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CHAPTER

## 10 Principle and Politics in Milton's *Areopagitica*

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### Abstract

This article considers the tensions in *Areopagitica* between John Milton's broad appeals for liberty and the circumstances to which he was responding, between his arguments from principle and the practical considerations that shaped those arguments. It examines the precise political context of Milton's ideas as well as his personal reasons for publishing the tract. It then addresses Milton's idealized vision of 'books freely permitted...both to the triall of vertue, and the exercise of truth'. In response to the government's censorship, Milton posits a collaborative process for sharing knowledge that includes not only authors but also members of the book trade and a book's diverse readership.

**Keywords:** John Milton, liberty, government censorship, knowledge sharing, book trade

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JOHN MILTON explained his reasons for writing *Areopagitica* (1644) ten years after its publication. Trying to justify the actions of the English Revolution on behalf of the Cromwellian Protectorate, Milton pauses in the midst of *Pro populo Anglicano defensio secunda* (1654) to defend himself and to review his polemical career. He recalls that he published 'several books' defending divorce 'at the very time when man and wife were often bitter foes' and then composed a 'small volume' about the education of children because 'nothing can be more efficacious' in 'moulding the minds of men to virtue'.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, he turned in *Areopagitica* to 'freedom of the press', what he calls the third type of 'domestic or personal liberty' (ii. 624). In this tract he wished to show:

that the judgment of truth and falsehood, what should be printed and what suppressed, ought not to be in the hands of a few men (and these mostly ignorant and of vulgar discernment) charged

with the inspection of books, at whose will or whim virtually everyone is prevented from publishing aught that surpasses the understanding of the mob. (ii. 626)

That Milton here equates the discerning of 'truth and falsehood' with 'what should be printed and what suppressed' suggests the landmark nature of *Areopagitica's* argument. In 1644 he anticipated the central role that the printing press would come to play and allied its unfettered operation 'with truth, with learning, and the Commonwealth' (ii. 488). Some modern readers have even come to regard *Areopagitica* as a manifesto of individual liberty.<sup>2</sup> Milton eloquently defends both the free circulation of knowledge and the right and privilege of thinking for oneself. '[A]bove all liberties', he appeals to Parliament, 'Give me liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience' (ii. 560).

p. 191 But Milton in *Areopagitica* also proposes a specific social policy and in places he offers a more measured response to the government's regulation of the book trade that qualifies the tract's impassioned calls for freedom. As he explains near the start of *Areopagitica*, he does not oppose all censorship; he only wants the Parliament to judge 'over again that Order which ye have ordain'd to regulate Printing', by which he seems to mean the Licensing Order passed on 16 June 1643 (ii. 490–1). This new law stipulated, as Milton summarizes, 'That no Book, pamphlet, or paper shall be henceforth Printed, unlesse the same be first approv'd and licenc't by such, or at least one of such as shall be thereto appointed' (ii. 491).

In this chapter, I am interested in the tension in *Areopagitica* between Milton's broad appeals for liberty and the circumstances to which he was responding, between his arguments from principle and the practical considerations that shaped those arguments. While Milton's impassioned rhetoric and rich metaphors have established *Areopagitica* as his best-known and most influential prose work—his description of a good book as 'the pretious life-blood of a master spirit' (ii. 493), for example, is embossed on the wall of the reading room in the New York Public Library—I want to examine the precise political context of Milton's ideas as well as his personal reasons for publishing the tract. The second part of this chapter then addresses Milton's idealized vision of 'books freely permitted...both to the triall of vertue, and the exercise of truth' (ii. 528). In response to the government's censorship, Milton posits a collaborative process for sharing knowledge that includes not only authors but also members of the book trade and a book's diverse readership.

During the reign of Charles I, the book trade operated under a two-part regulatory system. The business of producing, selling, and binding printed matter was overseen by the Company of Stationers, which the crown had chartered in 1557 to prevent the publication of 'certain seditious and heretical books...moving our subjects and lieges to sedition and disobedience'.<sup>3</sup> Anyone who wished to have a text printed first had to obtain official approval—a licence—from a group of government-appointed censors, many of whom were episcopal divines. The text then had to be approved a second time by a member of the Stationers' Company, who, for a fee, officially entered the title and the owner's name in the Company's Register.

With the assembly of the Long Parliament in 1640, this system temporarily collapsed, the first period of unrestricted publication in England since 1476 when William Caxton introduced printing in Westminster. The elimination of the courts of Star Chamber and High Commission in July 1641 meant that members of the book trade no longer feared royal prosecution for publishing a work that could be deemed scandalous or seditious. The quantity of English publications consequently soared: the total number of published items leapt from 625 in 1639 and 848 in 1640 to 2,034 in 1641 and 3,666 in 1642.<sup>4</sup>

p. 192 The Licensing Order that Milton opposes in *Areopagitica* represented Parliament's attempt to re-establish control of the book trade and to redress, in the government's words, the 'great...abuses and frequent disorders in Printing' that had arisen during the preceding three years.<sup>5</sup> Reviving key provisions from the intrusive regulations favoured by the Stationers and characteristic of Tudor and Stuart press laws, Parliament specifically wanted to curtail the 'many false forged, scandalous, seditious, libelous, and unlicensed Papers, Pamphlets, and Books to the great defamation of Religion and government'.<sup>6</sup> The 1643

order did not include the threat of corporal punishment, an important part of previous legislation under Charles I, but the new government still attempted to establish a rigid protocol for overseeing the press. Under the new law, Presbyterian censors replaced episcopal licensers, and Parliament assumed the position formerly held by the King.

