

John Milton – Liberty, Freedom of Expression and the Transatlantic Dialogue

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Introduction

Bold lettering dominates the fragile browned page: “By the King. A PROCLAMATION”. This imperious heading is stamped upon every page of each document in a collection of proclamations held together by a thick ridged leather binding. These 270 pages of proclamations, made by Charles II between 8 May 1660 and 14 July 1662, detail some of Charles II’s unilateral decisions as the newly restored monarch of England, nearly a decade after the end of the English Civil War. The pages display a sense of absolute power and security, especially evident in its dating: “in the Twelfth Year of Our Reign”, when Charles II had only been crowned months before. In many ways it is a rewriting of history and a wilful forgetting of a period of great political energy, reformation, and revolutionary upheaval. Within the collection is ‘A Proclamation, for the calling in, and suppressing of two Books written by John Milton’¹, a powerful demonstration of an autocratic monarchy limiting freedoms of speech and expression. The two books by John Milton (1608-1674) to be suppressed were the pamphlets *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano* and *Eikonoklastes*, polemics about Charles I written during the interregnum period. 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. 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. *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano* was a pamphlet which was specifically responding to the then exiled Charles II, in answer to a pamphlet paid for by the future king, *Defensio Regia pro Carolo I*. The argument is not concluded by means of logic or rhetoric but by a tyrannical limiting of expression. Charles II’s proclamation, with its stark refusal to engage in the animated culture of pamphleteering, can be viewed in a larger context of reestablishing a despotic and repressive monarchical rule.

John Milton 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. This essay explores the influence of Milton’s thought in early America and how his words and ideas have percolated 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.

¹ Sandars, Samuel, and Charles II, *By the King : A Proclamation for Calling in, and Suppressing of Two Books Written by John Milton; the One Intituled, Johannis Miltoni Angli pro Populo Anglicano Defensio, Contra Claudii Anonymi Aliàs Salmasii, Defensionem Regiam; and the Other in Answer to a Book Intituled, The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Majesty in His Solitude and Sufferings. And Also a Third Book Intituled, The Obstructors of Justice, Written by John Goodwin.* (London: printed by John Bill and Christopher Barker, printers to the Kings most Excellent Majesty, 1660)

Milton, with his supreme imaginative power and understanding and gift for vital argument, afforded them the audacity to give form to a new nation.

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 and Early America

Milton was consistently placed among the likes of Locke and Newton as an ideological influence who would shape the United States of America as an emerging nation, "not simply because of his genius and learning but because he had portrayed the verities of Christian belief."² During the American revolutionary period, Milton's perceived importance had great relevance and urgency in the fight against tyranny. As George Sensabaugh writes, Milton's "singular power to instruct and inspire so appealed to Americans searching for ideals and values that for a few decades they deferred to what he had said."³ 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. Donald S. Lutz's statistics show that from a comprehensive collection of some 916 political writings between 1760 and 1805, Milton was directly cited the 22nd most of any European thinker, ranking just behind only two poets, William Shakespeare and Alexander Pope.⁴ Lutz writes that 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.

Since Milton's work was most significant to early America for its rhetorical power, his poetry was widely quoted by American political figures in late 18th century. Furthermore, the greater interpretive licence granted by poems such as *Paradise Lost* allowed for some imaginative quotation, moulding Milton's words to fit a wide variety of contexts. Some of the greatest passages

² Sensabaugh, George Frank, *Milton in Early America*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), p.24.

