Areopagitica

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN MILTON

Milton was born in Cheapside, London, to John Milton, a respected musical composer, and Sarah Jeffrey. Milton's father made a handsome living as a scrivener in London's financial district, and his wealth afforded young Milton a private tutor. Milton later attended St. Paul's School in London, where he studied Latin and Greek and began writing, mostly psalms and other types of religious poetry. He attended university at Christ's College, Cambridge, and graduated in 1629 with a B.A. Milton continued studying at Cambridge, and in 1632, he graduated fourth in his class with a Master of Arts degree. He spent the next six years engrossed in private study at his father's home in London, during which time he wrote and anonymously published *Comus*, a masque, or type of play popular in the 17th century. In 1638, Milton wrote his famous poem, "Lycidas," which was immediately embraced as one of the greatest poems ever written. That same year, Milton embarked on a tour of France and Italy, which he references in *Areopagitica*. In 1642, Milton married Mary Powell, a 17-year-old girl several years his junior, and they suffered through a strained and distant marriage. Together, Milton and Mary had two daughters and one son, who died in infancy, before Mary died herself after giving birth to their third daughter in 1652. It was during Milton's tumultuous marriage to Mary that he wrote the polemic, *The Doctrine of Discipline of Divorce*, in 1643. Milton was miserable in his marriage, and he was certain that God did not mean for him to stay that way. His controversial views on marriage and divorce meant much of his writing was censored by Parliament, and he struck back against censorship in 1644 with the writing of *Areopagitica*. The pamphlet circulated for about one month before it nearly disappeared altogether. Milton failed to persuade Parliament to stop the pre-publication licensing of books in his lifetime, and it was several years before *Areopagitica* was fully appreciated as a foundational piece of writing on the freedom of written speech. Milton married his second wife, Katherine Woodcock, in 1656, but she and his infant daughter died in childbirth. Around the year 1658, Milton began writing his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, by which time he had gone almost completely blind. Milton had to dictate *Paradise Lost* in its entirety, most likely through his daughter, Mary. In 1663, Milton married his third wife, Elizabeth Mynshull, and finished writing *Paradise Lost* in 1664. The poem was published in 10 volumes in 1667 and was immediately controversial; however, it remains one of the most important pieces of English literature to date. Milton published the sequel to *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, in 1671. He died in London in 1674 at 65, of what is thought to have been kidney failure and complications of gout.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Milton mentions the Protestant Reformation several times in *Areopagitica*, in which even he claims it is time to "reform the reformation itself." The Protestant Reformation refers to over 130 years of political, religious, and social upheaval in Europe, at which time the Roman Catholic Church splintered, giving rise to Protestantism. Protestants hold differing religious beliefs from Catholics, including the rejection of papal authority and sacraments, and they account for nearly 40% of Christians worldwide. The Reformation Era is generally considered to have begun in 1517 when Martin Luther, a German theologian, nailed his disputation, the *Ninety-five Theses*, to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The *Theses* outlines Luther's complaint against the corruption of the Catholic Church and the selling of indulgences, or money given to the Catholic Church for the purpose of reducing one's punishment of sin in purgatory. Luther was excommunicated from the Catholic Church in 1521 for heresy, at which time the Catholic Church also banned citizens of the Holy Roman Empire from following and circulating Luther's religious beliefs. Milton also references John Wycliffe, a theologian and priest from 14th-century England. Wycliffe was an outspoken member of the Catholic priesthood who famously rejected transubstantiation—the conversion of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ—and papal authority. Wycliffe died in 1384, but he was declared a heretic in 1415 and retroactively excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Wycliffe's writings on Christianity are considered an important precursor to the Protestant Reformation, an honor Milton is quick to claim as a Protestant and an Englishman.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Areopagitica is a polemic, which is an aggressive written argument that usually pertains to religious or political matters. The word is derived from the Greek word for "war," and it was a common form of writing in ancient Greece. The writing of polemics again became popular during the Renaissance, and several writers, Milton included, took to the form, setting an example of political and social writing that lasted for years to come. For example, Thomas Paine's 1776 pamphlet, *Common Sense*, which argues American independence, is considered a polemic. *Common Sense* was wildly popular when it was first published during the American Revolution, and it remains America's bestselling book of all time. In 1792, Mary

Wollstonecraft (an 18th-century feminist philosopher and mother to Mary Shelly, the author of *Frankenstein*) published the polemic, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in which she argues for the equality of women and their right to education. Perhaps the most widely known polemic, however, is the 1848 pamphlet, *The Communist Manifesto*, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Credited with helping the spread of communism around the world, *The Communist Manifesto* is generally considered to be one of the most influential political works ever written.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Areopagitica; A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, To the Parliament of England*
- **When Written:** 1644
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1644
- **Literary Period:** Renaissance
- **Genre:** Prose polemic
- **Setting:**
- **Climax:**
- **Antagonist:** Censorship, English Parliament, the Roman Catholic Church
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Catholic Blood. While Milton's distaste for Catholicism is clear in *Areopagitica*, Milton himself comes from a long line of Catholics. Milton's father was disowned by his own devout Catholic father, Richard Milton, for following the Protestant faith.

Language Arts. The word "pandemonium" is one coined by Milton in the 1660s. It is derived from the Greek *pan*, meaning "all," and the Latin *daemonium*, for "evil spirit." The word references Pandaemonium, the capital of Hell in *Paradise Lost*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Milton begins his written speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing in England with a quote from *The Suppliants*, a play by the Greek tragedian, Euripides. "This is true liberty when free-born men / Having to advise the public may speak free," Milton quotes. "What can be juster in a state than this?" Milton addresses his speech to the "High Court of Parliament," which in 1643 passed a Licensing Order that mandated "no **book**, pamphlet, or paper shall be henceforth printed, unless the same be first approved and licensed by such." Milton is fervently opposed to Parliament's order—at least the part that requires pre-publication licensing. He supports the portion of the order that "preserves justly every man's copy to himself," and argues that "the utmost bound of civil liberty" is attained only when "complaints are freely heard, deeply considered and speedily reformed." He begins with a look at censorship through the ages and asserts that the type of pre-publication censorship mandated by Parliament's Licensing Order (a law Milton describes as an "authentic Spanish policy of licensing books"), was not seen until after the year 800. Until then, Milton contends, "books were ever as freely admitted into the world as any other birth: the issue of the brain was no more stifled than the issue of the womb." Indeed, Milton contends, pre-publication licensing was born "from the most antichristian council, and the most tyrannous inquisition that ever enquired." Of course, Milton is referring to the Roman Catholic Church and the Spanish Inquisition, and he is speaking directly to an overwhelmingly Protestant Parliament. The "inventors" of pre-publication censorship, Milton says, "be those whom ye will loath to own."

Books and ideas weren't censored in biblical times to such an extent either, Milton argues, unless they were found to be heretical or defamatory. The English Parliament meant to suppress books they considered bad, or evil, and Milton asserts this is not only impossible but an affront to God as well. "God uses not to captivate under a perpetual childhood of prescription," Milton writes, "but trusts [man] with the gift of reason to be his own chooser." Furthermore, good and evil are inextricably linked, within books and in man, so they are impossible to "sort asunder." Milton claims "it was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil." God never intended for humankind to live a life independent of evil, which is why he gave Adam "reason," and "gave him the freedom to choose." To eliminate evil means that each Christian's virtue is left untested and "is but a blank virtue, not a pure." Without evil to reject, Adam is "a mere artificial Adam, such an Adam as he is in the motions." In addition to negatively affecting the virtue of Christians, Milton maintains that Parliament's Licensing Order violates God's divine authority and plan as well.

Milton continues his argument by pointing out how inadequate Parliament's Licensing Order is, claiming that it "conduces nothing to the end for which it was framed." The law means to spare citizens from evil, but it only seeks to regulate printed material. "If we think to regulate printing, thereby to rectify manners, we must regulate all recreations and pastimes, all that is delightful to man." What about music, Milton questions, and the gestures and motions of dance? Surely these things can be evil as well and need regulation, he contends. There is even "household gluttony" to consider, and the "daily rioting" of gossip, which is most certainly to blame for the spread of evil.

Milton argues that "whatever thing we hear or see, sitting, walking, traveling, or conversing may be fitly called our book," and to suppress books only "is far insufficient to the end which [Parliament's order] intends." One cannot "remove sin by removing the matter of sin," Milton posits.

Books "cannot be suppressed without the fall of learning," Milton also claims, which too "hinders and retards the importation of our richest merchandise, truth." According to Milton, both "faith and knowledge thrives by exercise," and suppressing books hampers this exercise. Truth, the product of study and knowledge, "is compared in scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition." Parliament's Licensing Order does just that, Milton claims, by controlling and mandating what is read and learned. "A man may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believe things only because his pastor says so, or the assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds," Milton warns, "becomes his heresy."

Milton contends that truth "came once into the world with her divine master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to behold." But truth did not retain its original shape, Milton claims, and the "lovely form" of "virgin truth" was "hewed" into thousands of pieces, and "scattered" from "the four winds." Pursuit of knowledge is searching for bits and pieces of scattered truth, but all the pieces are yet to be found and likely never will be, "till her master's second coming," Milton says. Additionally, Milton cautions, when truth is bound, as it is by Parliament's order, "she speaks not true" but instead "turns herself into all shapes, except her own." It is not "impossible," Milton contends, that truth "may have more shapes than one," and he implores Parliament to lend equal weight to all shapes of truth and not "fall again into a gross conforming stupidity" which "is more to the sudden degenerating of a church than many subdichotomies of petty schisms."

Of course, Milton maintains, he cannot "think well of every light separation" of the church, and while he argues for more Christian beliefs to "be tolerated, rather than compelled," he does not mean to tolerate "popery, and open superstition, which as it extirpates all religions and civil supremacies, so itself should be extirpate." While Milton argues against the pre-publication censorship of books, he supports the censorship and full eradication of the Catholic Church. Milton maintains that Parliament's new practice of suppressing books "is the worst and newest opinion of all others; and is the chief cause why sects and schisms do so much abound, and true knowledge is kept at a distance from us." He claims to know that "errors in a good government and in a bad are equally almost incident," and he intreats Parliament "to redress willingly and speedily what hath been erred" in the passing of the Licensing Order of 1643.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Milton – An English writer and man of letters. Milton is opposed to Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643, and *Areopagitica* is his written defense. He considers Parliament's new printing laws an infringement on his God-given right to "reason" and the ability to freely choose between good and evil, and he therefore considers the order an act against God himself. Prior to Parliament's Licensing Order, Milton worked very closely with members of Parliament to overturn King Charles I's Star Chamber Decree, and he was incredibly disappointed to see Parliament impose the very same regulations just two years later. Not only does Milton maintain that Parliament's suppression of **books** is an affront to God, he claims it also weakens one's virtue by way of eliminating evil. Parliament's law removes temptation by removing bad books and in doing so, renders English virtue "blank" and untested. Milton further argues that Parliament's Licensing Order hinders the pursuit of knowledge and truth, making the English "ignorant and slothful" and imposing on them the life of "a common steadfast dunce." Perhaps most importantly, Milton maintains the kind of pre-publication licensing imposed by Parliament under their new law was first invented by the Catholics during Spanish Inquisition to thwart the spread of Protestantism during the Protestant Reformation. The continued suppression of books, according to Milton, only serves to further hinder future reformation and the spread of Protestantism. Milton implores Parliament to see the error of their ways and to recognize that by silencing and repressing books and opinions, Parliament, like the Catholic Church, has become "the persecutors."

The English Parliament – The governing body of England. Milton addresses Parliament directly in *Areopagitica*, and he is strongly opposed to their Licensing Order of 1643. Milton frequently refers to Parliament as "Lords and Commons," a reference to the two houses of Parliament, including the Upper House (the House of Lords) and the Lower House (the House of Commons). The House of Lords is further divided into the Lords Temporal, or secular members, and the Lords Spiritual, or religious members. In 1642, two years before Milton wrote *Areopagitica*, King Charles I excluded prelates from serving in Parliament, and by 1645, Presbyterianism was established by law in Parliament. Milton relies heavily on the anti-Catholic sentiments of Parliament to argue his point that Parliament's Licensing Order is oppressive and tyrannical, and he repeatedly implies that their practice of pre-publication censorship is a purely Catholic invention. Milton accuses Parliament of offending God by eliminating English citizens' God-given right to "reason" and "choosing," and he further implies that Parliament's order negatively affects the constitution of Christian virtue by eliminating sin and temptation through the

suppression of offensive **books**. Milton further claims that Parliament's suppression of books is to the detriment of knowledge and learning, and he implores them to abolish their newly implemented licensing laws and "redress willingly and speedily what hath been erred."

The Roman Catholic Church – The largest Christian church in the world. Milton considers the Roman Catholic Church to be exceedingly oppressive and tyrannical, and he maintains that they are the "inventors" of the type of pre-publication licensing enforced by Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643. Milton claims that the Catholic Church began suppressing **books** to stop the spread of Protestantism during the Protestant Reformation, specifically through the creation of the Council of Trent and the Spanish Inquisition. Milton asserts that as the Catholic Church "extirpates all religions and civil supremacies, so itself should be extirpate." Ironically, while Milton opposes the censorship of books by Parliament, he does support the complete suppression and eradication of the Catholic Church. Milton relies heavily on Parliament's own distaste for the Catholic Church to further his argument against pre-licensing censorship.

Isocrates – An ancient Greek orator who lived around the fourth or fifth century B.C.E. Isocrates was one of the "Attic Orators," or the greatest rhetoricians of the classical era, and his spoken and written works were foundational in the areas of rhetoric and education. Milton's title, *Areopagitica* is a direct reference to Isocrates and his written speech, the *Areopagitic Discourse*, in which Isocrates addresses the Athenian assembly and the power of the Court of Areopagus over the people of Greece. At the time Isocrates wrote his *Areopagitic Discourse*, he wasn't physically able to give a speech, so he wrote one instead. Milton's *Areopagitica* is a written speech, much like the *Areopagitic Discourse*, only Milton addresses Parliament and their power over the people of England.