We should not assume, however, that the Long Parliament had entirely ignored the book trade prior to its revival of licensing. Although the total number of printed texts rose considerably during the early 1640s, the government passed a series of temporary measures while preparing its broader legislative policy. Thus, in an effort to establish greater accountability, Parliament first ordered on 29 January 1642 that printers 'do neither print or reprint any thing without the Name and Consent of the Author'; seven months later on 26 August 1642 a second order prohibited the publication of 'any Book or Pamphlet, false, or scandalous to the Proceedings of the Houses of Parliament', and the government granted Stationers the right to search for and seize presses and printing materials used to produce such publications.<sup>7</sup> The third temporary measure enlarged the law's scope: on 9 March 1643, Parliament outlawed all 'scandalous and lying Pamphlets', not just those that misrepresented the government, and it granted the Committee for Examinations the power 'to appoint such Persons as they think fit' in order to apprehend and imprison anyone who helped to produce or circulate scandalous or unlicensed works.<sup>8</sup>

Milton in *Areopagitica* objects to none of these earlier laws. On the contrary, he approves of the first ordinance, which required, in his words, 'that no book be Printed, unlesse the Printers and the Authors name, or at least the Printers be register'd' (ii. 569), and he even concedes some parts of the 1643 Licensing Order, in particular, 'that part which preserves justly every mans Copy to himselve, or provides for the poor' (ii. 491).<sup>9</sup> Perhaps more strikingly, Milton in *Areopagitica* also accepts some post-publication censorship: he objects to licensing books before they are printed, but, if a book 'prov'd a Monster', he reasons, 'it was justly burnt, or sunk into the Sea' (ii. 505).

But that Milton in *Areopagitica* misidentifies the order passed on 29 January 1642 as 'publisht next before this' may be revealing: he leaves out the two other ordinances that the Long Parliament passed in the months before 'this', the Licensing Order of 1643. Surely he knew about the other, intervening laws; he would have needed to be at least somewhat familiar with all the recent legislation that supported censorship before undertaking a pamphlet about censorship addressed to Parliament. It is pleasing to speculate whether Milton could have ignored the orders of August 1642 and March 1643 because their ambiguous provisions would have exposed some of the vagueness of his own argument such as his general concession that 'the executioner' is 'the timeliest and most effectually remedy' for books 'found mischievous and libellous' (ii. 569). Just as Parliament's earlier laws did not fully address who would determine a 'scandalous' book and how such a judgement would be made, so Milton in *Areopagitica* never explains how exactly a book after its publication will 'prove' itself worthy of censorship (ii. 505). Of course, Milton could have left out the August and March orders because he believed that the Licensing Order of 1643 superseded them; Parliament even acknowledged that the earlier orders were stop-gap measures while the government continued preparing a bill 'which, by reason of present Distractions, cannot be so speedily perfected and passed as is desired'.<sup>10</sup> But we also need to consider the possibility that Milton for political reasons deliberately ignored the Parliament's other orders: in *Areopagitica* he wished to emphasize licensing, and the Parliament's two earlier orders muddied the waters. The laws enacted in August 1642 and March 1643 temporarily established a form of pre-publication censorship that did not depend on licensers, whereas Milton in *Areopagitica* wanted to connect Parliament's regulation of the press with the unpopular, repressive policies under Charles I. The revival of licensing represented the clearest link between Presbyterians in Parliament and the episcopal divines previously appointed as licensers by the King and Archbishop William Laud.

As various critics have noted, Milton's concern about Presbyterians in Parliament seems to underpin his broader opposition to pre-publication licensing in *Areopagitica*.<sup>11</sup> While he had allied himself with the

Presbyterian cause during the anti-prelatical controversy, Milton became bitterly disappointed that many Presbyterians sought a reconciliation with Charles I and did not support putting the King on trial. They were thus, as Milton notes in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), 'fall[ing] off from thir first principles' and siding with the 'worst of men, the obdurat enemies of God and his Church' (iii. 238). Given that Presbyterians, striving to consolidate their power within Parliament, had the most to gain from the Licensing Order of 1643, Milton could have advocated less regulation for the book trade in order to limit Presbyterian control of the government. As William Walwyn complained in *A Compassionate Samaritane* (1644), the 'Ordinance for licensing of Bookes, which being intended by the Parliament for a good and necessary end..., is become by meanes of the Licensers (who are Divines and intend their owne interest) most serviceable to themselves'.<sup>12</sup> Like Walwyn, Milton may have wanted a freer press in order to give voice to opponents of Presbyterianism and thus to thwart calls for a settlement with Charles I.

