



Milton's defense of freedom of press: A critical study of areopagitica

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Abstract

This paper helps us to understand how Milton defends the freedom of speech against the censoring of books before they are published. The Licensing Order of 1643, which mandated that all publications be approved by the official censor before being published, is protested against and called into question in John Milton's *Areopagitica*. Milton praises Parliament's track record of safeguarding liberty to start his case. He continues by explaining how ancient Greek and Roman society placed a great priority on having a free press. Milton also gives instances of censorship-based tyranny, such as the Roman Catholic Church. Milton criticises the Catholic church because he is a Puritan. He issues a warning that Parliament might be following in the footsteps of the Spanish Inquisition or the tyrannical censorship of Roman Catholicism. Since it questions the notion of censoring books before they are published, it is generally recognised as the first ardent defence of free speech.

Keywords: freedom, press, licensing act, censorship, ideology, prohibition

Introduction

The idea of freedom of speech incentivises people to express their thoughts and opinions openly and without concern for legal repercussions, censorship, or other forms of retaliation. Free speech is protected by constitutional legislation in several nations. In political debate, terms like free speech, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression are frequently used interchangeably. However, regardless of the media utilised, the freedom of expression in a legal sense encompasses any action of obtaining, receiving, and disseminating information or ideas. Free speech is one of the most divisive topics in liberal nations. Freedom of expression is simply limited in favour of other values if it is not highly valued, as has frequently been the case. It only becomes a contentious matter when it is highly prized since only then do the restrictions put on it become debatable.

Article 19 of the UDHR Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference" and "everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice".

Areopagitica, a controversial pamphlet by John Milton, was published in 1644. It is frequently cited as the first passionate defence of free speech since it challenges the idea of censoring books before they are published. Despite praising the vitality of books, Milton strongly opposes their annihilation, suggesting that one might 'as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book' (p. 4). Milton also alludes to ancient Greek democracy in the pamphlet, which is portrayed as an address "to the Parliament of England" under the reign of Charles I. His name, *Areopagitica*, is derived from the Greek word *Areopagus*, which refers to the hill where the Council of Athens convened and where St. Paul preached. Henry VIII introduced state control over printing, which persisted into the 17th century. Political agitator John Lilburne was detained in April 1638 for bringing in subversive literature. He received a £500 fine and two miles of flogging between the Fleet Prison and the pillory. Milton's pamphlet was written in opposition to Lilburne's treatment.

Milton opens his written argument for the freedom of unlicensed printing in England with a quotation from the Greek playwright Euripides' *The Suppliants*. "This is true liberty when free-born men / Having to advise the public may speak free". Milton contends that, except in cases where they were deemed to be heretical or libellous, books and ideas were not banned to the same level in biblical times. Milton claims that the English Parliament's attempt to ban writings it deemed to be evil or bad is not only impractical but also an insult to God. Milton continues his case by criticising Parliament's Licensing Order as being woefully insufficient, "conduces nothing to the end for which it was framed."

Milton's main subject of attack was the Licensing Order of 1643

The Licensing Order of 1643 was Milton's major target. He claimed there were a number of issues with forcing books to be licenced before they were widely distributed. For starters, it forbade writers from ever expanding or changing a work after their initial creation had been granted a licence. Second, it hampered the dissemination of

fresh and original viewpoints on a subject. Authors would never even attempt to publish novel ideas because of their extreme apprehension. The third defence was that some censorship would be carried out incorrectly. Both books that deserved to be censored and books that deserved to be published would be. Milton linked the regulation to unfavourable ideology in addition to discussing the potential long-term repercussions of the Licensing Order. He made a relationship between Catholicism and the practise of censorship. He added that censorship was opposed to nationalism and patriotism. Censorship would prevent the country from becoming linked with progressive views. Milton equated the adoption of new ideas with revered and recognised communities and cultures, such those of classical Greece and Rome. He saw that renowned Church of England officials frequently challenged the necessity and efficacy of censorship by their deeds. Additionally, numerous religious works, including the Holy Bible, might have been prohibited by this regulation.