Wyclif – An English philosopher and priest who was an early dissident within the Catholic Church. Wyclif disagreed with several Catholic beliefs, particularly with papal authority and the belief of transubstantiation, or the conversion of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Wyclif's religious writings were an important precursor to the Protestant Reformation, and they were especially influential to Jan Huss and John Calvin. Milton implies that without the work of Wyclif, the Protestant Reformation might not have happened.

Adam – A biblical figure from the Book of Genesis. Adam was the first man who fell from grace by eating the fruit of a forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. Milton asserts that the knowledge of good and evil was born as "two twins cleaving together" from "the rind of one apple tasted." Because of Adam's fall, humankind has knowledge of good and evil, "that is to say of knowing good by evil."

Luther – Marin Luther, a German theologian and priest whose academic paper, the *Ninety-five Theses*, which outlined his grievance with the Catholic Church related to indulgences (the selling of reduced sentences in purgatory for sins committed by congregation members) prompted the Protestant Reformation in 1517. While the Reformation is generally said to have begun with Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*, Luther himself was influenced by the writings of John Wyclif, an English bishop. Milton implies that without Wyclif, Luther may not have written his *Theses*.

Protagoras – A Greek sophist, or teacher, from the fifth century B.C.E. Protagoras was a particularly controversial figure in ancient Greece due to his unorthodox religious beliefs. He was banished and his **books** burned by the Court of Areopagus for heresy against the gods. Milton implies that this form of censorship—one that is based on heresy and decided by a public court—is acceptable and, at times, necessary.

Epicurus – A philosopher who lived in Greece around the fifth century B.C.E. Epicurus rejected Platonism, the teachings of Plato and the accepted school of thought during Epicurus's day. Instead, he circulated his own school of thought, now known as Epicureanism. Even though Epicurus challenged popular opinions, Milton claims that Epicurus's words were never censored in ancient Greece.

Lycurgus – A famous lawmaker in Sparta during the eight century B.C.E. Milton claims that Lycurgus encouraged Spartans to read Greek poets like Homer and Thales. Homer and Thales would have been viewed as foreign writers during Lycurgus's time, but Lycurgus did not suppress their controversial **books**. Milton offers Lycurgus as an example of a lawmaker who was tolerant of competing ideas and respected books.

Cato the Censor – A Roman senator from the third century B.C.E. Cato the Censor was opposed to Hellenization, or the spread of Greek culture, and he wanted to banish all Greek **books** from Rome. Cato's call to ban books was fought and overruled by Scipio and the other Roman senators, and Greek books were not banned in Rome.

Hus / Jan Huss – Jan Huss, a Czech theologian and an important predecessor to the Protestant Reformation. Jan Huss was deeply influenced by the religious writings of John Wyclif, an English bishop, and Huss was burned at the stake in 1415 for heresy against the Catholic Church. Milton claims it was early dissidents like Huss and Wyclif who "drove the papal court to a stricter policy of prohibiting," prompting an era of pre-publication licensing, but Milton also implies that without Wyclif, an Englishman, Huss perhaps wouldn't have been known.

Juno – The Greek goddess of marriage and childbirth. Milton claims that until the Spanish Inquisition and the Council of Trent, there was not an "envious Juno" sitting over the birth of **books**. Milton's reference to the goddess of childbirth deepens his argument that books are a living part of their author and

therefore should not be killed through censorship.

Galileo – An Italian astronomer and physicist who lived from 1564-1642. Galileo is often referred to as the father of modern science, and he was imprisoned by the Roman Inquisition for heresy against the Catholic Church. Milton claims to have met Galileo while visiting Italy, where Galileo was under house arrest for his more controversial writings. Galileo serves as an example of what happens when the government has the authority to ban and censor **books**.

Isis – The wife of Egyptian god Osiris. After Osiris was cut up into several pieces and "scattered," Isis searched for each individual piece and wrapped Osiris back up. Milton uses this ancient myth as an analogy for the pursuit of knowledge and truth. He sees truth as having been cut up and "scattered," and the pursuit of truth through knowledge is searching for each individual piece, like Isis searching for Osiris's limbs.

Osiris – An Egyptian god who was killed by his brother and cut up into several pieces. The body of Osiris was scattered, and his wife, Isis, recovered each piece and wrapped Osiris back together. This myth is where the image of a wrapped mummy originated, but this is also how Milton sees truth. Truth, too, has been "hewed" and "scattered," leaving humankind to search for the pieces like Isis, but Milton implies the pieces will never be fully recovered. This reflects Milton's opinion of truth as subjective and multifaceted, not merely one absolute thing or another.

Calvin – John Calvin, a French theologian and religious reformer during the Protestant Reformation. Calvin's beliefs later became known as Calvinism, a specific denomination of Protestantism. Milton draws attention to the fact that Calvin was influenced by the religious writings of John Wyclif, without whom the Protestant Reformation may have never happened.

Pythagoras – An ancient Greek philosopher from the sixth century B.C.E. Among other things, Pythagoras was known for his belief in the transmigration of souls, which assumes that the human soul can pass to another person, object, or animal upon death. Milton implies that Pythagoras's belief in the transmigration of souls originated with the Druids, the ancient people of the British Isles. Through Milton's reference to Pythagoras, he implies that it was the British who influenced and inspired the Greeks, not the other way around.

Jerome – Jerome of Prague, a Czech theologian and follower of Hus. Both Hus and Jerome of Prague believed in the religious writings of John Wyclif, an English priest and early dissident of the Roman Catholic Church. Jerome of Prague was burned at the stake in 1416 for heresy against the Catholic Church, and he is seen as in important forerunner of the Protestant Reformation. Milton implies that since Jerome of Prague was influenced by John Wyclif, the Protestant Reformation actually began with an Englishman, not with the German Martin Luther as is usually assumed.

MINOR CHARACTERS

God – Milton repeatedly argues that reason and the ability to choose between good and evil is a divine gift from God, which Parliament's Licensing Order violates. In this way, Milton implies that Parliament's law is an affront to God.

Plato – An ancient Greek philosopher who lived in Athens around the fifth century B.C.E. Plato, along with his teacher, Socrates, are generally considered to be the most important figures in Western philosophy. Milton claims that Plato encouraged the reading of Aristophanes,

Christ – Jesus Christ, the son of God in the Christian Bible. Even though Christ "preached in public," Milton claims that "writing is more public than preaching; and more easy to refutation, if need be." This comparison reflects Milton's opinion of the importance of written speech over that which is spoken.

Socrates – An ancient Greek philosopher from the fifth century B.C.E. Socrates was Plato's teacher. Plato accused Aristophanes's play, *The Clouds*, of contributing to Socrates's trial and subsequent execution.

King Charles I – King of England from 1625 to 1649. King Charles was responsible for initiating the Star Chamber Decree in 1637.

Aristophanes – A Greek playwright from the fourth century B.C.E. Plato claimed that Aristophanes's play, *The Clouds*, contributed to the trial and execution of Plato's teacher Socrates. Despite this, Milton claims that Plato still praised Aristophanes's work and did not support banning or censoring his **books**.

Dionysius – The Greek God of the theater. Plato "commends" the reading of Aristophanes's plays to Dionysius.

Homer – A writer from the Greek region of Ionia, near the ancient city of Troy, famously known for epic poems like *The Iliad*. According to Milton, Lycurgus encouraged the reading of **books** by Homer to "prepare and mollify the Spartan surliness."

Thales – A writer from the Greek region of Ionia, near the ancient city of Troy. According to Milton, Lycurgus encouraged the reading of **books** by Thales to "prepare and mollify the Spartan surliness."

Carneades – A Greek philosopher from the third century B.C.E. Cato the Censor of Rome despised Greek writing like those by Carneades and sough to "banish all such Attic babblers out of Italy."

Critolaus – A Greek philosopher from the second century B.C.E. Cato the Censor of Rome despised Greek writings like those by Critolaus and sought to "banish all such Attic babblers out of Italy."

Scipio – Scipio Africanus, a Roman general and senator from the third century B.C.E. Milton refers to Scipio as a "noble"

senator because he "withstood" Cato the Censor who wanted to ban all Greek **books** in Rome. Because of Scipio, Milton implies, Greek books were not censored or banned in Rome.

Naevius – Gnaeus Naevius, a Roman poet who was punished for libel in ancient Rome and made to recant. Milton offers Naevius as an example of an acceptable reason to censor or ban **books**.

Menander – A Greek dramatist from the fourth century B.C.E. According to Milton, Roman poet, Gnaeus Naevius was influenced by Menander.

Augustus – Emperor of the Roman Empire from 27 B.C.E. to 14 C.E. Milton claims that ancient Rome only banned **books** found to be heretical or libelous. In only these instances, Milton claims, books "were burnt," and their authors "punished by Augustus."

Padre Paolo – Paolo Sarpi, an Italian bishop and historian whose **book**, *The History of the Council of Trent*, exposed the power and corruption of the Council of Trent and was subsequently banned. Milton implies that Paolo Sarpi's book was the first to be suppressed by the Catholic Church.

Martin V – Pope of the Roman Catholic Church from 1417 to 1431. Martin V's papacy began shortly after Jan Huss was executed by the church during the tumultuous years leading up to the Protestant Reformation.

Dionysius Alexandrinus – Pope Dionysius of Alexandria. Milton mentions Pope Dionysius as an especially pious man who sought to safeguard himself from evil by reading heretical **books**. Pope Dionysius illustrates Milton's overarching argument that reading "bad books" does not make one bad by extension.

Paul – An apostle who preached the gospel in the first century C.E. Milton quotes Paul's letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Solomon – The King of Israel during biblical times. Milton claims that Solomon said that much reading "is a weariness to the flesh," but he did not say, according to Milton, that it is "unlawful."

Zwinglius – Ulrich Zwingli, the leader of the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland. Milton implies that to abandon the reformation and consider Protestants fully reformed is a disservice to Protestantism's founding fathers, like Calvin and Zwingli.

Sir Francis Bacon – An English philosopher who lived from 1561-1626. He is known for valuable work in the field of inductive reasoning, and he is credited with being one of the inventors of the scientific method. Milton quotes Sir Francis Bacon in *Areopagitica*.

Lucifer – The Devil in the Christian Bible. Milton hopes that Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643 falls "from the stars with Lucifer," like the Star Chamber Decree did. In this way, Milton implies that Parliament's Licensing Order is not only unchristian but evil.

Euripides – A Greek tragedian who lived in Athens during the fifth century B.C.E. Milton quotes Euripides's play, *The Suppliants*, at the beginning of *Areopagitica*.

TERMS

Areopagus – A rock formation in Athens, Greece. During ancient times, the Court of Areopagus, Greece's governing body, met near the rock formation to hear public disputes and decide laws. The Court of Areopagus is implied both in **Milton**'s title, *Areopagitica*, and his reference to **Isocrates**'s *Areopagitic Discourse*.

The Council of Trent – A council of the **Roman Catholic Church** held in Trent, Italy, from 1545-1563. The Council of Trent is often referred to as the Counter-Reformation, and it was created specifically to stop the progress of the Protestant Reformation. Like the Spanish Inquisition, the Council of Trent rooted out heretics of the Catholic Church (i.e. Protestants), and they, too, had a hand in censoring and suppressing books. The Council created the *Index of Prohibited Books*, which listed texts that Catholics were forbidden to read. **Milton** refers to the Council of Trent multiple times in *Areopagitica*, and he implies that Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643 is just as oppressive as the Council of Trent.

Cynics – Members of an ancient Greek school of philosophical thought who were opposed to pleasure. The word "cynical" comes from the school of Cynics, and **Milton** claims that not even their pessimistic words were censored in ancient Greece.

Cyrene – A city in ancient Greece, and later in Rome, in what is present-day Libya. Cyrene was one of the most important cities in the region and was widely known to embrace liberal beliefs and values. **Milton** notes that pre-publication censorship was not practiced in Cyrene.

Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643 – An ordinance mandated by **English Parliament** in 1643 that stipulated every piece of writing must be licensed prior to publication and that every written work must contain the name of the author, the printer, and the publisher. **Milton** was vehemently opposed to Parliament's Licensing Order (except for the part that required an author's name appear on their written work), and he argues it gives Parliament too much power to ban and censor books. *Areopagitica* is Milton's written defense of the free speech that it oppressed by Parliament's order.

Polemic – An aggressive written argument, usually involving political or religious matters. The word is derived from the Greek word for "war," and it was a popular form of writing in ancient Greece. **Milton**'s *Areopagitia* is a polemic.

Presbyter – A minister, pastor, or elder of the Protestant faith.

Prelate – A bishop of the **Catholic Church**. In 1642, **King Charles I** excluded prelates from serving in **Parliament**.

The Protestant Reformation – A movement within Christianity in which the **Roman Catholic Church** splintered and Protestantism was born. Protestants reject several of the accepted beliefs of Catholicism, such as that of the sacraments and papal authority, and they wished to be separate and independent of the Catholic Church to have the freedom to worship as they wished. The Protestant Reformation is generally accepted to have begun in 1517 with **Martin Luther**'s writing of the *Ninety-five Theses*, but **Milton** also mentions important figures prior to Luther who greatly influenced the reformation, such as **John Wyclif** and **Jan Huss**. Milton also implies that the reformation is not yet over, and that the reformation itself is in need of "reforming," which he indeed attempts to accomplish with *Areopagitica*.