Certainly in *Areopagitica* Milton emphasizes his dissatisfaction with Presbyterians for beginning to resemble prelates. Although episcopacy was not formally abrogated until 9 October 1646, prelates (alternatively called bishops) were excluded from the House of Lords as of 13 February 1642, and the abolition of the Star Chamber in 1641 had eliminated their authority for censoring books. With the revival of licensing, Milton in *Areopagitica* warns, 'Episcopall arts begin to bud again' and the country will suffer 'a second tyranny over learning' (ii. 541, 539). He repeatedly underscores the Parliament's hypocrisy for adopting a system of regulation just as rigid as the restrictions that the episcopal church government had imposed on learning: 'He who but of late cry'd down the sole ordination of every novice Batchelor of Art, and deny'd sole jurisdiction over the simplest Parishioner, shall now at home in his privat chair assume both these over worthiest and excellentest books and ablest authors that write them' (ii. 540). Milton argues that the 1643 order 'will soon put it out of controversie that ↳ Bishops and Presbyters are the same to us both name and thing' (ii. 539), an idea that he reiterates in 'On the New Forcers of Conscience' as he laments that 'New *Presbyter* is but old *Priest* writ large'.<sup>13</sup> Even Milton's decision to title his treatise *Areopagitica* after the highly respected Athenian court that met on a hill named Areopagus was in part an attempt to encourage Parliament not to repeat the prelates' policies. Just as Isocrates had appealed in his similarly titled tract for the Areopagus to reform itself and live up to its reputation as virtuous and fair-minded, so Milton was trying to persuade England's government to follow the Areopagus' classical precedent and to return to the ideals that initially distinguished the Long Parliament from Charles I's administration. Milton wanted the new government, as he puts it in *Areopagitica*, to demonstrate 'what difference there is between the magnanimity of a trienniall Parliament, and that jealous hautinesse of Prelates and cabin Counsellours that usurpt of late' (ii. 488–9).

Presbyterian calls for reconciliation with the King also probably influenced Milton's acceptance of some censorship. Although in principle he may have believed in the value of regulating the book trade, the specific types of books he proposes that the government should censor seem intended as a critique of the King's administration. Most notably, Milton's rejection of 'a rigid externall formality' as a 'grosse conforming stupidity' (ii. 564) forcefully alludes to efforts by Charles I and Laud to restore and make uniform the elaborate rituals that characterized religious worship before the Reformation. Whereas Laud advocated the 'Beauty of Holiness' and argued that the 'Outward Worship of God' was directly related to 'Inward' spiritual devotion, Milton and other opponents of Laud objected that an emphasis on external worship distracted believers from the Word of God.<sup>14</sup> Immediately after dismissing such 'a rigid externall formality', Milton in *Areopagitica* introduces his exceptions to what should be freely published:

Yet if all cannot be of one mind, as who looks they should be? this doubtles is more wholesome, more prudent, and more Christian that many be tolerated, rather then all compell'd. I mean not tolerated Popery, and open superstition, which as it extirpats all religions and civill supremacies, so it self should be extirpat, provided first that all charitable and compassionat means be us'd to

win and regain the weak and the misled: that also which is impious or evil absolutely either against faith or maners no law can possibly permit, that intends not to unlaw it self. (ii. 565)

Commentators such as Ernest Sirluck are no doubt correct that Milton here refers to Roman Catholicism as an exception to his argument for toleration;<sup>15</sup> in particular, the description of 'open superstition' as 'extirpat[ing] all religions and civill supremacies' echoes the language used by other seventeenth-century pamphleteers who also tried to impose limits on what should be tolerated. Writing in 1642, for example, John Pym argues against tolerating Catholics because 'The Religion of the Papists' is 'incomputable to any other Religion, destructive to all others, and doth not endure any thing that doth oppose it'.<sup>16</sup> But we also need to remember that the answer to Milton's question about a forced uniformity ('as who looks they should be?') would have included the episcopal Church under Laud. In this context, 'tolerated Popery'—as opposed to simply 'Popery'—is not a synonym for 'open superstition' but more likely refers to Laudian ritual under an episcopal form of church government. In Milton's view, to insist that such ceremonialism determined a person's salvation was tantamount to tolerating Catholicism, and books espousing such a belief should not be freely printed.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that Milton's political circumstances entirely shaped his argument in *Areopagitica*. While clearly Milton was responding to Presbyterians in Parliament in the early 1640s, his other writings indicate that he also held a principled belief in free expression. He continues to criticize censorship in the following year in *Colasterion* (1645), complaining that licensing intimidates authors and printers and only brings in 'round fees to the Licencer, and wretched mis-leading to the People' (ii. 727–8), and years later in *Pro populo Anglicano defensio secunda* he warns Cromwell not to institute pre-publication censorship. Milton specifically proposes that the newly titled Lord Protector should 'permit those who wish to engage in free inquiry to publish their findings at their own peril without the private inspection of any petty magistrate, for so will truth especially flourish' (iv. 679). Milton also supported the free circulation of ideas before writing *Areopagitica*. In *Animadversions* (1641), he asserts that 'nothing is more sweet to man' than the 'liberty of speaking' (i. 669), and in *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642) he anticipates that 'the honest liberty of free speech from my youth' will serve 'as the best treasure, and solace of a good old age' (i. 804). Although Milton's advocacy of free speech in *An Apology Against a Pamphlet* (1642) sounds more cautious—he suggests 'that a more free permission of writing at some time might be profitable'—he continues to bemoan how under the prelates 'the bookes of some men were confuted, when they who should have answer'd were in close prison, deny'd the use of pen or paper' (i. 907).

