

Milton's *Areopagitica*

A speech of Mr John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing (1644)



The English Puritans were Protestants first and foremost and in social and religious principles they followed the Bible and the Gospels. John Milton was, however, a classically-educated member of the non-Anglican elite who sought to integrate classical literature and philosophy into the framework of modern Christianity which he saw equally as the evolution of the Judeo-Christian and the Classical traditions. His personal convictions took him on an odyssey from Anglicanism of his father—who had been born a Catholic and lost the support of his father in changing religion—to the Presbyterianism of his early tutor Thomas Young, and later the independent non-episcopalian Protestantism of his later years. In between he was a Dissenter, along with Cromwell and the Parliamentarians, but broke with them on account of their religious intolerance, arguing in his famous *Areopagitica* for "the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties."

The *Areopagitica*

[U]nless wariness be used, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye.

Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.

For books are not absolutely dead things, but [...] do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragon's teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men.

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Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary [...] They are not skillful considerers of human things who imagine to remove sin by removing the matter of sin. For [...] it is a huge heap increasing under the very act of diminishing. [...]. Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably...

It was from out of the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into this world. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is, of knowing good by evil. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.

We boast our light; but if we look not wisely on the sun itself, it smites us into darkness. Who can discern those planets that are oft combust, and those stars of brightest magnitude that rise and set with the sun, until the opposite motion of their orbs bring them to such a place in the firmament where they may be seen evening or morning? The light which we have gained was given us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge.

It is not the unfrocking of a priest, the unmitering of a bishop, and the removing hum from the Presbyterian shoulders that will make us a happy nation; no, if other things as great in the Church, and in the rule of life both economical and political, be not looked into and reformed, we have looked so long upon the blaze that Zwinglius and Calvin have beacons up to us, that we are stark blind.

[K]now, that so far to distrust the judgement and the honesty of one who hath but a common repute in Learning and never yet offended, as not to count him fit to print his mind without a tutor and examiner lest he should drop a schism or something of corruption, is the greatest displeasure and indignity to a free and knowing spirit that can be put upon him.

Ye cannot make us now lesse capable, lesse knowing, lesse eagerly pursuing of the Truth, unlesse ye first make yourselves that made us so, lesse the lovers, lesse the founders of our true Liberty. We can grow ignorant again, brutish, formall, and slavish as ye found us, but you then must first become that which ye cannot be, oppressive, arbitrary, and tyrannous as they were from whom ye have free'd us.

Yet that which is above all this, the favour and the love of Heaven, we have great argument to think in a peculiar manner propitious and propending towards us. Why else was this nation chosen before any other, that out of her, as out of Sion, should be proclaimed and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation to all Europe? And had it not been the obstinate perverseness of our prelates against the divine and admirable spirit of Wickliff, to suppress him as a schismatic and innovator, perhaps neither the Bohemian Huss and Jerome, no nor the name of Luther or of Calvin, had been ever known: the glory of reforming all our neighbours had been completely ours.

There it was that I found and visited the famous Galileo, grown old, a prisoner to the Inquisition, for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought. And though I knew that England then was groaning loudest under the prelatical yoke, nevertheless I took it as a pledge of future happiness, that other nations were so persuaded of her liberty. Yet was it beyond my hope that those worthies were then breathing in her air, who should be her leaders to such a deliverance, as shall never be forgotten by any revolution of time that this world hath to finish.