The Spanish Inquisition – A tribunal of the **Roman Catholic Church** that was part of the greater Catholic Inquisition, which also included the Roman Inquisition and the Portuguese Inquisition. The purpose of the tribunal was to maintain Catholicism in the Holy Roman Empire and meet the growing resistance of the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Inquisition was particularly concerned with identifying heretics, and it was particularly violent and oppressive. **Milton** claims in *Areopagitica* that pre-publication censorship was "invented" by the Catholics during the inquisition for the expressed purpose of thwarting the spread of Protestantism, and he refers to Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643 as an authentically "Spanish policy of licensing books."

The Star Chamber Decree – The Star Chamber was an English court and major governing body of England from about 1422 until it was abolished in 1641, three years before **Milton** wrote *Areopagitica*. In 1637, The Star Chamber issued a decree that was particularly restrictive of certain liberties, such as freedom of speech. It mandated many of the same printing and publication restrictions as Parliament's Licensing Order, and when the Star Chamber Decree was abolished in 1641, all the restrictions were lifted. Printing and publishing of all types exploded only to have **Parliament** impose the same restrictions again just two years later.

THEMES

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RELIGION, CENSORSHIP, AND REASON

Areopagitica is a polemic, or an aggressive written argument, published by John Milton in 1644. Just two years before Milton wrote *Areopagitica*, King Charles's Star Chamber Decree, which was responsible for the widespread censorship of speech and writing, was abolished. For a short time, censorship was nearly nonexistent in England and publications of every type began to rise. To suppress royalist propaganda and police radical ideas, Parliament passed the Licensing Order of 1643, which introduced several ordinances for printing regulation, including pre-publication licensing and the registration of all authors, printers, and publishers. Milton himself had been censored for some his more controversial writings, and he vehemently disagreed with Parliament's Licensing Order. *Areopagitica*, which Milton published without registration, is his argument against Parliament's printing regulations and the repressive influence of the Roman Catholic Church, and he traces a historical account of censorship through the ages. The type of sweeping censorship imposed by Parliament, Milton argues, is a relatively recent phenomenon with roots in the Catholic Church and is the mark of a truly oppressive society. Though Milton is not wholly against censorship in all contexts, he believes that censoring **books** generally infringes on the individual's liberties and ability to "reason," and is a direct offense against God.

Milton provides ancient Greece and Rome as examples of societies that respected individual thought and censored minimally, in contrast with 17th century England. Milton claims that Plato, a highly influential Greek philosopher, "commended the reading of Aristophanes the loosest of them all, to his royal scholar Dionysus." Aristophanes was a Greek playwright and comic whose play, *The Clouds*, was accused by Plato of contributing to the trial and execution of Socrates, a fellow Greek philosopher and Plato's teacher. Regardless of how he must have personally felt about Aristophanes, Plato still praised the study of his work rather than calling for its censorship. Lycurgus, the lawgiver who established many of the institutions of ancient Spartan society, encouraged the reading of Homer and Thales—both poets from Ionia, a region near the ancient city of Troy—to "mollify Spartan surliness" and "plant among them law and civility." Homer is credited with writing the epic poem, the *Iliad*, a telling of the Trojan War, which began after the Prince of Troy ran off with the wife of the king of Sparta. Ancient Spartans no doubt had much animosity toward those associated with Troy, yet their writings were still widely accepted and read. Milton also references Cato the Censor, a Roman senator who sought to stifle the spread of Greek culture in Rome and called "to banish all such Attic babblers out of Italy." Essentially, Cato wanted to censor Greek influence and writing, which he considered pagan, "but Scipio and other of the noblest senators withstood him." In ancient Greece and Rome, Milton argues, there were but "two sorts of writings which the

magistrate cared to take notice of: those either blasphemous and atheistical, or libellous." In short, only books that were considered sacrilegious or defamatory were censored, a point Milton appears to agree with, as opposed to the heavily regulated publishing laws of his own contemporary period.

According to Milton, the type of censorship imposed by Parliament in 1643 was not seen until "after the year 800," when "the popes of Rome" (the Roman Catholic Church), began heavily censoring books and ideas. This, in his view, violates an individual's ability to "reason," and therefore to distinguish good from evil, a "gift" from God that should not be limited through the suppression and censorship of books. Milton mentions Jan Hus, a Czech theologian and predecessor to the Protestant Reformation, "who first drove the papal court to a stricter policy of prohibiting." Hus favored ecclesiastical reform and was burned at the stake in 1415 for heresy against the Catholic Church, a precedent which Milton implies to have encouraged general censorship in Europe. Milton also refers to the Council of Trent, a council held in northern Italy from 1545-1563 that responded to the growing threat of Protestantism against the Catholic Church. Out of the Council of Trent came the *Index of Prohibited Books*, which identified books Catholics were forbidden to read. Milton claims that the Spanish Inquisition (a judicial institution formed to identify heretics of the Catholic Church) and the Council of Trent "together brought forth, or perfected, those catalogues and expurging indexes that rake through the entrails of many an old good author." The Spanish Inquisition also identified prohibited books and is a prime example of the intolerance and censorship Milton opposes in *Areopagitica*. Milton repeatedly argues that one's ability to reason and freely choose between good and evil is a sacred gift handed down by way of God's divine authority and no one, including the British Parliament, has the authority to take that gift away. Milton implies that Parliament defies God's plan and authority through the suppression and censorship of books. Eliminating the freedom to choose between good and bad, as is done through censorship, diminishes one's moral fortitude, Milton contends, and in doing so makes one an "artificial" Christian—one who is only holy in theory, not in practice.

Milton relies on the anti-Catholic sentiments of the Protestant Parliament and characterizes censorship as a uniquely Catholic creation. He calls Parliament's printing regulations an "authentic Spanish policy of licensing books," and implies that these laws make Parliament no better than the Catholic Church. While Milton argues against censorship in *Areopagitica*, he supports the complete suppression and eradication of the Roman Catholic Church—which he considers to be particularly oppressive and cruel—an opinion that was also overwhelmingly held by members of Parliament. He "who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image," Milton writes, "but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye." Plainly put, Milton implies that to censor books and kill reason is to kill God Himself, a message that must have been particularly impactful for Milton's religiously devout audience to hear.

KNOWLEDGE, LEARNING, AND TRUTH

John Milton was a man of letters, meaning he was an intellectual who highly valued knowledge and learning, and his pursuit of knowledge through books is well-established both historically and in *Areopagitica*. Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643 severely limited one's access to **books**—books that were considered offensive or particularly controversial were subject to censorship or ban—and Milton argues Parliament's Licensing Order severely limits one's access to knowledge and learning as well. Perhaps more importantly, Milton argues, censorship "retards the importation of our richest merchandise, truth." Like good and evil, Milton maintains that truth cannot be separated from knowledge and learning, and he further implies that absolute truth is not something that can be isolated—at least, not yet. Though *Areopagitica*, Milton argues that truth is ultimately subjective and underscores the danger of censorship in propagating falsehoods.

One of Milton's overarching arguments throughout *Areopagitica* is that censorship hinders knowledge and learning. It encourages division among people, rather than understanding, and this is one of his primary reasons for opposing Parliament's Licensing Order. According to Milton, Parliament's Order, "this very opinion of theirs, that none must be heard, but whom they like, is the worst and newest opinions of all others; and is the chief cause why sects and schisms do so much abound, and true knowledge is kept at a distance from us." Milton not only implies that censorship hinders knowledge, he also suggests that the suppression of knowledge through censorship and intolerance has led to the greater division of England itself. Milton further claims that Parliament's censorship is "but a servitude like that imposed by the Philistines," under which the English are "not to be allowed the sharpening of [their] own axes and coulters." The Philistines were ancient farmers generally considered to have been uneducated, and Milton suggests that the censorship of books could result in the English leading the same uneducated existence as the Philistines. "What should ye do then," Milton asks, "should ye suppress all this flowery crop of knowledge [...], to bring a famine upon our minds again, and we shall know nothing but what is measured to us by their bushel?" Not only does censorship lessen one's knowledge, Milton asserts, but it also controls what kind of knowledge is accessible in the first place.

Milton also maintains that censorship negatively affects the pursuit of truth, which is itself a product of knowledge and learning. Milton argues that censorship by Parliament "will be

primely to the discouragement of all learning, and the stop of truth, not only by disexercising and blunting our ability in what we know already, but by hindering and cropping the discovery that might be yet further made both in religion and civil wisdom." Without learning, one cannot expect to discover truth, and therefore cannot hope to advance as a society. "Truth is compared in scripture to a streaming fountain," Milton writes, "if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition." According to Milton, Parliament's Licensing Order stops the free "perpetual progression" of knowledge and truth by individuals. The only truth that is circulated is the one chosen by the censors, and the rest gathers in "a muddy pool of conformity and tradition." "Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolized and traded in by tickets and statues and standards," Milton claims. Truth cannot be bought, sold, or forced through censorship. Rather, it must be feely discovered through knowledge and learning.

"Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on," Milton contends. He considers truth as something again gifted to humankind by God, something that in its most natural form is "perfect." Truth did not, however, retain its perfection. "Virgin truth," Milton argues, has been "scattered" to "the four winds," and is not easily picked up. "We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons," Milton says of the pieces of truth, "nor ever shall do, till her master's second coming." In this way, Milton argues truth's subjective nature. Truth can be different things to different people (absolute truth is known only by God), and humankind can only find bits and pieces of it if they are able to seek knowledge and learn freely.

WRITING AND AUTHORSHIP

It is very clear throughout *Areopagitica* that Milton opposes the pre-publication censorship imposed by Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643, but he doesn't entirely disagree with all of the order's regulations. In addition to mandating pre-publication licensing, Parliament's Order also dictated that every "**book**, pamphlet, or paper" must bear the name of the author, as well as the printer and publisher, and be registered at Stationer's Hall, the official censor appointed by Parliament. Milton failed to register *Areopagitica* at Stationer's Hall—it likely would have been heavily censored or banned had he done so—but he did proudly sign his name to it, as he did with many of his polemics. Milton was ready and willing to answer for his writing, a responsibility he considered particularly important for authors of written works. Milton advocates for the freedom of all types of speech in *Areopagitica*, but he is particularly outspoken over the preservation of written speech, which, Milton ultimately argues, takes precedence over other forms of speech.

Milton's title, *Areopagitica*, is itself a reference to written speech, which underscores Milton's central argument of the importance of preserving it. "I could name him who from his private house wrote that discourse to the parliament of Athens, that persuades them to change the form of democracy which was then established," Milton writes. This passage points to Greek orator, Isocrates, and his famous speech, the *Areopagitic Discourse*, which was delivered to an assembly of Athenians regarding the power of the Court of the Areopagus, the high court of ancient Greece. Isocrates's speech successfully persuaded the assembly, just as Milton hopes to do with *Areopagitica*. At the time Isocrates wrote his *Areopagitic Discourse*, however, he was physically unable to deliver the speech. Therefore, Isocrates intended for his speech to be read by the assembly, not spoken before them. This, too, is Milton's intention with *Areopagitica*. Milton did not stand up in front of Parliament and actually give a speech; he wrote it, much like Isocrates, and in it, he directly addresses Parliament. *Areopagitica* is Milton's written speech in defense of written speech, and this reinforces his opinion that writing is the most important sort of speech.

In addition to the reference within *Areopagitica*'s title, Milton explicitly outlines the benefits of written speech compared to that which is spoken. "Christ urged it as wherewith to justify himself, the he preached in public," Milton says, "yet writing is more public than preaching." Spoken words only reach those who can hear them, while writing has the ability to reach a much wider audience. Writing can be read repeatedly, throughout time and by endless numbers of people, making it infinitely more public than preaching. Milton argues that writing is "more easy to refutation, if need be, there being so many whose business and profession merely it is, to be the champions of truth." This is undoubtedly meant as sarcasm related to the sheer number of censors combing through books, but Milton's point is nonetheless clear: written works are easier to question and prove right, wrong, or libelous. Compared to other types of speech, Milton contends that written speech, like that in *Areopagitica*, can easily be traced to its author. When speech can be attributed to a single person, that person may be compelled to answer for said speech and explain, if necessary. This type of accountability is difficult with other types of speech, Milton implies, and as such, he appears to support the portion of Parliament's Licensing Order that demands the names of authors.

Still, it is Milton's identity as a writer that makes him most sensitive to Parliament's Licensing Order. He is resentful of Parliament's attempts to censor and ban his speech, and he questions their authority to do so. He writes of "the hasty view of an unleasured licenser," who, Milton points out, may be "younger," or "inferior in judgement," or "perhaps one who never knew the labour of book-writing." There is respect and authority to be found in writing, Milton implies, and Parliament's attempts to censor that authority is an affront to

all written speech. Thus, Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643 is "but a dishonour and derogation to the author" and "to the book."

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BOOKS

Books are repeatedly mentioned by Milton in *Areopagitica* and they carry a twofold significance within his speech. First, books are symbolic of knowledge and learning and the pursuit of truth; however, the *suppression* of books through censorship is also symbolic of oppression and governmental tyranny and overreach. Milton frequently references ancient Greece and Rome as model societies of wise, educated men, and one of the primary sources of this wisdom and knowledge, Milton asserts, is their tolerance for books and competing ideas. All books and "all opinions, yea, errors, known, read and collated" are useful in "the speedy attainment of what is truest," Milton argues. He further asserts that the continued censorship of books by Parliament's Licensing Order will be to the detriment of learning and the pursuit of truth, not only because it limits access to what "we know already," but because it limits "the discovery that might be yet further made both in religious and civil wisdom." Books, then, are a tangible representation of the wealth of ideas and potential for truth-seeking that Milton believes are unique to the written word, as well as the danger of those ideas being regulated and censored by the government.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin UK edition of *Areopagitica and Other Writings* published in 2014.

