



Areopagitica (Classic John Milton)

John Milton

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Areopagitica by John Milton - A speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, to the Parliament of England is a 1644 prose polemical tract by the English poet, scholar, and polemical author John Milton opposing licensing and censorship. Areopagitica is among history's most influential and impassioned philosophical defences of the principle of a right to freedom of speech and expression. It is regarded as one of the most eloquent defences of press freedom ever written because many of its expressed principles form the basis for modern justifications of that right. Areopagitica was published 23 November 1644, at the height of the English Civil War. It is titled after Areopagitikos, a speech written by the Athenian orator Isocrates in the 5th century BC. (The Areopagus is a hill in Athens, the site of real and legendary tribunals, and was the name of a council whose power Isocrates hoped to restore). Like Isocrates, Milton had no intention of delivering his speech orally. Instead, it was distributed via pamphlet, defying the same publication censorship he argued against. As a Protestant, Milton had supported the Presbyterians in Parliament, but in this work he argued forcefully against the Licensing Order of 1643, in which Parliament required authors to have a license approved by the government before their work could be published. This issue was personal for Milton as he had suffered censorship himself in his efforts to publish several tracts defending divorce (a radical stance which met with no favour from the censors). Areopagitica is full of biblical and classical references which Milton uses to strengthen his argument; this is particularly fitting because it was directed toward the Calvinist Presbyterians that comprised Parliament at that time. According to George H. Sabine the Areopagitica was based on an engaged public: Its basic principle was the right and also the duty of every intelligent man as a rational being, to know the grounds and take responsibility for his beliefs and actions. Its corollary was a society and a state in which decisions are reached by open discussion, in which the sources of information are not contaminated by authority in the interest of party, and in which political unity is secured not by force but by a consensus that respects variety of opinion.

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