Milton's advice to the parliament to review its Licensing Order

After praising the Parliament, to which he is addressing in this speech, Milton says he wants them to review a decree that they have issued. It becomes their responsibility to reevaluate an order that they deem to be unfair and unjust as sincere and educated people. The publication of books, pamphlets, tracts, etc. is governed by this edict. This edict intends to regulate the printing industry and stipulates that no book, pamphlet, or paper may be printed going forward without first receiving approval and a licence from the organisation set up for the purpose. According to Milton, this directive appears to be a return of the censorship that he and others had thought had ceased a long time ago. Milton wants to give both Houses of Parliament some advice on this matter, and he proposes to do so under four different headings: (i) the hateful origin of licencing; (ii) the effects of reading; (iii) the futility of the recently passed order; and (iv) the detrimental effects of this order on learning and on truth.

Milton supports an open conversation of all types of opinions

Milton states his belief that all viewpoints, including incorrect and untrue ones, should be open to all people so that the truth might be discovered by a discussion of them. He claims that this is most likely the reason why God did not establish a certain diet for humans and instead gave them access to a variety of foods, allowing them to make their own decisions about what they should eat and how much of it.

“Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.”

According to Milton, good and evil coexist in this universe and flourish together in the same unbreakable mixture. Our understanding of good and evil are intertwined. The blending is so tight that it's frequently very challenging for us to distinguish one thing from another. Only after understanding and appreciating the nature of virtue can we demonstrate our ability to make the best decision possible between them. We can only determine what is right and bad by reading a variety of literature. We can only read books to determine which ones are incorrect and misleading if authors and publishers are given unlimited freedom to create and distribute books, pamphlets, tracts, and other literary works.

“For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them.”

Milton justifies that how good books can help the society

Books should be publicly accessible, and printers and publishers should have the freedom to print and publish them. This will allow readers to freely access books and determine which ones are good and which ones are terrible. Only if people have the freedom to read the books themselves and if they are not outlawed at the very beginning can it be determined if they teach virtue or not and whether they contain any truth. A book is deserving of respect if it can even slightly improve the lives of its readers since doing a little good for society is preferable to forcibly preventing bad. Two more explanations for why the licencing order is ineffective Religious sects have been known to form through unwritten traditions and beliefs rather than through books, therefore the goal of the new licencing order—to prevent the creation of religious sects and schisms through books—will likewise not be realised. Christianity was formerly just a sect, and when it started to grow, it did so orally rather than through any books or pamphlets that were produced or published. This licencing order won't be effective for yet another reason. Those chosen to licence books must be guys with a high level of education and knowledge as well as sound judgement and moral integrity. Such men are hard to come by. In addition, the licensers would have a massive amount of books submitted for their review and approval, which would require a lot of effort on their part. No men with actual talent or worth would volunteer to take on this assignment for the meagre compensation they would receive since the licensers would find it extremely unpleasant, difficult, and dull.

“Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.”

Conclusion

Milton's treatise is a direct response to the licencing order of 1643, which reestablished a similar form of pre-publication censorship to that which the Star Chamber and other earlier censors, both royal and ecclesiastical, had previously used. Here, Milton only urges against pre-publication censorship of books rather than making an argument for unrestricted speech or printing. He concedes that treasonous, defamatory, and blasphemous works

ought to be subjected to legal proceedings before being suppressed and their writers punished. Milton used Catholic Spain and the papacy as his counterexamples to those enlightened societies. It also demonstrates Milton's respect and admiration for ancient Greek society and serves as the opening statement for his argument against censorship. Milton later asserts that Euripides is evidence of why ancient Greece is a model society for preserving the right to free speech. It was repulsive to consider that any of their orders might have an air of unreformed Catholicism about them, especially in the turbulent years leading up to the civil wars when claims of Catholic sympathies flew as frequently as the pigeons of Hyde Park. *Areopagitica* shows Milton to be a skilled political orator in addition to being a wonderful poet and scholar.

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