Areopagitica Quotes

❝ Which though I stay not to confess ere any ask, I shall be blameless, if it be no other than the joy and gratulation which it brings to all who wish and promote their country's liberty; whereof this whole discourse proposed will be a certain testimony, if not a trophy. For this is not the liberty which we can hope, that no grievance ever should arise in the commonwealth, that let no man in this world expect; but when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained, that wise men look for. To which if I now manifest by the very sound of this which I shall utter, that we are already in good part arrived, and yet from such a steep disadvantage of tyranny and superstition grounded into our principles as was beyond the manhood of a Roman recovery, it will be attributed first, as is most due, to the strong assistance of God our deliverer, next to your faithful guidance and undaunted wisdom. Lords and Commons of England.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), God, The Roman Catholic Church, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98-9

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs in the very beginning of *Areopagitica*, in the portion of Milton's polemic that is often referred to as the exordium, or introduction. This quote is important because it outlines Milton's argument against Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643, but it also underscores Milton's distaste for the Roman Catholic Church. Milton's speech is primarily in response to Parliament's Licensing Order, which severely limited printing and publishing rights in England. Milton considered Parliament's order oppressive and a violation of one's liberty to free written speech, which is why Milton's speech to Parliament is more than just a "testimony." *Areopagitica* is Milton's written speech to Parliament about the freedom of written speech; therefore, Milton's treaty is a "trophy." It is a tangible example of the very thing he is fighting for, and it reflects his merit as well, as both a writer and a learned and "wise" man.

Milton clearly outlines his own definition of liberty: when one's "complaints are freely heard, deeply considered and speedily reformed." Despite his grievance, however, Milton still praises Parliament. He credits Parliament (along with God) for the liberty that they do have, and he implies that it was Parliament who helped to deliver England from the confines of the Roman Catholic Church. Prior to the

Protestant Reformation, England was at a "steep disadvantage of tyranny and superstition" under the control of the Catholic Church, but the English Reformation, particularly the Protestant Reformation, freed them from this control. Milton points out that Rome itself remains under control of the Church; thus, the level of liberty the English have secured was "beyond the manhood of a Roman recovery." This is not only telling of Milton's religious beliefs, but reflects his high opinion of England in general as a country he considers to be above the "tyranny" of Parliament's order.

❝ Nevertheless there being three principal things, without which all praising is but courtship and flattery: first, when that only is praised which is solidly worth praise: next, when greatest likelihoods are brought that such things are truly and really in those persons to whom they are ascribed: the other, when he who praises, by showing that such his actual persuasion is of whom he writes, can demonstrate that he flatters not; the former two of these I have heretofore endeavoured, rescuing the employment from him who went about to impair your merits with a trivial and malignant encomium; the latter as belonging chiefly to mine own acquittal, that whom I so extolled I did not flatter, hath been reserved opportunely to this occasion.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

This quote also occurs in the introduction of *Areopagitica*, and it is important not only because it confirms that Milton's own praise of Parliament is not mere "courtship and flattery," but because it also lays the groundwork for Milton to better explain the true dangers of censorship later in the speech. Prior to this passage, Milton emphasizes how wonderful Parliament is, and this quote prevents him from sounding ingenuine. Milton's praise is not empty, and neither are his complaints; they come from a place of extensive thought and deep respect. This quote also reflects Milton's concern over copyrighting and preserving one's written work. Before praise, one must be sure that the qualities they praise are "truly and really in those persons to whom they are ascribed."

Milton's third "principal thing" states that one must be of the "actual persuasion" of whom or what they praise. In other words, one must be honest and not lie about what they praise. Milton writes of he "who went about to impair your merits with a trivial and malignant encomium," and this is a reference to the recent circulation of an anonymous pamphlet that pretended to praise Parliament but was just concealed royalist propaganda. The author of the pamphlet was not of the "actual persuasion" he claimed; therefore, his praise is mere "courtship and flattery." This again surfaces when Milton tells of going to Europe and visiting with learned men who had been silenced and stifled by the Spanish Inquisition. There, it was clear that licensing and censorship had ruined the state of learning, and the only books published were "but flattery and fustian."

❝ Lords and Commons, as what your published order hath directly said, that to gainsay, I might defend myself with ease if any should accuse me of being new or insolent, did they but know how much better I find ye esteem it to imitate the old and elegant humanity of Greece, than the barbaric pride of a Hunnish and Norwegian stateliness. And out of those ages, to whose polite wisdom and letters we owe that we are not yet Goths and Jutlanders, I could name him who from his private house wrote that discourse to the parliament of Athens, that persuades them to change the form of democracy which was then established. Such honour was done in those days to men who professed the study of wisdom and eloquence, not only in their own country, but in other lands, that cities and signories heard them gladly, and with great respect, if they had aught in public to admonish the state.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), Isocrates, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs in the opening of Milton's argument against Parliament's Licensing Order, and it is significant because it reflects Milton's opinion that the ancient Greeks' approach to censorship is preferable to Parliament's. It also sheds light on Milton's title, *Areopagitica*. Here, Milton expressly says it is "better" to "imitate the old and elegant humanity of Greece," and he further implies that Parliament's new licensing order is "barbaric." The ancient Greeks censored very little—only what was considered blasphemous or libelous was subject to censorship or

ban—and Milton would rather see England imitate that "polite wisdom." After all, Milton implies, it was the culture and knowledge of the Greeks that ensured the English were no longer "Goths and Jutlanders," the ancient Germanic people who settled in the British Isles.

Milton writes of he "who from his private house wrote that discourse to the parliament of Athens," and this is a reference to Greek orator, Isocrates. Isocrates successfully delivered a speech to a council in Athens about the power of the Court of Areopagus, which was the governing body in ancient Greece. At the time Isocrates wrote his speech, the *Areopagitic Discourse*, he could not physically deliver the speech, so he wrote it instead. Milton borrows both the title and form of his speech from Isocrates, and like Isocrates, he is hoping to persuade Parliament to loosen its grip on English citizens. In ancient Greece, it did not matter if one condemned the government in speech or writing—every voice was heard and given equal weight. Milton suggests that this practice would be preferable to the current state of printing and publishing in England.

❝ By judging over again that order which ye have ordained to regulate printing: 'That no book, pamphlet, or paper shall be henceforth printed, unless the same be first approved and licensed by such', or at least one of such as shall be thereto appointed. For that part which preserves justly every man's copy to himself, or provides for the poor, I touch not, only wish they be not made pretences to abuse and persecute honest and painful men, who offend not in either of these particulars. But that other clause of licensing books, which we thought had died with his brother 'quadragesimal' and 'matrimonial' when the prelates expired, I shall now attend with such a homily, as shall lay before ye, first the inventors of it to be those whom ye will be loath to own; […].

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The Roman Catholic Church, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in what is known as the proposition of Milton's introduction, and it is important because it specifically identifies his argument within *Areopagitica*. Milton directly cites Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643 that dictates "no book, pamphlet, or paper shall be henceforth printed" unless said book is approved and licensed by Parliament. Parliament's new law also mandates that each book bear the author's name, and this provision Milton does not dispute. "I touch not," writes Milton. This part of the law, which "preserves justly every man's copy to himself," is an early form of copyrighting, and it ensures that each author is given credit for their own intellectual property (it provides for "poor" writers), but it also ensures that each author is held accountable for their words, which underscores Milton's overarching argument of the importance of written speech.

This passage also reflects Milton's distaste for the Catholic Church and his belief that pre-publication licensing is a uniquely Catholic creation instituted to suppress the growing threat of the Protestant Reformation. Milton himself is a Protestant, and the Parliament he is speaking to is overwhelmingly Protestant as well (Presbyterian, specifically), and he is counting on their shared dislike of Catholicism to further his argument. In 1642, prior to the writing of *Areopagitica*, bishops—or "prelates" as Milton calls them—were excluded from serving in Parliament by a national law. Until 1642, the prelates of Parliament ordered certain restrictions on English citizens, such as dietary (or "quadragesimal") restrictions during the observation of Lent and "matrimonial" matters concerning restrictions within legal marriage. Milton assumed that restrictions of this kind, like that of Parliament's Licensing Order, had gone out with the prelates, but he was evidently wrong.

❝ And yet on the other hand unless 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 life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), God, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs early on in Milton's speech, and it is

significant because it explains exactly why Milton opposes Parliament's Licensing Order of 1634. The new order allows Parliament to censor or ban any book they see fit for any reason, and Milton sees this order as certain death for books and knowledge. Prior to this passage, Milton claims that "books are not absolutely dead things," and he describes a book as a living extension of the author who wrote it. According to Milton, books "preserve" a portion of the author's soul; thus, Milton considers censoring a good book and killing a good book one and the same, and it is even tantamount to killing the one who wrote it.

It is obviously not advisable to kill a human being, and Milton says as much, but he considers the killing of a book a much worse offense. One's ability to think and "reason," which is certainly required to write a book, is a divine gift bestowed on humankind by God, Milton argues. When a book is censored or banned and therefore killed, that author's "reason" is likewise killed, and this is a direct affront to God, in Milton's opinion. He equates "reason" to "God's image" and implies that killing "reason" through censorship is to kill "God's image" as well. In other words, Milton claims that Parliament's Licensing Order kills God along with books, a message that must have been particularly difficult for his religiously devout audience, the English Parliament, to hear.

❝ Therefore we do not read that either Epicurus, or that libertine school of Cyrene, or what the Cynic impudence uttered, was ever questioned by the laws. Neither is it recorded that the writings of those old comedians were suppressed, though the acting of them were forbid; and that Plato commended the reading of Aristophanes the loosest of them all, to his royal scholar Dionysius, is commonly known, and may be excused, if holy Chrysostom as is reported nightly studied so much the same author, and had the art to cleanse a scurrilous vehemence into the style of a rousing sermon. That other leading city of Greece, Lacedaemon, considering that Lycurgus their lawgiver was so addicted to elegant learning as to have been the first that brought out of Ionia the scattered works of Homer, and sent the poet Thales from Crete to prepare and mollify the Spartan surliness with his smooth songs and odes, the better to plant among them law and civility, it is to be wondered how museless and unbookish they were, minding nought but the feats of war.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), Thales, Homer, Lycurgus, Dionysius, Aristophanes, Plato, Epicurus, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Milton begins his argument, and it is important because it reflects his opinion that ancient Greece's approach to censorship—that they censored very little and only in instances of blasphemy or libel—is preferable to Parliament's approach adopted by the new printing laws. Each example Milton offers illustrates just how tolerant ancient Greeks were of competing ideas and thoughts. For instance, the Cynics were of a particular school of philosophical thought that rejected all pleasure, but their "uttered imprudence" was not suppressed. Residents of the city Cyrene were known for marked liberalism, yet their books were not censored either. Nor was the writing of Epicurus, who rejected Platonism, the accepted philosophy of the time.

Even Lycurgus, a famous lawgiver from Sparta, encouraged the reading of Homer and Thales. Homer and Thales were both born in Ionia, a region near the city of Troy. Troy and Sparta fought the infamous Trojan War after the wife of the king of Sparta ran off with the prince of Troy. And yet, Lycurgus still encouraged the reading of works by authors who were aligned with the Trojans. Homer's epic poem, *The Iliad*, chronicles the fighting of the Trojan War, and it was not suppressed. The Spartans have a misconceived image of being concerned only with war and not books, but Milton implies otherwise. The Spartans were not as "museless" and "unbookish" as history believes, Milton argues, and they were infinitely more tolerant of competing ideas than the English Parliament.

❝ We have it not, that can be heard of, from any ancient state, or polity, or church, nor by any statute left us by our ancestors elder or later; nor from the modern custom of any reformed city or church abroad; but from the most antichristian council, and the most tyrannous inquisition that ever enquired. Till then books were ever as freely admitted into the world as any other birth: the issue of the brain was no more stifled than the issue of the womb: no envious Juno sat cross-legged over the nativity of any man's intellectual offspring; but if it proved a monster, who denies, but that it was justly burnt, or sunk into the sea

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), Juno, The Roman Catholic Church, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in the portion of Milton's argument in which he claims pre-publication censorship like that practiced under Parliament's Licensing Order is a purely Catholic creation, and it is important because it not only underscores Milton's (and Parliament's) dislike of the Catholic Church, but it also reflects Milton's opinion that books are living things and extensions of their authors. Here, Milton claims that no civilized society throughout history other than the Holy Roman Empire, and now England, has ever practiced pre-publication licensing. Censorship like this, Milton says, came out of "the most antichristian council," or the Council of Trent, and "the most tyrannous inquisition that ever enquired," which is another reference to the Spanish Inquisition.

Milton compares Parliament to both the Council of Trent and the Spanish Inquisition, effectively accusing Parliament of being "antichristian" and "tyrannous" as well. He implies that Parliament sits over all written books like an "envious Juno," waiting to censor, or kill, one's "intellectual offspring." This, too, implies that books are livings piece of their authors, and to kill them through censorship is surely a crime,. Furthermore, this passage suggests that Milton is not wholly against the censorship of books. In ancient societies, he claims books that were "proved monsters" were "justly burnt." This implies that Milton believes books that are judged to be bad, such as instances of blasphemy or libel, deserve to be censored, or "sunk into the sea." Milton's objection is with pre-publication censoring, when the decision to censor is made entirely by Parliament independent of the people of England.