Yet even with such a principled position staked out in advance, Milton's composition of *Areopagitica* in late 1644 also seems to have been self-interested.<sup>17</sup> Given that his tract appeared almost a year and a half after the Licensing Order was made law, his own more recent legal difficulties apparently prompted him to take up his pen on behalf of the liberty of printing. How else can we account for the tract's delay? As Milton himself acknowledges in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1644), self-interest often lies behind attempts to effect social change: 'when points of difficulty are to be discussd, appertaining to the removall of unreasonable wrong and burden from the perplext life of our brother, it is incredible how cold, how dull, and farre from all fellow feeling we are, without the spurre of self-concernment' (ii. 226). In Milton's own case, his defence of divorce, published without a licence two years earlier, provided the 'spurre' he needed to address the government's regulation of the book trade. Not only did an anonymous critic in 1644 find fault with Milton's 'intolerable abuse of Scripture' in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, but also on 13 August 1644 the Presbyterian divine Herbert Palmer, speaking before both Houses of Parliament, proposed that Milton's divorce pamphlet should be publicly destroyed.<sup>18</sup> Later that same month the Stationers' Company submitted a petition to the House of Commons complaining about recent unlicensed and unregistered books, including Milton's divorce pamphlet, and shortly afterwards the House of Commons ordered the Committee for Printing to prepare a new ordinance and 'diligently to inquire out the Authors, Printers, and Publishers, of the Pamphlet against the Immortality of the Soul, and concerning Divorce'.<sup>19</sup>

The Stationers' petition and Parliament's new ordinance reinforce the significance of Milton's personal and political motives for writing *Areopagitica*. If, more than a year after the Licensing Order, the Company and government were still struggling to regulate the book trade, then Milton in 1644 was apparently not reacting to a widely established practice of censorship. Although it is difficult to measure how repressive authors and printers found the government's laws regulating the book trade, the licensing system under the Long Parliament seems never to have been strictly enforced.<sup>20</sup> The government tried to prosecute anyone who repeatedly published unlawful works, or, as in Milton's case with his divorce tracts, anyone who took egregiously controversial positions or whose works elicited official complaints, but the quantity of manuscripts that the government's thirty-four licensers would have been expected to examine must have necessitated in practice no more than a cursory review of some tracts. As Milton observes in *Areopagitica*, 'there cannot be a more tedious and unpleasing journey-work, a greater losse of time...then to be made the perpetuall reader of unchosen books and pamphlets, oftimes huge volumes' (ii. 530). And with only a little initiative, authors and printers could have circumvented the Parliament's order, either by inserting a controversial passage in a book after it was officially licensed, or, as Milton did with his unlicensed divorce tract and *Areopagitica*, simply ignoring the law altogether. In 1644, the year *Areopagitica* was printed, only 20 per cent of the published books and pamphlets were registered, which suggests that in many cases owners did not bother to obtain official approval.<sup>21</sup> Presumably, the mere existence of pre-publication licensing discouraged some writers from even attempting to take controversial works to press, but we cannot know how often such self-censorship occurred nor with what frequency licensers redacted or expunged passages they deemed unacceptable from works that they then approved.<sup>22</sup>

Milton's argument in *Areopagitica* emphasizes both the effrontery of Presbyterian interference and the impracticality of the government's policy. Even an author who was not trying to skirt the law, Milton notes, would be grossly inconvenienced if he had to seek approval for every late revision: 'what if the author shall be one so copious of fancie, as to have many things well worth the adding, come into his mind after licencing, while the book is yet under the Presse' (ii. 532)? Milton also faults the government's order because it will require licensers to redact individual passages in books that 'are partly usefull and excellent, partly culpable and pernicious'; the labour of making so many separate 'expurgations, and expunctions' would 'ask as many more officials...that the Commonwealth of learning be not damnify'd' (ii. 529).

Alongside such practical objections to the government's licensing policy, Milton argues that allowing a select group of agents—whether Stationers or licensers—to oversee the book trade will lead 'primely to the discouragement of all learning, and the stop of Truth' (ii. 491). This part of *Areopagitica* sounds more idealistic, concerned less with Presbyterians in Parliament than with an abstract principle of liberty. In a series of extended poetic images, Milton emphasizes the dynamic nature of pursuing 'religious and civill Wisdome' (ii. 492): he compares truth to a 'streaming fountain' whose waters must flow 'in a perpetuall progression' (ii. 543); to a 'flowry crop...sprung up and yet springing daily in this City' (ii. 558); and to a virgin, 'hewd...into a thousand peeces', whose 'lovely form' must be actively 'gather[ed] up limb by limb' (ii. 549).

