

JOHN MILTON – LIBERTY, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE

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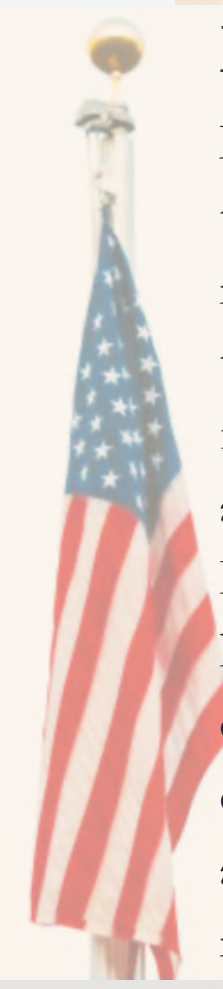
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OVERVIEW

“Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties”(Areopagitica, 1644). Poet and pamphleteer John Milton (1608-1674) is venerated as a powerful advocate for freedom of speech, the press, and toleration of religion. A great deal of the power of his works comes from their ability to have a resonance beyond their immediate context. My project examines the influence of Milton’s thought in early America and how his words and ideas have permeated into the constitutional documents of the United States, an area of continued relevance and discussion. The Founding Fathers, in their own times of political upheaval and revolution, were reaching for ideological inspiration and grounding. Milton, with his supreme imaginative power and understanding and his gift for vital argument, afforded them the audacity to give form to a new nation.



MILTON’S PAMPHLETS

Milton’s pamphlets were written in specific temporal and political contexts. It is the reason for their power and urgency yet also the reason for their falling short of a fully formed and consistent ideology. The language and arguments are undeniably complex. Inevitably, the responses to them over time have been inconsistent and often opportunistic. He consistently advocates for close reading, careful reasoning and scrutiny – a principle which must be applied in the reading of his own work.

MILTON AND AMERICA

During the American revolutionary period, Milton’s perceived importance had great relevance and urgency in the fight against tyranny. His powerful rhetoric encourages his works’ longevity and sense of pertinence across time. Milton’s importance to the politics of early America is evident not only through the inference of echoes in the language of foundational legal documents of the United States but also in the explicit references to his work.

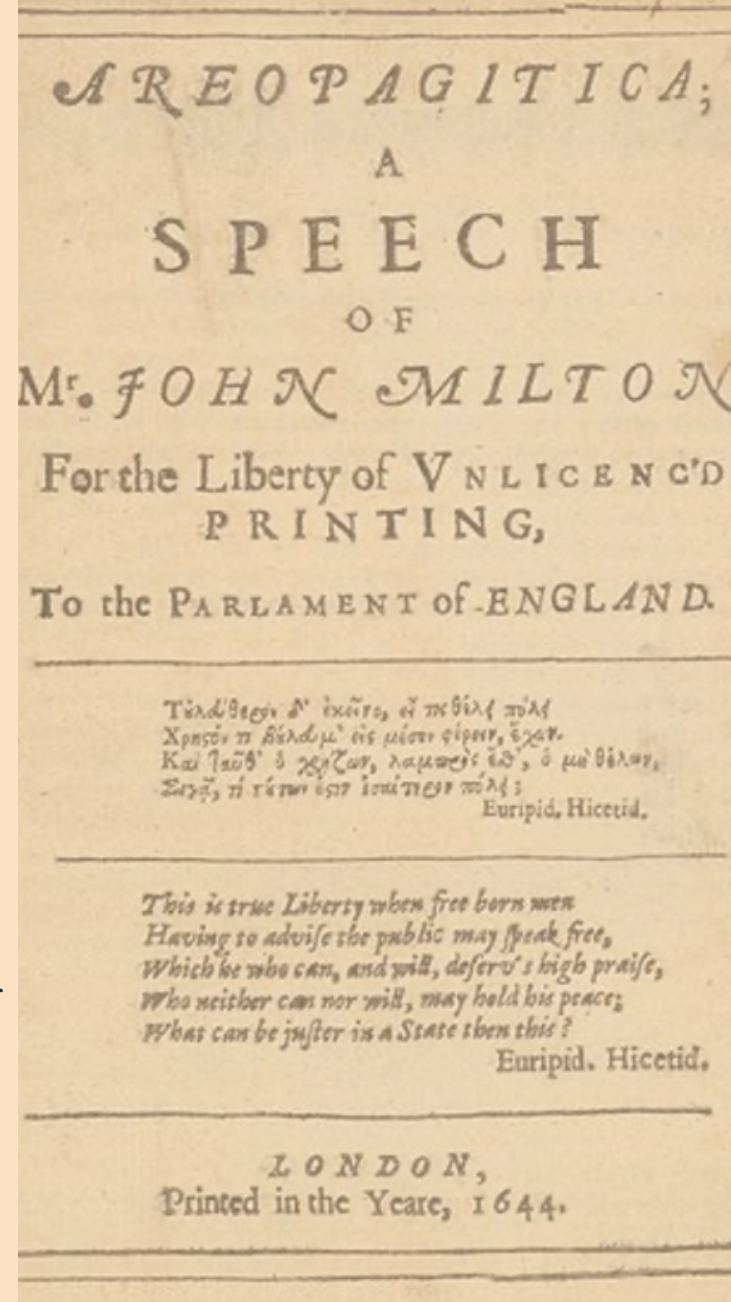
Milton was most heavily cited during the 1770s, the period of revolt against repressive British rule, stirring the obvious connections to be made between Milton’s revolutionary writings against the absolutism of Charles I and Charles II and the rule of George III over America.