> I conceive therefore, that when God did enlarge the universal diet of man's body, saving ever the rules of temperance, he then also, as before, left arbitrary the dieting and repasting of our minds, as wherein every mature man might have to exercise his own leading capacity. How great a virtue is temperance, how much of moment through the whole life of man? Yet God commits the managing so great a trust, without particular law or prescription, wholly to the demeanour of every grown man. [...] God uses not to captivate under a perpetual childhood of prescription, but trusts him with the gift of reason to be his own chooser; there were but little work left for preaching, if law and compulsion should grow so fast upon those things which heretofore were governed only by exhortation.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The English Parliament, God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

This is passage occurs when Milton argues against Parliament's efforts to remove evil from the world through the censorship of offensive books, and it is significant because it identifies "reason" as a divine "gift" from God. Milton resents Parliament's efforts to decide for him which books are appropriate to read, and he believes that God has given him the ability to "choose" for himself that which is evil and whether to stay away. God has decreed no "particular law or prescription" in instances such as this, Milton maintains, and has left one to their own "temperance," or discretion and self-restraint, to decide what is best.

Milton implies that Parliament is defying God's divine will by eliminating one's ability to "reason" and "be his own chooser." In this way, the English people's religion and virtue are managed for them, by an outside party, and it thereby makes them dependent on the state for matters of their personal beliefs and morals. Then, Milton argues, "there will be little left for preaching" if one's religion and virtue is commanded by "law and compulsion." Religious matters have been encouraged, or "governed only by exhortation," in the past, but Parliament's Licensing Order now makes them compulsory. Milton argues that this is obviously oppressive, but it also diminishes the importance of the religion. When religion is forced and managed by another, it negates its purpose and reason. There is little spiritual enrichment to be had from a religion one is obligated to follow.

> Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned, that those confused seeds which were imposed on Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixed. It was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil. As therefore the state of man now is, what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil?

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), Adam, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Milton continues to argue that Parliament cannot remove evil from the world by trying to eradicate sin, and it is significant because it implies that humankind, and therefore books as well, have potential for both good and evil. In this way, Milton implies that Parliament's Licensing Order is destined to fail because what it seeks to do—eliminate evil—can't be done. Milton describes good and evil as "inseparable," "involved and interwoven," with "cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned." Milton references Psyche, a mortal woman from Greek mythology whose stories are frequently interpreted as the fall of the human soul. Psyche is often seen as an Adam figure in mythology who is also tempted by lust and curiosity.

Milton maintains that Adam "fell into of knowing good and evil" by "knowing good by evil." The binary nature of good and evil means that they can't be understood independent of one another. They were both born from the "rind of one apple tasted"—a reference to the Garden of Eden and man's fall from grace—and Milton implies that good cannot possibly exist without evil. Without evil, Milton argues, there would be no way of knowing that which is good. The word "continence" refers to one's self-restraint, especially in sexual matters, but without solid knowledge of evil, one doesn't know from which behaviors to refrain. Indeed, even if good and evil could be separated, they would cease to exist in the way they are typically understood.

> 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. 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.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Milton is arguing that Parliament can't remove vice, or sin, from the world without negatively impacting one's virtue. This quote is significant because it underscores Milton's assertion that untested virtue is weak virtue. Parliament's Licensing Order endeavors to remove offensive and sinful books from circulation to spare citizens from sin, thereby safeguarding the virtue of England and ensuring their collective piety and righteousness. However, Milton argues this forced righteousness leads to "cloistered virtue" that is sheltered and untried.

Milton implies that, as Christians, they are not born into the world pure and full of "innocence." Of course, this runs counter to popular Christian beliefs of purity and innocence. It is often assumed that one is innocent until tempted and tainted by evil; however, Milton implies one is born tainted and is then "purified" by "trial." It is only after one has faced evil and resisted that they can be truly "pure" and claim superior virtue, and Milton argues that Parliament's Licensing Order eliminates the opportunity to resist evil. Thus, Milton asserts that Parliament's attempts to protect virtue will lead only to "unexercised and unbreathed" virtue that never "sees her adversary."

> When God gave him reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had been else a mere artificial Adam, such an Adam as he is in the motions. We ourselves esteem not of that obedience, or love, or gift, which is of force: God therefore left him free, set before him a provoking object, ever almost in his eyes herein consisted his merit, herein the right of his reward, the praise of his abstinence

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), Adam, God,

The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Milton is explaining his opposition to Parliament's attempts to remove sin from the world by removing "bad books," and it is significant because it again underscores the importance of "reason" and the "freedom to choose" between good and evil in the constitution of Christian virtue and righteousness. Milton again refers to "reason" as something bestowed upon humankind by God, which implies that Parliament has no right to take it away through their new printing laws. Milton claims that "reason is but choosing," specifically choosing good from evil, and Parliament disregards this choosing.

Milton claims that without choosing, Adam himself would have been "a mere artificial Adam, such as an Adam as he is in the motions." In other words, had Adam never had to choose between eating from the tree of knowledge and not eating from the tree, he would have been only a puppet, moved about by God's divine authority. Similarly, Milton implies that England becomes "artificial" Christians under Parliament's new law. By removing the "provoking object"—evil or offensive books—Parliament becomes the puppet master pulling the strings of the nation. To Milton, there is no "praise" or "reward" in such forced virtue.

> Banish all objects of lust, shut up all youth into the severest discipline that can be exercised in any hermitage, ye cannot make them chaste, that came not thither so: such great care and wisdom is required to the right managing of this point. Suppose we could expel sin by this means; look how much we thus expel of sin, so much we expel of virtue: for the matter of them both is the same; remove that, and ye remove them both alike. This justifies the high providence of God, who though he command us temperance, justice, continence, yet pours out before us even to a profuseness all desirable things, and gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety. Why should we then affect a rigour contrary to the manner of God and of nature, by abridging or scanting those means, which books freely permitted are, both to the trial of virtue, and the exercise of truth.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), God, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Milton continues his argument that Parliament cannot rid the world of sin simply by ridding the world of evil, further underscoring the symbiotic relationship between sin and virtue. Like good and evil, Milton explains sin and virtue as binary terms that cannot exist independent of one another. By suppressing offensive books, Parliament hopes to guard and defend virtue, but Milton implies this has a paradoxical effect. By removing sin, Parliament removes virtue as well, which is counterproductive to their expressed goals in suppressing books and competing ideas.

Milton further argues that Parliament's Licensing Order offends God's divine plan. The "high providence of God," according to Milton, is to behave with "temperance, justice, [and] continence" in the face of the "profuseness of all desirable things," be that offensive books or carnal pleasure, and virtue is secured only in resisting these things. By refusing that which is tempting, one proves their piety to God, but this cannot be achieved without temptation. By removing this temptation through removing books, Parliament is essentially affecting "a manner contrary to the manner of God and of nature." In other words, Parliament's Licensing Order goes against both God and nature.

> Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolized and traded in by tickets and statutes and standards. We must not think to make a staple commodity of all the knowledge in the land, to mark and license it like our broad cloth, and our woolpacks. What is it but a servitude like that imposed by the Philistines, not to be allowed the sharpening of our own axes and coulters, but we must repair from all quarters to twenty licensing forges.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Milton is arguing that Parliament's Licensing

Order negatively affects knowledge and learning through the suppression of books. This quote is significant because it highlights the impact that censorship has on understanding and the pursuit of truth, and it also illustrates just how oppressive Parliament's new law is to the people of England. Milton implies that through the control of books and printing, Parliament is also attempting to control truth and understanding, which is impossible to do. Truth and understand cannot be "monopolized and traded," Milton argues, but must be freely discovered through the pursuit of knowledge.

Milton repeatedly references the Philistines, ancient farmers from biblical times known to be particularly uneducated, and he implies that Parliament's Licensing Order has the same effect on England. Notably, the Philistines did not allow blacksmiths or forges in Israel because they feared that the Hebrews would make swords or spears. While the Israelites were held captive by the Philistines, they were forced to go to their captors to have their "axes and coulters" sharpened, and this is much how Milton views Parliament and the English people. Parliament won't give English citizens books because they fear it will make them evil, so in order to "sharpen" their wits through books and knowledge, they must appeal to their own captors, Parliament, to do so.

> And in their name I shall for neither friend nor foe conceal what the general murmur is; that if it come to inquisitioning again, and licensing, and that we are so timorous of ourselves, and so suspicious of all men, as to fear each book, and the shaking of every leaf, before we know what the contents are, if some who but of late were little better than silenced from preaching, shall come now to silence us from reading, except what they please, it cannot be guessed what is intended by some but a second tyranny over learning: and will soon put it out of controversy that bishops and presbyters are the same to us both name and thing.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The Roman Catholic Church, The English Parliament

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Milton continues his argument that Parliament's Licensing Order and the suppression of books will be to the detriment of learning and the pursuit of truth, and this quote is important because it further implies that Parliament is just as oppressive and tyrannical as the Roman Catholic Church. Milton claims that his view of Parliament is not merely his opinion but the "general murmur," or accepted understanding, that Parliament's order is wholly oppressive. He again refers to the Catholic Church and the Spanish Inquisition and compares Parliament's new law to the overly "suspicious" and fearful approach of the Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation.

Under Parliament's new printing laws, England has been "silenced from reading, except what [Parliament] pleases," which is to say that Parliament is attempting to control truth and knowledge. Milton considers this a "second tyranny over learning," and he implies that it makes Parliament no better than the Catholic Church. The Presbyterians within Parliament insist that their presbyters are of the same holy office and standing as a Catholic bishop, and here Milton suggests that Parliament's Licensing Order settles this dispute. He implies that the oppressive nature of Parliament's new law confirms that presbyters are just like bishops—tyrannous and oppressive.

> Well knows he who uses to consider, that our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise, as well as our limbs and complexion. Truth is compared in scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. A man may be a heretic in the truth; and if he believe things only because his pastor says so, or the assembly so determines, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresy.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The English Parliament

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears as Milton continues to argue against Parliament's control of knowledge and truth, and is significant because it underscores how Parliament's control of knowledge destroys the very understanding of truth. Milton claims that "knowledge thrives by exercise," which is to say that knowledge thrives through study, but Parliament

has severely limited study through their Licensing Order of 1643 and the suppression of books. Instead of a free pursuit of knowledge and truth, Parliament has made available only that truth which they have approved.

Milton's comparison of truth to a "streaming fountain" illustrates his point. Truth must continually flow in a constant pursuit of knowledge. According to Milton, "all opinions, yea, errors, known, read and collated" are useful in "the speedy attainment of what is truest," but Parliament ensures that they alone control the fountain, and other forms of truth "sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition." In this way, Milton suggests that the truth available under Parliament's Licensing Order isn't true all but is simply "heresy." Milton's analogy is a reference to the Bible passage Psalm 85:11-13, which reads: "Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven." Of course, Milton implies that Parliament's order inhibits this "perpetual flow" and diminishes the righteousness of English citizens.

❝ Christ urged it as wherewith to justify himself, that he preached in public; yet writing is more public than preaching; and more easy to refutation, if need be, there being so many whose business and profession merely it is, to be the champions of truth.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), Christ, The English Parliament

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears as Milton continues his defense of written speech, and it is significant because it underscores Milton's opinion that written speech takes precedence over other types of speech and therefore is worth preserving. Christ gained followers and advanced his beliefs through public preaching, and Milton claims that this one way that Christ "justified himself," or validated himself as the chosen one and the son of God. However, Milton maintains that writing is "more public" than Christ's preaching. Preaching is only able to reach the people who can hear it, and the message may become distorted and increasingly inaccurate as it spreads from person to person. Writing, on the other hand, is more permanent and tangible, and it can be read over and over and reach an infinite number of people. In this way, writing is certainly more public than speaking.

This quote also reflects Milton's sarcasm and his distaste for Parliament's new laws. Milton notes that writing is more easily refuted, and he further criticizes Parliament's diligent work to oversee books and be "champions of truth." Of course, Milton has already established that the books circulated by Parliament cannot rightly be called "truth," at least not in the way Milton understands it. Parliament's Licensing Order has deprived Milton and other writers of reaching large audiences through written speech, which further highlights the oppressive nature of Parliament's law.

❝ There is yet behind of what I purposed to lay open, the incredible loss and detriment that this plot of licensing puts us to, more than if some enemy at sea should stop up all our havens and ports and creeks, it hinders and retards the importation of our richest merchandise, truth: nay, it was first established and put in practice by antichristian malice and mystery on set purpose to extinguish, if it were possible, the light of reformation, and to settle falsehood; little differing from that policy wherewith the Turk upholds his Alcoran, by the prohibition of printing.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The Roman Catholic Church, The English Parliament

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 129-30

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Milton argues that Parliament's Licensing Order inhibits the "importation" of truth by diminishing knowledge, and this quote is significant because it implies that Parliament's law further hinders the continued reformation and improvement of the Protestant faith. Milton again implies that the type of censorship practiced by Parliament under the new licensing laws "was first established" by "antichristian malice and mystery" whose purpose it was to "extinguish" the Protestant Reformation. This, of course, is another reference to the Roman Catholic Church and their efforts to stifle the spread of Protestantism through the suppression of books and ideas.

In this vein, Milton implies that the continued suppression of books will further hinder the spread and improvement of Protestantism. During the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church attempted to uphold the Catholic orthodoxy through the suppression of Protestant books and ideas, and Milton draws a parallel between this practice of

censoring books and the Muslim practice printing prohibition. Some Muslims believe that their holy book, the Koran (or "Alcoran"), is desecrated by the act of printing; therefore, printing of the Koran is often prohibited. Milton seems to imply that this act of prohibition does nothing to preserve truth of any kind, and the only way to counteract this suppression is through the free printing of all books and ideas.

> 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 Egyptian Typhon with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good Osiris, took the virgin truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangled 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 do, till her master's second coming; he shall bring together every joint and member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), God, Isis, Osiris, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Milton explains his own understanding of truth, and this passage is significant because it implies that truth is subjective and not absolute. Again, Milton implies that truth, like reason, is a divine gift from God. Indeed, truth came into the world with her "divine master," and in her original state, truth was "perfect," or absolute. But the "wicked race of deceivers," of humankind, ripped "virgin truth" into "thousands of pieces." Milton uses the Egyptian myth of Osiris, who was cut into several pieces after he was murdered, to make his point. Isis, Osiris's wife, searched for Osiris's scattered limbs, and after finding them, wrapped him up again.

