton goes on to argue that it is largely an invention of the Inquisition; (ii) it won't work – the licensing order will not be effective in suppressing the circulation of scandalous, seditious, or libelous books; and (iii) it will make England dumb – licensing will obstruct the progress of learning because readers will not exercise their critical faculties on pre-approved ideas; thus it will hinder progress in the discovery of civil and religious wisdom. Ultimately, bad books are the cause of good books, because critical readers will find true arguments to refute the false ones. Without the test afforded by wrong-headed books, righteous truths will go undiscovered. These are reasoned arguments, but the extraordinary power of the *Areopagitica* comes also from a few rhetorical figures that press against and sometimes burst the strictly logical argument. The first of these is a comparison between a not-yet printed book and an unborn baby. A book, Milton says, in a famous passage of the *Areopagitica*, is to its author as a child to its father:

For Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was who progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And yet on the other hand unlesse warinesse be us'd, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. (1953–1982, 2:492)

There is much to unpack in this passage. Milton takes literally the idea of the seminal text. As a child preserves the seed of a father, the book preserves the seed of its author's intellect. But also, as a child grows the father's seed into a new and independent life, the book, too, fathers new books, by planting the seeds of its ideas in fertile wombs. This metaphor of the author as father and the book as child is complicated precisely because it both asserts the author's presence in his or her work and the work's potential to grow into something its creator neither intended nor anticipated. Books, like babies, are the offspring of parents but, also like babies, they represent an independent life of their own.⁹ A person's son can be expected to someday inseminate someone else's daughter, giving rise to a birth that uniquely combines the character-

istics of both; a book can be expected to introduce ideas that will grow in other minds, producing new ideas of composite identity.

This idea of books as progeny brings Milton to the myth of Cadmus and the dragons' teeth. Cadmus is the mythic founder of the Greek city of Thebes. Instructed by the oracle of Delphi to found a city on the spot where a certain cow sat down, Cadmus, reaching the spot, had to deal with a dragon that guarded the nearby water source. After slaying the dragon, he was instructed by Athena to sow the dragon's teeth on the ground where the city was to be built. Armed men grew from the teeth and fought each other. The five left standing at the end of the battle joined Cadmus in the founding of Thebes and became progenitors of the city's most powerful families.¹⁰ In 1644, Milton's allusion to the dragon's teeth that sprang up armed men was pointed. Armed men had sprung up in England in response to printed polemics against the bishops and the king, and they would continue to do so for years to come. Moreover, along with being the founder of Thebes, Cadmus was credited by Herodotus and others with having brought the alphabet from Phoenicia to Greece, so Milton's allusion places the printed word at the intersection of violence and civilization.¹¹ Although only five of Cadmus's sown men survive their mutual combat, this tested remainder builds Thebes. Similarly, Milton envisions civilization progressing from the mortal struggle of book against book, continued beyond the expectation, intention, and control of their authors. If even a book's author cannot anticipate the effect his work will have once it is in the world, how much less can a censor know whether the effects of a book he suppresses would have been ill or good?

Milton's allusion to Cadmus carries him from books as intellectual and spiritual progeny to books as soldiers of reason. A man is a reasonable creature. But a book is the repository of reason itself. It represents the process by which ideas are sent out to encounter each other. A society that allows one man's argument to be refuted by another allows for the possibility of an approach to the truth, whether immediately or by stages. In other words, if a book is wrong the possibility of refutation allows for the possibility of correction. In this way Milton develops the idea that God gave man reason with which to tell right from wrong, truth from falsity and that the discovery of truth is a collective project to be carried out by the exercise of reason. By exercising reason, human beings make choices that allow them to define who they are: "Many there be that complain of divin Providence for suffering *Adam* to transgresse, foolish tongues! When God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had bin else a meer artificiall *Adam*, such an *Adam* as he is in motions" (Milton 1953–1982, 2:527). Without the freedom to choose according to

his reason, man would be an automaton. One is only capable of being good, if one is capable of being evil as well. More than 20 years later, Milton would put a similar point into the mouth of God, the Father, in *Paradise Lost*:

I made him [Adam] just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
Such I created all th'ethereal Powers
And Spirits, both them who stood and them who failed;
Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere
Of true allegiance, constant faith or love,
Where only what they needs must do, appeared,
Not what they would?

