



MILTON'S AREOPAGITICA: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to look in to the depth of moral aims and religious duties of Milton reflected through this prose pamphlet Areopagitica. The basic reason for reading this prose work is not only to look for Milton, the poet, but also Milton, the man.

Key-words: *Areopagitica, prose, moral, aims.*



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Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
of that forbidden tree whose mortal
taste Brought death in to the world, and all our woe
with the loss of Eden.

(Paradise Lost, Book I 1-4)

John Milton was born in London. He was one of the greatest poets of the English Language best known for his epic poem 'Paradise Lost' (1667), Milton's powerful, rhetoric prose and the eloquence of his poetry had an immense influence especially on the 18th-century verse. Besides poems, Milton published pamphlets defending civil and religious rights. 'Of Reformation in England', 'Reasons of church Government', 'Apology For Smectymnus' 'Tenures of kings and Magistrates', 'Eikonoklastes', 'Second Defense of English People', and *Areopagitica* are some of the finest prose works to his credit.

Milton's title *Areopagitica*, alludes to Isocrates' seventh edition, often called the Areopagitic Discourse or Areopagiticus (about 355 BCE). There, Isocrates (436-338 BCE) addresses the General Assembly of Athens on a topic of civic safety.

In the first place, *Areopagitica* tells us a great deal about the author's literary, as well as even more about his personal character, and it explains to us at once how the strong pleasure which he found in the form and the strong constraint which it imposes were needed to produce the perfection of his poetic style, and how the volcanic quality of his genius forced

even that constraint to permit the variety, the pulse, the fluctuation, which made English blank verses of the non-dramatic type.

In the second, *Areopagitica* has given us passages – the longer of them well known by quotation and selection, the shorter constantly as has been said, to be found in all the welter and confusion of the mass of extraordinary beauty, passages, without which the crown of English prose writing would show miserable gaps and empty socket—holes.

In the third, *Areopagitica* is the strongest possible historical document as to the necessity of an alteration - for a time, at any rate - in the dominant character of English prose style. In the other greatest pre-restoration prose writers – In Donne, in Taylor, in Browne- the solace is altogether above the sin. In Milton, it is not. The title of Milton's *Areopagitica* alludes to both the Areopagiticus of Isocrates and the story of St. Paul in Athens from Acts 17:18-34. Isocrates' tract, which outlines a program for political reform, specifically mentions the degradation of the judges of the court of the Areopagus, the highest court in Greece. Milton may fancy himself a man similar in virtue and sagacity to the old judges of the Areopagus whom Isocrates praises; following this allusion, the morally weakened judges of Areopagus are symbolic of England's sitting parliament. Milton doubly identifies with the voice of reform and the sober minded leaders of a previous generation. The allusion to Paul in the book of 'Acts' contains a similar parallel: St. Paul preaches to the Athenians, Paul uses a stock phrase from a poem by Aratus, with Greeks would certainly have been familiar Paul uses a pagan idea to instruct the Athenians about the truth of Christianity.

As always Milton divides his scholarly affections between the classical and the Biblical in *Areopagitica*. Notice, though, that in this speech classical allusions outweigh Biblical, Particularly in the first half of the tract. Milton seems to be attempting, by way of copious example, to demonstrate just how Greek and Roman learning can reside within the boundaries of Christian morality. At first, one might be inclined to dismiss this as merely Milton's attempt to reconcile the differences between his two intellectual loves. However, a closer examination of the *Areopagitica*, with attention to the purpose of the speech, will reveal Milton's more cagey purpose for following classical reference to dominate.

In this prose tract *Areopagitica*, in his direct speech to the parliamentarians of England Milton makes subtle attempt to flatter members of parliament, by comparing their commonwealth to the enlightened societies – of Athens and Rome. By playing off the vanity of English politicians, who would of course like to think of themselves as the senators of a letter – day Troy, Milton hopes to reverse the opinion of the legislative body. Only an ignorant man would criticize the policies of Athens, and that city, as far as Milton argues, did

not support licensing of books. Milton seems to express a faith that England's enlightened leaders would never embark on a policy that would demonstrate their country's inferiority to those ancient societies.

Milton's tract is a direct response to the licensing order of 1643 which reinstated much the same sort of pre-publication censorship once exercised by the Star Chamber and other earlier censors, royal and ecclesiastical. Milton does not argue here for free and unregulated speech or printing, but simply that books should not be suppressed before publication. Treasonous, slanderous, and blasphemous books, he allows, should be tried according to law, then suppressed and their authors punished. The counter examples Milton gives to those enlightened societies of catholic Spain and the papacy. Milton offers the members of Lords and Commons a clear choice: either popery or freedom. By making the counter- example to enlightened policy Catholicism, Milton once again demonstrates an acute understanding of his audience. Parliament during Milton's time, especially the House of Commons, was largely puritan. The thought that any of their orders might have an odor of unreformed Catholicism about it was distasteful, especially during the particularly tumultuous days surrounding the civil wars, when accusations of Catholic sympathy flew as regularly as the pigeons of Hyde Park. *Areopagitica* demonstrates Milton to be not only a great wordsmith and scholar, but also a brilliant political orator.