Milton implies that humankind's search for truth is much like Isis's search for Osiris's limbs. According to Milton, the pursuit of knowledge is like searching for bits and pieces of scattered truth, only unlike Isis, humankind will never find all the pieces of truth. Only God is privy to absolute truth, and he will not reveal her until his "second coming." While this surely illustrates God's divine power, it also implies that truth is subjective and not based upon a single absolute. Truth is many different things to many people, and not one form of truth is any more or less important than the next.

> For who knows not that truth is strong next to the almighty; she needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings to make her victorious, those are the shifts and the defences that error uses against her power: give her but room, and do not bind her when she sleeps, for then she speaks not true, as the old Proteus did, who spake oracles only when he was caught and bound, but then rather she turns herself into all shapes, except her own, and perhaps tunes her voice according to the time, as Micaiah did before Ahab, until she be adjured into her own likeness. Yet is it not impossible that she may have more shapes than one.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears near the end of *Areopagitica*, and it is important because it further implies that truth is subjective; however, it also suggests that Parliament's Licensing Order only serves to obscure truth instead of uncovering it. Through their Licensing Order and the suppression of books, the only truth that Parliament circulates is that which they believe to be true, which Milton suggests is detrimental to the overall pursuit of truth. When truth is tampered with and forced, Milton implies, it begins to change shape. Milton compares this "bound" truth to Proteus, a shapeshifting oracle in Greek mythology who only spoke truth when someone firmly held him, otherwise he would shift his shape and speak untruths.

This is how Milton sees truth under Parliament's Licensing Order. Truth "tunes her voice according to the time" and only speaks Parliament's approved message. Milton compares this to Micaiah, who predicts King Ahab's victory in battle only because he is encouraged to do so. However, when Ahab orders Micaiah to speak the truth, he rightly predicts the king's defeat and death. Parliament's suppression of books and control of knowledge has caused truth to shift shape, moving England further away from

enlightenment and continued reformation. Milton claims that "it is not impossible" that truth can have more shapes than one, and while this again implies that truth is subjective, it also implores Parliament to have more tolerance for competing ideas, as many are rooted in truth.

> Not that I can think well of every light separation, or that all in a church is to be expected 'gold and silver and precious stones'; it is not possible for man to sever the wheat from the tares, the good fish from the other fry; that must be the angel's ministry at the end of mortal things. Yet if all cannot be of one mind, as who looks they should be? This doubtless is more wholesome, more prudent, and more Christian that many be tolerated, rather than all compelled, I mean not tolerated popery, and open superstition, which as it extirpates all religions and civil supremacies, so itself should be extirpate, provided first that all charitable and compassionate means be used to win and regain the weak and the misled.

Related Characters: John Milton (speaker), The Roman Catholic Church, The English Parliament

Related Themes:

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the end of *Areopagitica*, and it is significant because it reflects Milton's desire to censor and eliminate the Catholic Church. Here, Milton beseeches Parliament to be more accepting of competing ideas and controversial truths. He claims it is "more Christian" to tolerate those who are different than to "compel" those with differences to conform. Milton frequently speaks of "separation" throughout his speech, especially the separation of the Protestantism from Catholicism, but it appears as it there is limit to Milton's tolerance to differences and separation, especially when it involves the Roman Catholic Church.

Milton repeatedly refers to the Catholic Church as oppressive and narrow-minded, and he claims that since the Catholic Church is intolerant of others, their "popery, and open superstition" should not be tolerated either. Milton states that Catholicism "should be extirpate," which is to say it should be censored and eradicated, after the "weak and misled" Catholics have been redirected to Protestantism that is. Ironically, despite vehemently arguing against Parliament's censorship laws, Milton supports the censorship of Catholicism, which is perhaps the fatal flaw of his argument. Milton asks for the same understanding from Parliament which he himself is unwilling to give to the Catholic Church, and this reveals the "the chief stronghold of our hypocrisy to be ever judging one another" that Milton fears earlier in his speech.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

AREOPAGITICA

Milton begins with a quote from *The Suppliants*, a play by Greek tragedian, Euripides. "This is true liberty when free-born men / Having to advise the public may speak free," Milton quotes. "What can be juster in a state than this?"

This immediately launches Milton's argument against censorship, and it also reflects his respect and admiration of ancient Greek society. Milton later claims that ancient Greece is a model society when it comes to the freedom of speech, and his reference to Euripides is evidence of this.

Milton addresses "the High Court of Parliament" directly. The reason for his polemic, he claims, is "no other than the joy and gratulation which it brings to all who wish and promote their country's liberty." He considers his speech a "certain testimony, if not a trophy," to ensure that "complaints are freely heard, deeply considered and speedily reformed." Only with free speech, Milton says, "is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained," and this is what "wise men look for."

This identifies Milton's intended audience: the English Parliament. While he doesn't explicitly state it here, he implicates Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643. Milton thinks Parliament's suppression of books is oppressive and inhibits one's liberty and freedom of speech. This also establishes Milton's pride as an Englishman and his love for his country. Milton later claims that the entire country is negatively affected by the Licensing Order.

England has "already in good part arrived" at liberty, Milton writes, and from such "a steep disadvantage of tyranny and superstition grounded into our principles as was beyond the manhood of a Roman recovery." England's liberty is "attributed first" to God and secondly to the "faithful guidance and undaunted wisdom" of Parliament.

Here, Milton refers to England's break from the Roman Catholic Church, which he believes to be particularly oppressive. The Roman's themselves could not break from the church; thus, true liberty was "beyond […] a Roman recovery." Milton praises Parliament both implicitly and explicitly—not only does he refer to their "wisdom," but he also implies that they delivered England from the "tyranny" of the Catholic Church.

However, Milton states, praise is "courtship and flattery" without "three principal things." Number one, that which is praised must be "solidly worth praise." Secondly, one must ensure to the best of their abilities "that such things are truly and really in those persons to whom they are ascribed." Lastly, one who praises must show "that such his actual persuasion is of whom he writes." Only then, Milton claims, can one "demonstrate that he flatters not." Furthermore, it is only "he who freely magnifies what hath been nobly done, and fears not to declare as freely what might be done better, gives ye the best covenant of his fidelity." This "would fare better with truth, with learning, and the commonwealth," Milton says to Parliament, "than one of your published orders."

Obviously, Milton does not believe Parliament's Licensing Order is worthy of praise, and he further implies that anyone who does praise it is simply flattering Parliament. Milton's own praise of Parliament is not merely "courtship and flattery," because he holds to the "principal things." Milton implies that true "fidelity," or loyalty to country, is stronger in an individual who speaks freely compared to someone who only seeks to flatter the government. This also reflects Milton's belief in the importance of authorship and copyright.

Milton preemptively "defends" himself from those who will "accuse [him] of being new or insolent," but it is "much better" to "imitate the old and elegant humanity of Greece, than the barbaric pride of a Hunnish and Norwegian stateliness," he says. Milton directly references Isocrates, an influential Greek orator from the fifth century B.C.E. "I could name him who from his private house wrote that discourse to the parliament of Athens, that persuades them to change the form of democracy which was then established." Such "honour" was given "to men who professed the study of wisdom and eloquence," Milton says.

This further reflects Milton's respect for ancient Greek society. He refers to other ancient societies as "barbaric" but refers to the Greeks as "old and elegant." This passage also explains Milton's title, Areopagitica, *as he refers to the* Areopagitic Discourse, *a written speech by Isocrates to the Athenian council regarding the power of the Court of Areopagus. It, too, reflects Milton's respect for knowledge, and this belief that those who are knowledgeable should be able to speak publicly for the betterment of society.*

According to Milton, Parliament's Licensing Order of 1643 mandates "that no **book**, pamphlet, or paper shall be henceforth printed, unless the same be first approved and licensed by such." Part of this law "preserves justly every man's copy to himself," and this provision "I touch not," Milton writes. However, the practice of pre-publication licensing—which Milton thought had "died with [its] brother 'quadragesimal' and 'matrimonial' when the prelates expired"—is where the problem lies.

Parliament's order states that every written work must bear the author's name, which is an early form of copyrighting. In this way, one's intellectual property is "justly preserved" by Parliament's order, so Milton does not take issue with this part of the order. Milton considers pre-publication licensing a Catholic invention, however, which is reflected in the words "'quadragesimal' and 'matrimonial.'" Before bishops were removed from Parliament in 1642, they imposed quadragesimal, or dietary, restrictions during Lent and controlled "matrimonial" matters, or those concerning marriage.

First, writes Milton, "the inventors" of [censorship] are "those whom [Parliament] will be loath to own"—the Roman Catholic Church—and the order does "nothing to the suppressing of scandalous, seditious and libellous **books**, which were mainly intended to be suppressed." Milton asserts that the pre-publication licensing of books will be to the detriment of learning and the pursuit of truth, not only because it limits access to what "we know already," but because it limits "the discovery that might be yet further made both in religious and civil wisdom."

In 1645, one year after the writing of Areopagitica, *Presbyterianism, a specific form of Protestantism, was established within Parliament by law. Catholics and Protestants have a contentious history, and Milton is appealing to Parliament's distaste of Catholicism in order to further his argument against pre-publication licensing.*

Milton does not deny that it is important to keep a "vigilant eye on how **books** demean themselves as well as men," for books can be "malefactors" as well. "Books are not absolutely dead things," Milton argues, and they "contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that was whose progeny they are." But caution must be used in sorting the good from the bad. Milton claims it is "as good almost kill a man as kill a good book."

This reflects Milton's respect for the written word and the power of books to bestow knowledge and impart truth. In Milton's opinion, banning or censoring a book is tantamount to killing the one who wrote it, which is certainly an affront to God and the Christian faith.

History illustrates what ancient societies have done against censorship, right up to "the very time that this project of licensing crept out of the Inquisition," catching even "some of our presbyters," Milton writes. In Athens, Greece, "the magistrate" cared only about **books** that were "either blasphemous and atheistical, or libellous." For example, the books of Protagoras were ordered to "be burnt" by "the judges of Areopagus," and Protagoras himself was "banished" when he claimed not to know "whether there were gods, or whether not."

Milton implies that ancient Greece's approach to censorship is preferable to Parliament's, which he again suggests is a Catholic invention through referencing the Spanish Inquisition. Many early preachers of Protestantism, or presbyters, were censored and even killed during the Inquisition. Milton implies that censorship on the grounds of heresy is acceptable, and he offers Protagoras, a particularly controversial sophist from the fifth century B.C.E., as an example.

"We do not read," Milton writes, that Epicurus, "the libertine school of Cyrene," or the words of the Cynics were "ever questioned by the laws." While the acting of many plays was outlawed in Greece, *reading* the same plays was not, and even Plato "commended the reading of Aristophanes" to Dionysius. In Lacedaemon, Lycurgus encouraged the reading of Homer and Thales "to prepare and mollify the Spartan surliness" and "plant among them law and civility." There was "no licensing of **books** among them," Milton says. "Thus much may give us light after what sort of books were prohibited among the Greeks."

Each of the examples Milton provides illustrates the ancient Greeks' tolerance for controversial books. Epicurus rejected Platonism, the accepted school of thought in ancient Greece, and the writings of Aristophanes directly contributed to Socrates's trial and subsequent execution. Still, their books were not suppressed. Homer and Thales were poets from Ionia, a region near Troy, who fought the Trojan war against Sparta, but their books were still read and encouraged by Lycurgus, a famous Spartan lawmaker.

In Rome, Cato the Censor despised Carneades and Critolaus and "moved it in the Senate to dismiss them speedily, and to banish all such Attic babblers out of Italy." However, "Scipio and others of the noblest senators withstood him and his old Sabine austerity," Milton says. During this time, Naevius "filled the city with all the borrowed scenes of Menander" and Naevius "was quickly cast into prison for his unbridled pen." Libelous **books** "were burnt" in Rome, "and the makers punished by Augustus." Books that "were impiously written against their esteemed gods" were met with "like severity," but outside of "these two points, how the world went in books, the magistrate kept no reckoning," Milton argues to Parliament.

Milton again implies censorship is only acceptable in instances of heresy and libel, as was the practice in ancient Rome. Gnaeus Naevius was a Roman poet who was influenced by the Greek dramatist, Menander, a foreign writer by Roman standards. Naevius was tried for libel against a prominent Roman family and was subsequently imprisoned and released only after he recanted. His books were banned because they were libelous, not because they were controversial, and this is also reflected in Milton's reference to Cato. Cato sought to banish Greek books because he despised Greeks, but the "noblest senators" of Rome "withstood him" and allowed the reading of Greek books.

Then, Milton says, the "emperors" became "Christians." Books they believed to be heretical "were examined, refuted and condemned in the general councils," and only then were books "prohibited or burnt by authority of the emperor." Early councils identified books that "were not commendable," but they passed no laws, and they left books "to each one's conscience to read or to lay by." This continued until "after the year 800," when Padre Paolo became "the great unmasker of the Trentine Council." Then, the popes of Rome began to "extend their dominion over men's eyes, [...] burning and prohibiting what they fancied not."

Padre Paolo, also known as Pietro Sarpi, was an Italian bishop who spoke out against the Catholic Church and the power of the Council of Trent. Sarpi's book, The History of the Council of Trent, *was suppressed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Council of Trent, and Milton implies that this is the first time in history that pre-publication censorship was exercised. Just as Milton claims earlier in his speech, pre-publication censorship is a Catholic "invention."*

During the time of Martin V, when Wyclif and Hus were "growing terrible," they "drove the papal court to a stricter policy of prohibiting." This continued, and the Council of Trent and the Spanish Inquisition "together brought forth or perfected those catalogues and expurging indexes that rake through the entrails of many an old good author." The Roman Catholic Church was not only concerned with heretical **books**, but any book that did not suit their tastes. No books could then be published unless "approved and licensed under the hands of two or three glutton friars."