Among others, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, were profoundly influenced by Milton’s body of work. Milton continues to be viewed as an important figure in America, especially by those involved in the protection of civil liberties. Modern-day advocates of freedom of expression extensively reference Milton’s most influential pamphlets, particularly *Areopagitica*. His influence spans from the Constitution of the United States to the Supreme Court citing Milton’s political works.



MATERIALITY

Milton’s political pamphlets are specific to their context and yet have long-lasting value in the principles of liberty, toleration, and reason that they promote. The aim of pamphlets was to have relevance to their immediate context, often being in direct response to others, their impermanence being reflected in their flimsy material form. Pamphleteering had a culture of largely free discussion and debate in print, particularly in relation to political and religious matters. A symptom of a booming printing press, their physical form had an urgency and ephemerality, the pages tended to be small and mostly sewn together without a binding. It could be considered that the handwritten constitutional documents of America have a different sort of fragility to the almost ephemeral nature of the English Civil War pamphlets. Rather than being dispersed on a large scale, there were only fourteen original copies of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights produced. The scarcity of these constitutional documents, distributed for each colony, creates the sense that the proposed laws of the Founding Fathers are hallowed, their commitment to American values proven in their signatures. In the modern day, the handwritten Constitution of the United States has visually become a representation of democracy in America. It may be considered that the connotations of the Constitution’s material quality have been detrimental to its adaptive nature. The sense of permanence contradicts the ambition of Article Five which provides the mechanism for constitutional change and evolution, which has become increasingly rare.



CONCLUSION

Milton was viewed by the Founding Fathers during the Revolutionary Wars as an inspirational voice of revolution and of liberty. His exploration of fundamental freedoms and civil liberties in a time of political uncertainty resonated with their own turbulent times. John Milton’s metaphor in *Areopagitica* emphasising the need for constant progression is a pertinent one: “We boast our light; but if we look not wisely on the Sun it self, it smites us into darkness [...] The light which we have gain’d, was giv’n us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge”. Milton was demonstrably motivated to develop, to reassess, to not ossify and venerate ideas and texts. However, Milton’s political pamphleteering was inherently, and necessarily, specific to the particularity of the rapid fire exchange of polemics with his Royalist adversaries; they were not fully formed ideological documents. The materiality of Milton’s political pamphlets, with their inherent fragility, reflects the temporal specificity of their polemical arguments. An interesting counterpoint is the reverence in which the US Constitutional manuscripts are held, a veneration which may have resulted in a reticence to scrutinise the origins of the laws that founded and uphold the nation. Milton was willing to be politically, religiously and ideologically radical; he believed in an ongoing, organic liberated discussion and a government which was mindful of that continuing progression and a constant reformation of ideas.