As this last metaphor suggests, Milton tries to counter the government's idea of restricting control of the book trade—that is, having the 'liberty of Printing...reduc't into the power of a few' (ii. 570)—by advocating instead an inclusive, social process. In contrast to Presbyterians, 'who perpetually complain of schisms and sects, and make it such a calamity that any man dissents from their maxims' (ii. 550), Milton extols the value of open discussion and constructive disagreement: 'Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions' (ii. 554). In another of the tract's extended metaphors, he compares the pursuit of knowledge with constructing 'the house of God', for both require various, differently skilled people, 'some cutting, some squaring the marble, others hewing the cedars' (ii. 555). Here Milton also puns on contemporary fears of 'sects and schisms' within the episcopal Church by insisting that to construct the physical temple 'there must be many schisms and many dissections made in



the quarry and in the timber' (ii. 566, 555). Milton points up the need for tolerating a diversity of Christian opinions and suggests that individual efforts will lead to a greater collaborative achievement: 'out of many moderat varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportionall arises the goodly and the gracefull symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure' (ii. 555).<sup>23</sup>

This ideal of a collaborative construction is not limited to writers; critics often overlook that Milton includes both printers and readers within the social process that he promulgates. In various places in *Areopagitica*, he focuses on an author's authority, as in the tract's most often quoted passage, in which he describes a 'good Booke' as 'the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life' (ii. 493). Perhaps influenced by his own legal difficulties, Milton repeatedly addresses the ways that the law demeans 'the free and ingenuous sort' whose 'publisht labours advance the good of mankind' (ii. 531). He complains, for example, that the licensing order implies that members of Parliament 'distrust the judgement & the honesty' of authors, casting them as mere 'Grammar lad[s]' and 'boy[s] at school' (ii. 531).

But elsewhere in the tract Milton hints at the perspectives of printers, publishers, and booksellers, and emphasizes the need for their cooperation to create and circulate books. His paraphrase of the 29 January 1642 order as requiring that 'the Printers and the Authors name, or at least the Printers be register'd' indicates the authority he grants agents of material production (ii. 569). Even his metaphor of differently skilled artisans constructing God's temple could suggest the division of labour in a printing house and include members of the book trade as part of the social process of authorship. '[L]earning is indetted', Milton more plainly asserts near the end of *Areopagitica*, to the 'honest profession' of book-making (ii. 570).

p. 198 Milton also incorporates a series of subtle allusions to what the seventeenth-century Stationer Joseph Moxon described as a special 'Printers Language' that distinguishes between the 'Vulgar acceptance' and a 'more peculiar Phrase Printers use among themselves'.<sup>24</sup> Thus when Milton depicts pre-publication licensing as a 'kinde of homicide' and warns that it could escalate to a 'kinde of massacre', he interrupts his anthropomorphic metaphor with a conditional clause, 'if it extend to the whole impression', so as to stress that he is talking about books (ii. 493): an impression refers to all the copies of an edition printed at one time.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, when Milton recalls how the Papal Court not only kept catalogues of prohibited books but also invented licensing 'To fill up the measure of encroachment' (ii. 503), he seems to allude to the length of a line of type.<sup>26</sup> Compositors used the expression 'to fill up the measure' to describe the process of justifying a line of type by adjusting the amount of space between words in a composing stick. Milton's language reminds readers of the material process of book production so as to underscore that he is arguing not just for toleration but specifically for an unlicensed press. Although these puns and allusions may be too few or too subtle to create a consistent subtext for the tract's argument, they serve individually as reminders of the dynamic collaboration out of which, Milton believes, truth emerges. Thus the description of 'gathering up limb by limb' truth's 'dissever'd peeces' evokes the procedure called gathering by which books were assembled piece by piece after the printed sheets were dried and piled in stacks (ii. 549–51), and a separate group of possible puns highlights the importance of book-binding: Milton warns against trying to 'bind' truth 'when she sleeps' (ii. 563); criticizes the Star Chamber for intending 'to bind books to their good behaviour' (ii. 570); and praises 'all the heathen Writers...with whom is bound up the life of human learning' (ii. 518).

Trying to establish the significance of books near the start of the tract, Milton alludes to the myth of Cadmus: 'I know they [books] are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men' (ii. 492). But even here Milton hints that authors do not work in isolation. If we recall that Cadmus was credited with inventing letters (or, according to some traditions, introducing the alphabet into Greece), he represents a material agent on whom authors depend to create their texts.<sup>27</sup> When Milton writes that books are as 'lively' and 'vigorously productive' as Cadmus' 'fabulous Dragons teeth' (ii. 492), he conjures the image of letters as the life-giving seed that

books preserve. Only when 'sown up and down' in readers' minds can the words stored in books give birth — 'chance to spring up' — to people 'armed' with an author's insights (ii. 492).