The Council of Trent and the Spanish Inquisition both sought to identify heretics of the Catholic Church, and they both published lists of books that Catholics were forbidden to read. The Index of Prohibited Books *was published by the Council of Trent, and it identified writers like John Wyclif and Jan Hus, who were early dissidents of the Catholic Church and important predecessors of the Protestant Reformation.*

Pre-publication licensing, Milton claims, cannot be found in "any ancient state, or policy, or church." Licensing can be found only in "the most antichristian council, and the most tyrannous inquisition that ever enquired." Up to that point, **books** were "freely admitted into the world as any other birth." There was not an "envious Juno" waiting "over the nativity of any man's intellectual offspring." Only when a book "proved a monster" was it "justly burnt, or sunk into the sea," Milton says.

Milton directly implies that Catholics are "antichristian" and "tyrannous," and since Parliament has adopted the Catholic practice of pre-publication licensing, he implies that Parliament is antichristian and tyrannous as well. Milton considers one's writing, or "intellectual offspring," a sacred thing like any other birth, and he believes it, too, should be respected. Only after *a book is published and is deemed heretical or libelous, he argues, should it be suppressed.*


"But some will say," Milton writes, even though the inventors of pre-publication licensing were bad, the thing itself may be good. Maybe, says Milton, the "best and wisest" societies throughout history have prohibited pre-publication licensing, and only the "falsest seducers and oppressors of men were the first who took it up" for the expressed purpose of hindering the Protestant Reformation. Finding "good use out of such an invention" will surely be impossible, and it therefore should "be held a dangerous and suspicious fruit," Milton asserts.

Here, Milton claims that Catholics first began pre-publication licensing to thwart the Protestant Reformation, without which Parliament and an independent England would not exist. Pre-publication licensing can never be put to good use, Milton asserts, because it is deliberately oppressive, and the fact that it has only been used to stifle the ideas of others, especially Protestant others, is proof of this.

About the year 240 C.E., Dionysius Alexandrinus was "a person of great name in the church for piety and learning," and he wanted to guard himself "against heretics" by being well versed in their **books**. He had a "vision" of God that told him the following: "Read any books whatever come to thy hands, for thou art sufficient both to judge aright, and to examine each matter." Dionysius Alexandrinus read as many books as he could, to do as the apostle Paul said to the Thessalonians: "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good." Dionysius may have "added another remarkable saying of the same author," Milton writes. "'To the pure all things are pure,' not only meats and drinks, but all kinds of knowledge." According to Milton, neither knowledge nor books can "defile" if the individual's morals and "conscience" cannot be "defiled."

Parliament has instituted pre-publication licensing to spare the public from offensive books and keep them from evil, but Milton argues that this method is ineffective. Dionysius Alexandrinus was a particularly righteous man, and he, in part, remained that way by reading offensive books so that he would be more familiar with evil and more readily recognize it. In this way, reading bad books did not make Dionysius Alexandrinus evil, it made him more pious, and Parliament eliminates this possibility through their Licensing Order.


"Wholesome meats" to a spoiled stomach are no different than "unwholesome meats," Milton says, and "best **books** to a naughty mind" are not useless either. "Bad meats will scarce breed good nourishment," but "bad books" are different. Bad books can serve "to discover, to confute, to forewarn, and to illustrate," Milton maintains. All books and "all opinions, yea, errors, known, read and collated" are useful in "the speedy attainment of what is truest." Thus, when God enlarged "the universal diet of man's body, saving every the rules of temperance," he gave man the ability to "exercise his own leading capacity." God did not place man "under a perpetual childhood of prescription, but trusts him with the gift of reason to be his own chooser," Milton claims.

Like Milton's example of Dionysius Alexandrinus, bad books can be informative and teach one about evil and how to avoid it. This passage also identifies "reason" and the ability to choose right from wrong as a divine gift from God that should not be infringed upon by Parliament and their Licensing Order. Milton's mention of man's "universal diet" and the association between books and meat suggests that books are needed to sustain life, but it also harkens to Milton's reference of "quadragesimal" restrictions during Lent.

According to Solomon, Milton says, too much reading "is a weariness to the flesh," but he did not say it is "unlawful." Had God intended "to limit us herein," it would have been useful had he explicitly said what is "unlawful" and what is simply "wearisome." In this world, good and evil "grow up together almost inseparably," Milton claims. The "knowledge of good" is "involved and interwoven" with the "knowledge of evil," and they are impossible to separate. The knowledge of good and evil was born as "two twins cleaving together," both "from the rind of one apple tasted." This is the "doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil."

Milton implies that good and evil exist together in all things, in books and in humankind, which makes sorting out the good from the bad impossible. The binary nature of good and evil can't be understood independent of one another, and good can't exist without evil. Furthermore, Milton claims God never explicitly stated that reading bad books is unlawful, and neither did Solomon, the wise king of Israel during biblical times. Surely, Milton implies, had God meant for bad books to be unlawful, He would have said so.

A "true warfaring Christian," Milton attests, can "distinguish" and "abstain" from that which is evil and "prefer that which is truly better." In this way, one's virtue is tested. "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue," Milton claims, "that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race." One is "purified" by "trial." To reject vice and embrace good is "pure" virtue; but to never be tempted in the first place "is but a blank virtue." Thus, knowledge of "vice" is "necessary to the constituting of human virtue," Milton argues, and "this is the benefit which may be had of **books** promiscuously read."

Here, Milton implies that the suppression of books hurts one's virtue and piety instead of safeguarding it. It is not indicative of true virtue if all evil is removed from the world and everyone is made pious by lack of choice. "Pure" virtue, Milton implies, is having the liberty to choose between good and bad, such as in books, and freely choosing good. Removing this choice makes one's virtue "blank" and essentially meaningless.

It is often feared what "infection" might "spread" from bad **books**, but what of the Bible, Milton asks. The Bible "oft times relates blasphemy not nicely," and it "describes the carnal sense of wicked men not inelegantly." Will that be censored as well? Milton maintains that the feared "infection" from bad books is more "dangerous to the learned than to the ignorant," because books "cannot be suppressed without the fall of learning." Milton points out that "evil manners" can be learned from nearly anywhere, least of all from a book.

Milton implies that Parliament's Licensing Order is particulaly oppressive because it unfairly targets the educated, and it ensures that all knowledge and education will be drastically less accessible moving forward if books continue to be subject to pre-publication licensing. Milton points out the obvious; evil is everywhere, not just in books, yet Parliament is only suppressing written works.

Parliament's Licensing Order "conduces noting to the end for which was framed," Milton argues. Furthermore, if printing is to be regulated to remove evil from the world, "we must regulate all recreations and pastimes." There can be no music, and dancers must be licensed to guarantee "that no gesture, motion, or deportment be taught our youth but what by [Parliament's] allowance shall be thought honest." What of **books** already written and for sale, Milton asks? "Who shall prohibit them?" And "household gluttony"; who will be the censors "of our daily rioting?" Most importantly, who will "forbid and separate all idle resort, all evil company?" These things can introduce one to evil just as easily as a book, Milton contends.

Milton exposes Parliament's order as completely inadequate in ridding England of evil, and he also underscores how wholly oppressive it really is. Regulating that which Milton mentions in his list—music, dance, and private gossip—would likely be criticized as serious government overreach, but this is exactly what Parliament has done to books and reading. Milton also exposes Parliament's order as a slippery slope that could lead to further restrictions in other areas of life and liberty.

It "will not mend our condition," Milton writes, "to sequester out of the world into Atlantick and Eutopian polities, which never can be drawn into use." Virtue is "but a name" if each action either good or evil is "under pittance, and prescription, and compulsion." When God gave Adam reason, "he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing." Without reason, he is "a mere artificial Adam, such an Adam as he is in the motions." God made Adam free and "set before him a provoking object," thereby testing his virtue and morality.

Milton essentially implies that Parliament's Licensing Order makes all of England "artificial" Christians by trying to remove evil from the world. This is obviously an exaggeration, but Milton's point is clear: God gave reason to humankind so that people can freely distinguish between good and evil and choose good—thereby reinforcing their piety and Christian virtue. A world without evil isn't real, much like a utopian society or the fictional island of Atlantis.

One cannot "remove sin by removing the matter of sin," Milton claims. One can "banish all objects of lust, shut up all youth into the severest discipline that can be exercised in any hermitage, ye cannot make them chaste." To banish sin is to banish virtue as well, Milton claims, "for the matter of them both is the same; remove that, and ye remove them both alike." Thus, it is to the detriment of virtue that sin is removed from the world. "A dram of well-doing should be preferred before many times as much the forcible hinderance of evil-doing," Milton says.

Milton's explanation of sin and virtue is much like his explanation of good and evil. The binary relationship between sin and virtue means that one cannot exist without the other. Thus, Parliament's order is incredibly counterproductive. It seeks to make English citizens more virtuous, but in doing so, it destroys their virtue instead by making it meaningless.

Furthermore, "whatever thing we hear or see, sitting, walking, travelling, or conversing may be fitly called our **book**," Milton maintains. As Parliament wishes only to prohibit books, Milton argues, "it appears that this order hitherto is far insufficient to the end which it intends." Plus, all foreign books must be held until they can be reviewed, and a catalogue of "frequently offending" printers must be kept. If this order is not to be "deficient, ye must reform it perfectly according to the model of Trent and Seville, which I know ye abhor to do," Milton says.

Milton again references the Catholic Church and the Council of Trent. His mention of Seville is a reference to the Spanish Inquisition, whose headquarters were in Seville, Spain. In this way, Milton once again compares Parliament to the Roman Catholic Church, an association that is sure to anger and offend Parliament, and hopefully make them rethink their policy on pre-publication licensing.

Parliament's Licensing Order will also "miss the end it seeks" because of the "quality" which "ought to be in every licenser." Anyone "who is made judge to sit upon the birth or death of **books**" must be "a man above common measure," Milton says. They must be "studious, learned and judicious," and make no mistakes, which is surely impossible. There "cannot be a more tedious and unpleasing" type of work, Milton claims, than to be the "perpetual reader of unchosen books." In fact, those who are now employed to do so, "by all evident signs wish themselves well rid of it," and "no man of worth" wishes to take up such a profession.

Milton implies that Parliament's Licensing Order is a bad idea because it is too much authority for any one person to have. What if a mistake is made and the wrong book is censored or banned? The qualifications of a licenser should be above reproach, but Milton implies that no one actually wants to do the job. If there is no one qualified and available to do the job, Milton argues, it clearly can't be done and therefore shouldn't be.

Parliament's Licensing Order is "the greatest discouragement and affront that can be offered to learning and to learned men," Milton laments. There is no benefit to being "a man" instead "a boy at school, if we have only escaped the ferular, to come under the fescue of an imprimatur." When one writes, they use "reason and deliberation," and usually "consult and confer" with "judicious friends" and previous writings. Years of study and work are put into writing, only to have it rejected by "the hasty view of an unleasured licenser," one who is perhaps "younger," or "inferior in judgement," or "one who never knew the labour of book-writing." How can one "teach with authority" or "be a doctor in his book as he ought to be," if all that is written is "under the correction of his patriarchal licenser?" Milton asks.

A "ferular" is a rod typically used in beatings, and a "fescue" is the pointer used by a teacher. What Milton implies through these terms is that Parliament's Licensing Order treats grown men like children by deciding what books they can and cannot read. Furthermore, by restricting books, Parliament is also restricting education and diminishing the expert authority of those who write books. Books are typically written after years of research and study, and that authority and knowledge is insulted by pre-publication licensing and underqualified licensers.

"Who shall warrant me [the licenser's] judgement?" Milton wonders. He knows the answer is "the state," but Milton doesn't like this answer. "The state shall be my governors," Milton proclaims, "but not my critics." The state could make a "mistake" in choosing a licenser just as easily as a licenser can be "mistaken in an author." And, as Sir Francis Bacon said, "such authorized **books** are but the language of the times." It is regrettable, Milton claims, that any author, living or dead, must "come to their hands for license to be printed, or reprinted." No amount of fame will pardon an author from Parliament's "dash," and "the sense of that great man shall to all posterity be lost" due to the "rashness of a perfunctory licenser."

This, too, underscores just how oppressive Parliament's order truly is. Parliament can refuse the printing of a book simply because they don't like the author or what is written, and this opinion isn't necessarily rooted in factual knowledge. Milton draws attention to what is at risk with the suppression of books. Sir Francis Bacon was an important British philosopher who also invented the scientific method. Milton asks his audience to image the consequences of Bacon's books being suppressed: the world would be deprived of his knowledge.

"Henceforth," Milton proclaims, "let no man care to learn, or care to be more than worldly wise," for the "only pleasant life" will be the "ignorant and slothful" life of "a common steadfast dunce." Pre-publication censorship, to Milton, "seems an undervaluing and vilifying of the whole nation." He asserts that "truth and understanding" are not "wares" to be "monopolized and traded in by tickets and statutes and standards." Knowledge cannot be "marked and licensed" like "broad cloth" and "woolpacks." To punish "the whole nation," including those who have done nothing wrong is "a disparagement." After all, Milton says, "debtors and delinquents" are free to roam "without a keeper but inoffensive **books** must not stir forth without a visible jailor in their title."

Again, Milton implies that Parliament's Licensing Order unfairly targets the educated, and he further suggests that the order will do nothing but contribute to the overall dumbing-down of the entire country of England. Milton's words are derogatory—surely Parliament doesn't want to be, or lead, a country of lazy, uneducated "dunces." Milton's rhetoric is obviously meant to be strong and persuasive, but it also reflects his deep respect for knowledge and truth. Milton argues that knowledge should be safeguarded rather than ruined.