Milton's *Areopagitica* had virtually no political impact in its day: Parliament ignored it. However, as the first major treatise on freedom of the press, it influenced the arguments of many later advocates for the abolition of censorship. Even the United State Bill of Rights can be Viewed as a direct descendent of Milton's *Areopagitica*. Part of the reason that it was ignored in its day may be that Milton had already Challenged Parliament and Popular opinion With other unorthodox arguments, such as presented in the ' Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce' and its defenses (Tetrachordon, Colasterion). Though he attempted to cultivate an image as a gentleman poet. The particular species of liberty for which Milton argues in *Areopagitica* , according to a careful dissection of the pamphlet, is not the liberty of unlicensed printing, or the liberty to engage in unfettered civil or religious discourse, but the liberty of philosophic speech in the tradition of the "heathen" Philosophers- Socrates, Plato, and Isocrates, in Particular. It may do well to agree with earlier Commentators that *Areopagitica* is a thoroughly ironic piece of prose, the irony made necessary for Milton's own protection against possible retribution from the Long Parliament, should it members perceive his true purpose. To learn that "Philosophic freedom" is what made necessary the

rhetorical Complexities- the disguised allusions, the deliberate errors, the omissions, and the obliquities.

Milton's first argument against licensing is that The inventors of its (are) those whom ye will be loath to own (Yale Complete Prose 2:491) , namely the "Popes of Rome engrossing what they pleas'd of Political rule into their own hands" (501). The censorship exercised by the popes contracts, in Milton's account, with the practice of the primitive Christian community that Seventeenth Century English protestants took as the model for their reformation, and even before that with the practice of Athens Lacedaemon (i.e., Sparta). And Rome itself neither in those famous cities of the ancient world nor in early Christian times was censorship or licensing seen as desirable, necessary, or good.

The argument we have just summarized is the "vernacular reading "The real teaching is hidden in the interest of the rhetoric to be ferreted out by a few fit readers (26). What such readers discover when we have done such ferreting is that Milton has manipulated his account of Classical history to make the Athenians. Lacedaemonian, and Romans appear more tolerant and open-minded than they actually were. For example, Milton omits mention of the trial and execution of Socrates in his account of Athens. Not only does Milton expect fit readers to notice such an omission, he also expects them to notice the hidden critique in his (deliberately) inaccurate history of the primitive church-as Ernest Sirluck did in his introduction to the Yale edition (2.158).

Milton seems to say that such censorship as took place in early Christian times was relatively insignificant. The only writings Censored "were plain invectives against Christianity", (2.501) such as Porphyrius and Proclus. The vernacular reader, including most Milton scholars, passes over the two relatively unfamiliar names without suspicion, but the reaction of the fit reader to the statement that Christianity "only" censored Porphyrius and Proclus is akin to the reaction a modern reader would have upon learning that America only censored James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence.

Despite the esteem in which Milton allegedly held Porphyrius, there is no article on him in the 'Milton Encyclopedia', and Purvis Boyette, the author of the article on Proclus, asserts that Milton couldn't have read either of them. The conclusion drawn from Milton's manipulation of history is that Milton was really arguing that only the cities of ancient Greece and Rome - not the polity of early Christianity- should serve as the models for seventeenth - century English society and Law.

In the second, the argument regarding the value of books, Milton, through deliberate distortion, makes the writers of the Hebrew Bible appear more receptive of learning than in

fact they really are and , he “distorts Paul”(34) to suggest that the apostle saw no need for restraints on knowledge when in fact, the opposite is true.

In the third and fourth arguments, that the licensing act “avails nothing to the suppressing of scandalous, seditious, and libelous Books” and that “it will be primely to the discouragement of all learning, and the stop of Truth” (2.491), we identify further, misreading, distortions, misquotations, and ambiguities, all of them designed by Milton to placate the vernacular reader and enlighten the specialist. In the analysis of the third argument, the argument of the licensing act’s insufficiency, by using Plato’s Laws as a guide and gloss, concluding that Milton’s focus is primarily on the licensing act’s effect on the English people’s “manners”, which parliament is trying to shape by means of Law. Instead, following the precepts of the Athenian Stranger in the “Laws”, parliament should recognize that Law must grow out of the customs and manners of society.

Areopagitica’s subject after all, is the licensing of printing, and if parliament were to enforce its licensing legislation it would adversely affect not treatises on Military Strategy, but pamphlets like Milton’s on divorce, published in defiance of the licenser. It writer may refrain from mentioning a particular subject simply because it is not germane.

Milton’s cry for liberty of conscience contradicts his own suggestion in the digression that only a “moderate” range of religious opinion can be tolerate- certainly not including Catholics, whom Milton explicitly excludes.

By their very nature, polemical pamphlets are to be read and understood as they were written-quickly. Mr. Milton is here advocating, not general freedom from licensing or other government censorship, not toleration for the various Christian sects that inhabit our land in these days but freedom of philosophic speech.

To sum up, Milton in this book makes his significant efforts in defense of the freedom of speech. And also we observe that *Areopagitica* is a prime example of the nature of Milton’s genius: heavily inflected with Biblical and classical knowledge and he is always ready in performing his moral duty to the Contemporary society, but too unorthodox for mainstream acceptance, at least in his day.

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