Milton's allusion to Cadmus thus includes readers within the social process of acquiring knowledge that the government's licensing policy threatens to impede. Authors and printers depend on a book's audience for their work to have lasting value. Milton accordingly compares a good reader to 'a good refiner' who 'can gather gold out of the drossiest volume', even using 'errors' — when they are 'known, read, and collated' — for 'the speedy attainment of what is truest' (ii. 521, 513). Like Psyche sifting through Venus's 'confused seeds', readers must 'cull out, and sort asunder' the good ideas found in books (ii. 514).

p. 199 This part of *Areopagitica* echoes other seventeenth-century discussions of reading as a laborious searching and gathering. Perhaps most immediately, Milton's metaphor suggests Francis Bacon's indictment of scholastic reading in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605). Bacon compares 'schoolmen' to spiders, spinning ideas out of their heads, 'admirable for their fineness of thread and work but of no substance or profit'; Bacon instead wants readers who will weigh what they read with what they observe, and 'hunt' in books 'after the weight of matter, worth of subject, soundness of argument, life of invention, or depth of judgment'.<sup>28</sup> A seventeenth-century edition of Plutarch's *Morals* (1603) similarly emphasizes the effort involved in effective reading. When readers discover 'some wicked and ungodly speech', they 'must confute it', either by locating 'contrarie sentences of the same author in other places' or by tracking down 'contrarie sentences of other famous authors' that can be 'weighed and compared'.<sup>29</sup>

Milton in *Areopagitica* pushes this idea of active reading further. Most notably, personifying truth as a dismembered virgin raises the stakes for readers' engagement with an author's and printer's work; Milton's violent imagery suggests the tremendous responsibility he accords a book's audience. He wants readers who will persevere, 'imitating the carefull search that Isis made for the mangl'd body of Osiris' by 'gathering up limb by limb' the 'dissever'd peeces' of Truth 'scatter'd' through various pamphlets and books (ii. 549, 550–1). If, as Sabrina Baron has argued, Milton in *Areopagitica* ultimately emerges less as an opponent to censorship and more as 'the proponent of the freedom to read', equally important is the obligation that Milton believes readers have: they must work hard and think for themselves.<sup>30</sup> Because 'the knowledge and surway of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human vertue', readers must cultivate good reading habits: 'how can we more safely, and with lesse danger scout into the regions of sin and falsity then by reading all manner of tractats, and hearing all manner of reason' (ii. 516–17)? Milton introduces metaphors of digesting food and compounding medicine to emphasize readers' power and responsibility. Whereas 'Bad meats will scarce breed good nourishment in the healthiest concoction', a 'discreet and judicious Reader' can digest even 'bad books', making them useful 'to discover, to confute, to forewarn, and to illustrate' (ii. 512–13). He adds that books also resemble 'usefull drugs and materialls wherewith to temper and compose effective and strong med'cins' (ii. 521). This comparison once again suggests the potential that books contain and the work that they require: readers must first transform a text into something useful, then apply it in their pursuit of knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, lest we overstate Milton's ideas about readers' authority, we need to remember that he was inclined to elevate the status of readers in general, not necessarily the few, fit readers whom he posits in his own poetic and prose works. The year before he died, in *Of True Religion* (1673) Milton was still urging his readers 'to read duly and diligently the Holy Scriptures' (viii. 433) and still hoping readers would peruse books critically 'to examine their Teachers themselves' (viii. 435). But Milton could also respond harshly to readers of his works whom he considered impertinent or ill prepared. When readers of the first edition of *Paradise Lost* wondered why the poem did not rhyme, he added a sharp critique of their expectations, dismissing 'the jingling sound of like endings', and ↵ when readers objected to the logic and morality of his divorce tracts, he wrote two sonnets satirizing such hostile reactions as the 'barbarous noise...| Of owls and cuckoos, asses, apes and dogs'.<sup>32</sup> The problem with his divorce tracts, he would later explain, was that he should not have

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written in English, 'for then I would not have met with vernacular readers, who are usually ignorant of their own good, and laugh at the misfortunes of others' (iv. 610).

And for all Milton's open-mindedness and forward thinking in *Areopagitica*, his willingness to serve as a government licenser just five years after the tract's publication seems to qualify further his arguments for readers' freedom. As Secretary for Foreign Tongues under the Commonwealth, Milton regularly licensed one of the government's newsbooks, *Mercurius politicus*, and two separate entries 'under the hand of Master Milton' appear in the Stationers' Register for two other texts, a copy of the newsbook *The Perfect Diurnall* and a French-language book about Charles I's trial.<sup>33</sup> Because not all entries in the Register include the licenser's name, Milton may have officially approved other texts. The anonymous religious work *Catechesis ecclesiarum quae in regno Poloniae* (1651), for example, may have been licensed by Milton. Commonly known as *The Racovian Catechism*, this heretical, anti-Trinitarian tract was confiscated in early 1652 by Parliament, which then appointed a special committee to investigate how such a work could have been published. The committee examined 'a Note under the Hand of Mr. John Milton' dated 10 August 1650, and on 2 April 1652 members of the committee formally questioned, among other people, the author of *Areopagitica*.<sup>34</sup> Although details of the proceedings have been lost, and the official resolutions that the committee presented to the House make no mention of Milton, Liewe van Aitzema, a Dutch ambassador newly arrived in England, recorded in his journal that it was Milton who had approved ('*hadde gelicentieert*') the catechism's printing.<sup>35</sup> According to van Aitzema, Milton explained 'that he had published a tract on that subject, that men should refrain from forbidding books; that in approving of that book he had done no more than what his opinion was'.<sup>36</sup>