It is a "sick and weak estate of faith and discretion," Milton says, to be allowed only that which comes "through the pipe of a licenser." This is not done out of "care or love," he claims, because in "those popish places where the laity are most hated and despised the same strictness is used over them," and sin continues to "break in faster at other doors which cannot be shut."

Milton again references the Catholic Church through the word "popish." Parliament isn't censoring books to protect the people; books are censored to control the people, just like Milton claims is done in the Roman Catholic Church. He further implies that these efforts are futile, since evil breaks in anyway.

It should "discourage the ministers," Milton argues, that "such a low conceit" is given to their efforts that their followers are "not thought fit to be turned loose to three sheets of paper without a licenser." This assumes that all the "sermons" and "lectures preached" are not "armour enough against one single" book without the influence of licenser.

Many members of Parliament are also Presbyterian bishops, and Milton is explicitly calling them out here by insinuating that their sermons might not be enough to keep their congregations, and the country, on the straight and narrow.

Milton claims to have visited other countries "where this kind of inquisition tyrannizes." He has sat with "learned men" who considered him lucky to have been "born in such a place as they supposed England was," and they did nothing but complain about censorship and the state of learning. Censorship "had damped the glory of Italian wits" and only "flattery and fustian" has been written since. Milton had the honor of meeting Galileo when Galileo was an "old" man and "prisoner to the Inquisition." Little did Milton know that he would soon hear the same complaints from "learned men at home."

By claiming the foreign men "supposed" England was a great place to be born, Milton implies that it isn't, precisely because of Parliament's Licensing Order. Galileo, an important Italian astronomer, was tried and found guilty of heresy against the Catholic Church during the Roman Inquisition, and he was exiled and forced to recant much of his written work. Galileo's work has been invaluable to the advancement of society, and his struggle against the Catholic Church's silencing is proof positive of how dangerous censorship can be.

Milton's speech therefore is not "the disburdening of a particular fancy, but the common grievance" of all those who have studied hard to "advance truth." If the time has come that we are so fearful "and so suspicious of all men," Milton says, that we "fear each **book**" before knowing what's inside, and the state can "silence us from reading, except what they please," it can only be assumed that it is "a second tyranny over learning," and it will "put out of controversy that bishops and presbyters are the same to us both name and thing," Milton writes.

Presbyterians insist that "bishops" and "presbyters" are of the same religious office and standing (equivalent to that of a priest), and Milton sarcastically implies that they are indeed the same—both oppressive and tyrannous. There are several presbyters in Parliament who were responsible for instituting the licensing order, and Milton directly insults them.

According to Milton, "faith and knowledge thrives by exercise," just like one's "limbs and complexion." In scripture, truth is compared "to a streaming fountain." If the water does not flow "in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition." In this way, "a man my be a heretic in the truth" if "he believes things only because his pastor says so, or the assembly so determines, without knowing other reason." His "belief" may "be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresy," Milton says.

Parliament's order decides what books are in circulation. Therefore, the only truth that circulates is the one chosen by Parliament, and the rest gathers in "a muddy pool of conformity and tradition." This completely destroys the very understanding of truth by associating it with tradition and conformity instead of knowledge and fact. In this vein, truth isn't true at all, but is farce or "heresy."

Milton believes that there is no "burden" many "would gladlier post off to another, than the charge and care of their religion." A rich man, "addicted to his pleasure and to his profits," might consider religion "a traffic so entangled" that he finds it impossible to manage. In cases such as this, Milton says, men find someone else to manage their religious affairs for them, and then religion is no longer "within" them but becomes "a dividual movable" that "goes and comes." His religion may "walk abroad at eight," and leave "his kind entertainer in the shop trading all day without his religion," Milton warns.

Milton implies that Parliament's order takes the issue of religion out of English citizens' hands by controlling which books are read. The intention, supposedly, is to protect citizens from evil, but Milton again implies it does the opposite. It makes people lazy and no longer accountable for their own religion and virtue, which weakens their righteousness and piety.

There is nothing "more fair," Milton asserts, "than when a man judicious, learned, and of a conscience" can "openly by writing publish to the world what his opinion is." Christ "preached in public," Milton notes, but "writing is more public than preaching; and more easy to refutation, if need be." England is deprived this freedom by Parliament's Licensing Order, Milton claims.

This reflects Milton's opinion that written speech takes precedence over other types of speech. Milton claims that writing is "more public" than preaching because it can reach more people, and it is more easily preserved and referenced. Preaching, by comparison, only reaches those who can hear it, and it is easily misunderstood.

Most importantly, however, Parliament's Licensing Order "hinders and retards the importation of our richest merchandise: truth." Milton contends that pre-publication licensing "was first established and put in practice by antichristian malice" "set on purpose to extinguish, if it were possible, the light of reformation." However, those who believe "we are to pitch our tent here, and have attained the utmost prospect of reformation," are very far from the "truth," he says.

Milton again infers that pre-publication censorship is a Catholic invention created to stifle the Protestant Reformation and stop the spread of Protestantism. He also implies that the reformation is not yet over, and that Parliament's order is blocking the improvement of their own religion.

According to Milton, when truth came "into the world with her divine master," she "was a perfect shape." Yet when God rose, so did a "wicked race of deceivers" who "took the virgin truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds." Since then, "the sad friends of truth" have imitated the "careful search that Isis made for the mangled body Osiris" and tried to gather up the truth. "We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons," Milton writes, "nor shall ever do, till her master's second coming."

Osiris is an Egyptian God who was killed by his brother and cut up into pieces. Osiris's wife, Isis, searched for all the pieces and wrapped Osiris up. This is how Milton sees truth: cut up and thrown about for others to find. He suggests that truth will never be whole again, and the pursuit of knowledge is searching for lost truth. This also implies truth's subjectivity—it isn't merely one thing, but infinite things.

Parliament's Licensing Order stands "at every place of opportunity forbidding and disturbing" those who seek truth. "We boast our light," Milton claims, "but if we look not wisely on the sun itself, it smites us into darkness." The light "was given us," not to look at, but "to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge." If nothing else can be "looked into and reformed," Milton asserts, then "we have looked so long upon the blaze that Zwinglius and Calvin hath beaconed up to us, that we are stark blind."

Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin were both leaders of the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland and were important figures in the spread of Protestantism. Milton implies it is a disservice to pioneering Protestants like Zwingli and Calvin if further improvement of the Protestant faith is hindered, and Parliament's order is a step backward from this improvement.

It is the "dividers of unity," those who restrict and stop others from finding and uniting truth, "which are yet wanting to the body of truth." Milton implores Parliament to remember that England is "a nation not slow and dull" but capable of reaching "any point" that "human capacity" can aspire to. English studies are "so ancient, and so eminent" that "even the school of Pythagoras and Persian wisdom took beginning from the old philosophy of this island," Milton claims.

Pythagoras was an ancient Greek philosopher from the sixth century B.C.E. who believed in the transmigration of souls: the belief that the human soul can pass to another person, object, or animal upon death. This notion may have originated with the Druids, or ancient Celts coming from parts of Britain. By invoking the deep historical roots of Pythagoras's ideas in this passage, Milton emphasizes just how significant of an intellectual role "this island" of England has held throughout the ages.

Moreover, Milton claims, "had it not been the obstinate perverseness of our prelates against the divine and admirable spirit of Wyclif," perhaps neither Hus, Jerome, Luther nor Calvin would have been known. "The glory of reforming all our neighbors had been completely ours," Milton says. And now, "God is decreeing to begin some new and great period in his church, even to the reforming of the reformation itself."

John Wyclif was an English bishop and early dissident of the Catholic Church whose writings against the Catholic belief in sacraments and papal authority were an important precursor to the Protestant Reformation. Here, Milton implies that the Protestant Reformation might not have happened without Wyclif, an Englishman, thereby calling on England to maintain its rebellious, intellectually free spirit.

"Where there is much desire to learn," Milton writes, "there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in God is but knowledge in the making." We should "rejoice" and not "lament" the disputes of educated men who take charge of their own religion and knowledge. With some "prudence" and "forbearance of one another," England can "unite into one general and brotherly search after truth," Milton maintains.

This mirrors Milton's point that Parliament's order makes one lazy and dependent for their religion and knowledge. When one is free to take one's religion and education into their own hands, there will naturally be some disagreement, but Milton suggests that tolerance of competing ideas is the only path to truth.

Milton claims there are "many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber" of God's house, and each piece of the building cannot be the same. Instead, "the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportional arises the goodly and graceful symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure." Therefore, Milton contends, we should be "more wise in spiritual architecture, when great reformation is expected."

Milton again implies that tolerance is required if England is to successfully reform the reformation and move closer to spiritual and religious truth. Once more, Milton preaches the importance of tolerance of competing ideas, provided those differences "are not vastly disproportional," such as in Catholicism, which he calls for the censorship of later in the speech.

Milton argues that Parliament cannot make England "less capable, less knowing, less eagerly pursuing of the truth" unless Parliament can also make itself "less the lovers, less the founders of [their] true liberty." England can only grow "ignorant again, brutish, formal and slavish" if Parliament becomes that which it cannot be: "oppressive, arbitrary and tyrannous." Parliament's Licensing Order is an "abrogated and merciless law," Milton claims, and is not in keeping with the liberties already established by Parliament. "Give me the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties," Milton implores.

Milton again hopes to gain ground by praising Parliament. Many in England are angered by Parliament's order only because they are so used to being free, Milton implies, a liberty afforded to them by Parliament. Milton's call for the liberty to know, utter, and argue freely is one of the most famous quotes in Areopagitica, *and it has been frequently cited in other arguments for freedom of speech since then.*

When one has labored "the hardest labour in the deep mines of knowledge" and has "drawn forth reason" and "scattered and defeated all objections in his way," only to be caught on a "narrow bridge of licensing," this "is but weakness and cowardice in the wars of truth." Milton argues that truth is "strong" and "needs no policies" to make her stronger. He warns Parliament not to "bind" truth, "for then she speaks not true" and "turns herself into all shapes, except her own." It is "not impossible," Milton asserts, that truth "may have more shapes than one."

This, too, implies that truth is subjective rather than absolute. In claiming that it is possible for truth to have "more shapes than one," Milton suggests that multiple, perhaps infinite, truths exist, and one is not more important or truer than the next. This also reflects Milton's call for tolerance of competing ideas. After all, who's really to say what is true or not?

Milton wonders what else "might be tolerated in peace and left to conscience" if not for "the chief stronghold of our hypocrisy to be ever judging one another." He fears the "iron yoke of outward conformity" has "left a slavish print upon [their] necks" as if "the ghost of a linen decency" still "haunts" them. Keeping truth from truth is "the fiercest rent and disunion of all," Milton argues, and if Parliament continues to "affect by all means a rigid external formality," England will "soon fall again into gross conforming stupidity" that is more "degenerating of a church than many sub dichotomies of petty schisms."

Milton's mention of "the ghost of a linen decency" is a reference to priestly vestments and the Catholic Church. The vestments make each priest look the same, which harkens to their "outward conformity." Milton also claims Catholics are wholly intolerant of other religions and ideas, and this is the "slavish print" that Milton fears still "haunts" them. Like the Catholics they came from, Milton fears Protestants still carry a latent intolerance.

If everyone "cannot be of one mind," Milton claims, "this doubtless is more wholesome, more prudent, and more Christian that many be tolerated rather than compelled." Milton does not mean to tolerate "popery and open superstition which, as it extirpates all religions and civil supremacies, so itself should be extirpate," Milton argues that when it comes to "prohibiting," there is nothing "more likely to be prohibited than truth itself," which is "why sects and schisms do so much abound, and true knowledge is kept at distance from us."

With the mention of "popery and open superstition," Milton implies that he cannot tolerate the Catholic Church, as it does not tolerate others, so he wishes to see it completely eradicated. This is perhaps the only hypocritical flaw in Milton's eloquent argument. He spends several pages belaboring the importance of tolerance and competing ideas only to completely dismiss the ideas of Catholics and call for their censorship.

When God "shakes a kingdom" and prompts a reformation, Milton says, "tis not untrue that many sectaries and false teachers are then busiest in seducing," but God also "raised to his own work men of rare abilities, and more than common industry" to "look back and revise" what has already been taught and "gain further and go on, some new enlightened steps in the discovery of truth." But, Milton says, if we "resolve to stop their mouths, because we fear they come with new and dangerous opinions" then we become "the persecutors."

This makes Milton's call for the censorship of the Catholic Church all the more ironic. He calls to "persecute" Catholics (provided attempts to reform them are made) while simultaneously arguing for his own freedom, a point which seems to further prove Milton's theory of England's "chief stronghold of hypocrisy to be ever judging one another."

This "authentic Spanish policy of licensing books," Milton claims, "will prove the most unlicensed book itself within a short while," like the Star-Chamber Decree, which has "now fallen from the stars with Lucifer." Milton claims to know that "errors in a good government and in a bad are equally almost incident," and he implores Parliament to "redress willingly and speedily what hath been erred."

Milton implies that Parliament's Licensing Order will soon be abolished, just like the Star-Chamber Decree was; however, this does not prove to be the case historically. Areopagitica *failed to gain much attention, and Parliament's Licensing Order was not abolished until many years after Milton's death.*

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Rosewall, Kim. "*Areopagitica*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Jul 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Rosewall, Kim. "*Areopagitica*." LitCharts LLC, July 29, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/areopagitica.

To cite any of the quotes from *Areopagitica* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Milton, John. Areopagitica. Penguin UK. 2014.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Milton, John. Areopagitica. London: Penguin UK. 2014.