(*Paradise Lost* 3.98–106)¹²

Milton likens the exercise of reason to the exercise of a muscle. Its constant use makes it stronger, while disuse leads to atrophy. Thus licensing, which resigns the critical function to a parliamentary censor, leads to a “discouragement of all learning, and the stop of Truth” (1953–1982, 2:491). Milton argues that the sectarianism the licensing act means to curtail is an indication of renewed Reformation:

Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making. Under these fantastic terrors of sect and schism, we wrong the earnest and zealous thirst after knowledge and understanding which God hath stirr'd up in this City. What some lament of, we rather should rejoyce at, should rather praise this pious forwardness among men, to reassume the ill deputed care of their Religion into their own hands again. (2:554)

Milton opposes to the fear of devolution into “sect and schism” a broad notion of intellectual progress and continual discovery to be achieved by the collective application of reason: “A little generous prudence, a little forbearance of one another, and som grain of charity might win all these diligences to joyn, and unite into one generall and brotherly search after Truth” (2:554). Milton deploys two extraordinary metaphors to illustrate the open-ended and collaborative nature of this “generall and brotherly search after Truth.” In the first, he alludes to the Egyptian myth of Isis, comparing the goddess who gathered up and reassembled the scattered parts of her brother, Osiris, who had been torn apart by a conspiracy led by the god Typhon, to the “sad friends of truth” who go about collecting and reassembling the scattered words of Jesus:

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after him were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers, who as that story goes of the *Ægyptian Typhon* with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good *Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds. From what time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangl'd body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second comming; he shall bring together every joynt and member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection. Suffer not these licencing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking, that continue to do our obsequies to the torn body of our martyr'd Saint. (2:549–550).

As Ernest Sirluck points out, Milton was probably thinking of Plutarch's allegorical reading of the Isis and Osiris myth (2:549, n.222). Remarking that "the effort to arrive at the Truth, and especially the truth about the gods, is a longing for the divine. For the search for truth requires for its study and investigation the consideration of sacred subjects, and it is a work more hallowed than any form of holy living or temple service," Like Milton, Plutarch interprets the dismemberment of Osiris by Typhon as the tearing to pieces and scattering "to the winds of sacred writing, which the goddess collects and puts together and gives into the keeping of those who are initiated into the holy rites" Plutarch (1957, 5:9). Milton's use of a pagan text to locate a Christian truth recalls Paul's use of the inscription to the unknown god when preaching at the Areopagus.

Milton turns, however, to a Hebraic source, the building of Solomon's temple in I Kings, for a second allegory of the search for truth. He compares those who cry out against "schismatics and sectaries" to:

a sort of irratiounall men who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timeber, ere the house of God can be built. And when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be made contiguous in this world; neither can every peece of the building be of one form; nay rather the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportionall arises the goodly and the gracefull symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure. (1953–1982, 2:555)¹³

Opposed to the picture of an already built church, in which everyone conforms to a completed dogma, Milton envisions a collection of individuals or groups of individuals, each exercising reason, each working on another part

of a temple that will be completed only at the end of time. No one knows what the final building will look like, but each contributes, working side by side, but not exactly together.

Notes

- 1 For a more detailed discussion of the religious factions in the Civil Wars, see above, “Texts and Contexts,” pp. 59–85.
- 2 “The Licensing Order of 1643,” with annotations by Ernest Sirluck, in Appendix B of Milton (1953–82, 2.797–9).
- 3 What is known about Milton’s separation from and reconciliation with Mary Powell Milton is admirably summarized in Campbell and Corns (2008, pp. 152–75).
- 4 See “Milton, John” in “Writers of the Seventeenth Century,” below, pp. 333–341. On the Presbyterian backlash against the divorce tracts, see also, Campbell and Corns (2008, pp. 164–173).
- 5 Herbert Palmer, *The Glasse of Gods Providence Towards His Faithful Ones* (London, 1664), qtd in Ernest Sirluck’s, Introduction to Milton (1953–1982, 2.142).
- 6 It must be noted that in the *Areopagitica* Milton explicitly excludes Roman Catholics from the toleration he advances for all Protestant opinion; his virulently intolerant position on Catholics is based on the fact that he regards the Roman church as foreign power, grounded in the coercive secular authority of the pope rather than on theological or scriptural grounds.
- 7 See Burt (1998).
- 8 Compare Milton’s invocation of “thou O Spirit, that dost prefer / Before all temples th’upright heart and pure” in the opening of *Paradise Lost* (1.17–18).
- 9 Milton’s way of imagining the relationship of an author to his creation is discussed at length in Teskey (2006).
- 10 The story of Cadmus and the dragon’s teeth is told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, bk 3, ll. 101–30, and many other classical sources.
- 11 Herodotus, *Histories*, bk 5, ch. 58.
- 12 Quoted from Milton (1998).
- 13 For a thorough discussion of Milton’s allegory of the building of the temple, see Kolbrenner (1993).