Van Aitzema's account raises the intriguing possibility that Milton as secretary was more involved with overseeing the book trade than has been previously thought. During Milton's first year in office he prepared only seven letters and wrote two translations. Early on he seems to have worked primarily with members of the book trade, licensing individual titles, negotiating on the government's behalf, and policing the papers of authors and stationers—what the biographer David Masson has summed up as a 'squalid, but perhaps necessary, business'.<sup>37</sup> But van Aitzema's account may also permit us to downplay Milton's licensing duties and to rescue his reputation as a defender of individual liberty. If Milton licensed a heretical catechism, this way of thinking goes, perhaps he never took his job as licenser seriously, approving every book that crossed his desk.

p. 201 Van Aitzema's recollection of *Areopagitica*'s argument does not tell the whole story, however. Like the summary of Milton's polemical career in *Pro populo Anglicano defensio secunda*, which, as we saw at the start of this chapter, neatly divides his early prose writing into three categories of personal liberty, the assertion that van Aitzema records, that 'men should refrain from forbidding books', leaves out the political and practical considerations that complicate Milton's idealistic claims about censorship in *Areopagitica*. Certainly Milton's decision to work as a licenser contradicted his earlier argument: in *Areopagitica* he bluntly criticizes pre-publication licensing as 'the greatest displeasure and indignity to a free and knowing spirit that can be put upon him', and he predicts 'that no man of worth, none that is not a plain unthrift of his own hours is ever likely to succeed' the current group of licensers (ii. 531, 530). But Milton, as we have seen, never opposed all regulation of the book trade. Understanding the political context and qualified nature of his argument against censorship in *Areopagitica* helps to explain his pragmatic decision to work as a government licenser five years later. Milton's censorial duties presumably reflected the new circumstances of 1649. When he wrote *Areopagitica*, he could not have imagined that within five years the King would be tried and executed, and the country would be on the verge of becoming a republic.

If we are looking for consistency in Milton's words and deeds, it may lie not in an idealized notion of a free press but in an ongoing commitment to the social process of pursuing knowledge that he describes in *Areopagitica*. In practice and in principle, Milton throughout his career depended on other people in the creation and circulation of his texts.<sup>38</sup> Returning, for example, to the note on the verse that he added to

*Paradise Lost*, we discover that he only wrote it at the request of the printer Samuel Simmons and that Simmons, on behalf of the ‘many’ who ‘desired it’, also asked Milton to compose the arguments that summarize each of the epic’s books.<sup>39</sup> Often, as with *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, Milton attempted to accommodate readers’ responses by working with printers and booksellers to publish revised versions of his prose tracts. When readers failed to live up to Milton’s high expectations, he tried harder in each expanded edition to map out the preparation and effort he required of them.

Milton also envisioned his own writing as part of a larger cooperative endeavour—the building of God’s temple, as he describes it in *Areopagitica*. Thus in his theological treatise *De doctrina Christiana*, Milton promotes ‘free discussion and inquiry’ (vi. 121); he does ‘not urge or enforce anything upon [his] own authority’ but instead tells readers to think for themselves and ‘Assess this work as God’s spirit shall direct you’ (vi. 121, 124). Or, to take a better-known example, when Eve in *Paradise Lost* separates from Adam to garden alone, she argues, ‘what is faith, love, virtue unassayed | Alone, without exterior help sustained?’ (IX.335–6). Critics frequently note that Eve is paraphrasing the crucial point in *Areopagitica* that virtue must be tested; Milton in 1644 specifically explains that he ‘cannot praise a fugitive and cloister’d virtue, unexercis’d & unbreath’d, that never sallies out and sees her adversary’ (ii. 515). But, as Joan Bennett has astutely observed, the second part of Eve’s argument for working alone is faulty: Adam’s ‘exterior help’ would not limit Eve’s virtue or compromise her free will.<sup>40</sup> Eve does not sin until she eats the fruit, but here she fails to understand that arriving at truth is a collaborative process and that she and Adam should ‘sustain’ each other as they decide whether to work together or apart.

p. 202 That in *Paradise Lost* Milton stages the scene preceding the fall of humankind by dramatizing one of *Areopagitica*’s core principles is significant. In the years following the pamphlet’s publication, Milton may have agreed to work as a government licenser, and his faith in readers may have sometimes waned, but he still believed in the need for collaboration. In both *Areopagitica* and *Paradise Lost*, Milton continues to emphasize that ‘Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing...many opinions’ (ii. 554).

## Notes

1. Milton, *Pro populo Anglicano defensio secunda*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, iv. 625–6. All subsequent references to Milton’s prose are taken from this edition and identified parenthetically in the text by volume and page numbers.
2. See e.g. Belsey, *John Milton*, 78.
3. *Transcript of the Registers*, i. xxviii. Here and throughout the chapter, I distinguish between upper-case ‘Stationers’, members of the company, and lower-case ‘stationers’, participants in the book trade. For a more extended discussion of the early modern book trade, see Jason McElligott’s chapter in this volume.
4. For these statistics, see Barnard, McKenzie, and Bell, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 779–93. On printing and licensing, see also the chapter by McElligott in this volume.
5. ‘An Ordinance for the Regulating of Printing’, i. 184.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Journal of the House of Commons*, ii: 1640–43, 402; 739.
8. *Ibid.* 997.
9. At the conclusion of *Areopagitica*, Milton reiterates his support for ‘retaining of each man his severall copy’ and emphasizes that honest stationers should not ‘be made other mens vassalls’ (ii. 570).

10. *Journal of the House of Commons*, ii: 1640–42, 739.
11. See e.g. Norbrook, 'Areopagitica, Censorship', 20–1.
12. Walwyn, *Compassionate Samaritane*, in *Writings of William Walwyn*, 112–13.
13. Milton, 'On the New Forcers of Conscience', 164–5 (l. 20). All quotations of Milton's poetry are taken from *Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*, ed. Kerrigan et al.
14. Laud, *History of the Trouble and Tryal*, X3<sup>v</sup>.
15. Sirluck, Introduction, *Areopagitica*, in *Complete Prose Works*, ii. 180–1.
16. Pym, *March 17. Master Pym's Speech in Parliament*, A3<sup>v</sup>.
17. The evidence that *Areopagitica* was published in late 1644 derives largely from the copy dated 24 November 1644 in the Thomason Collection at the British Library and the copy dated 23 November 1644 at the Beinecke Library at Yale University.
18. *Answer to a Book*, E2<sup>v</sup>; Palmer, *Glasse of Gods Providence*, 11<sup>r</sup>.
19. *Journal of the House of Commons*, iii: 1643–1644, 606.
20. In this paragraph and the next, I am drawing on Dobranski, 'The Book Trade', 226–36.
21. This statistic is taken from McKenzie, 'The London Book Trade', 131.
22. For the ways that licensers under Charles I tried to 'massage' and 'modify' texts to control religious opinion, see Milton, 'Licensing, Censorship', 629–31.
- p. 203 23. Kolbrener more fully pursues this dialectic in *Milton's Warring Angels*, 11–27. ↵
24. Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises*, 16. In this section I am working from arguments in Dobranski, *Milton, Authorship, and the Book Trade*, 116–24.
25. During the seventeenth century, an impression was often the same as an edition (all the copies printed at any time from the same setting of type) because, as Philip Gaskell notes, 'it was normal' for compositors to reuse the type from sheets after they were printed. See Gaskell, *New Introduction*, 314.
26. See Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises*, 206–8.
27. See Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis*, 148–9.
28. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, 140, 139. For a fuller discussion of early modern instructions for readers, see Dobranski, *Readers and Authorship*, 32–53.
29. Plutarch, *Philosophie*, C1<sup>v</sup>, C2<sup>r</sup>; and see B3<sup>r</sup>.
30. Baron, 'Licensing Readers', 237.
31. Five years later in *Eikonoklastes* (1649), Milton continues to empower readers over writers. He justifies his own interpretation of Charles I's intention in *Eikon Basilike* by arguing that 'in words which admitt of various sense, the libertie is ours to choose that interpretation which may best minde us of what our restless enemies endeavor, and what wee are timely to prevent' (iii. 342).
32. *Paradise Lost*, 'The Verse', 291; and Sonnet XII, 'I did but prompt the age', 149 (ll. 3–4). See also Sonnet XI, 'A Book was writ of late', 147–8.
33. *Transcript of the Registers*, i. 333, 380.
34. *Journal of the House of Commons*, 7. 113–14.
35. French, *Life Records*, iii. 206. The catechism had been entered in the Stationers' Register on 13 November 1651, but we do

not know whether this entry named a specific licenser, for the Council had it cancelled two days after issuing a warrant for the arrest of the book's printer, William Dugard. See *Transcript of the Registers*, i. 383.

36. French, *Life Records*, iii. 206.
37. Masson, *Life of John Milton*, iv. 155. For examples of Milton's early duties as secretary, see *Calendar of State Papers*, i. 474, iv. 338.
38. For Milton's rhetorical conception of himself as an isolated author, see Lewalski, 'Milton's Idea of Authorship', 53–79; for evidence of Milton's various collaborative practices, see Dobranski, *Milton, Authorship, and the Book Trade*, esp. 1–13, 82–103.
39. *Paradise Lost*, 'The Printer to the Reader', 291.
40. Bennett, '“Go”: Milton's Antinomianism', 401.

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