³ Ibid, p. viii

⁴ Lutz, Ds, 'THE RELATIVE INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN WRITERS ON LATE 18TH-CENTURY AMERICAN POLITICAL-THOUGHT', *The American Political Science Review*, 78.1 (1984), 189–97 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1961257>>

in *Paradise Lost* are the words of Satan, he himself a rebel against the autocracy of God. As a result, the descriptions and speeches of Satan came to be used in emancipatory and revolutionary contexts as well as the polemical. In Thomas Jefferson's commonplace book, he quotes Milton and especially *Paradise Lost* extensively, with particular focus on the language of Satan and his rebellion. Furthermore, in a letter to George W. Lewis in 1825⁵, Jefferson describes with the English loss at the Battle of Hastings, "the natural rights of the nation were not staked on the event of a single battle" and that "their will to recover the Saxon constitution continued unabated, and was at the bottom of all the unsuccessful insurrections which succeeded in subsequent times". To emphasise his point, Jefferson calls upon Satan's first speech in *Paradise Lost*:

What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:

Jefferson writes that Whig historians draw the true principles of the constitution from Saxon times whereas Tory historians date them from Norman rule. Given that the American Tories remained loyal to the British Crown, Jefferson uses Milton's verse to draw a connection through history of insurrection against the tyranny of British monarchs in the Norman, Caroline, and Georgian eras. At the end of his life Jefferson continues to see the revolutionary merit of Satan's language even though he was attacked by opponents for Satanic "obdurate pride" and "steadfast hate"⁶. The tendency to manipulate Milton's words is particularly evident in John Adams' use of the same lines which spoke to Jefferson in polemic against Thomas Gage, the Governor of Massachusetts and commander of British troops. The following is an extract from a letter to James Warren on 3 January 1775 on the matter:

If you see Drapers Papers and Mills and Hicks's—you will observe that The Arch Enemy, is at work again in his infernal Council at Boston.

I never think of the Junto there, immured as they are, without recollecting, the infernal Spirits in Milton after they had recovered from their first astonishment arising from their fall from the Battlements of Heaven to the Sulphurous Lake—not subdued tho confounded—plotting a fresh assault

⁵" From Thomas Jefferson to George W. Lewis, 25 October 1825," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-5617>.

⁶ Milton, John, and Gordon Teskey, *Paradise Lost* (Second Edition) (Norton Critical Editions) / John Milton, Gordon Teskey., 2nd., 2021, I. 58.

upon the Skies. "What tho the Field be lost? All is not lost; th 'unconquerable Will and Study of Revenge, immortal Hate and Courage never to submit or yield &c. Of this be sure, to do ought good never will be our Task, but ever to do ill our Sole Delight."⁷

The discrepancy between the same quote being used with such opposite intentions illustrates the breadth of interpretations which Milton's work can be subject to; when brought into other contexts this lack of clarity is potentially damaging.

Adams, like Jefferson, was a great admirer of Milton. He records in his diary on 29 April 1756 "Reading Milton. That man's Soul, it seems to me, was distended as wide as Creation. His Power over the human mind was absolute and unlimited. His Genius was great beyond Conception, and his Learning without Bounds. I can only gaze at him with astonishment, without comprehending the vast Compass of his Capacity."⁸ His praise for Milton later became directed at his pamphlets in particular. In the Revolutionary era, Adams wrote of "Sidney, Harrington, Locke, Milton, Nedham, Neville, Burnet, and Hoadley" that "The wretched condition of this country, however, for ten or fifteen years past, has frequently reminded me of their principles and reasonings. They will convince any candid mind, that there is no good government but what is Republican."⁹ In this period of conflict and the necessity for clear, defined difference from the British, the ideals which the Americans were fighting for needed rhetorical might. In Sensabaugh's words, "At this particular moment in American history Milton played a role he could play nowhere else: he could and did become an inextricable part of a country seeking national identity."¹⁰ However, once freedom from tyranny was achieved, the focus became upon establishing an effective means for government. In his *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States*, Adams' reverence for Milton becomes complicated:

A man may be a greater poet than Homer, and one of the most learned men in the world ; he may spend his life in defence of liberty, and be at the same time one of the most irreproachable moral

⁷" From John Adams to James Warren, 3 January 1775," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-02-02-0067>. [Original source: *The Adams Papers*, Papers of John Adams, vol. 2, *December 1773–April 1775*, ed. Robert J. Taylor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977, pp. 208–209.]

⁸ John Adams diary 1, 18 November 1755 - 29 August 1756 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

⁹" III. Thoughts on Government, April 1776," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0026-0004>. [Original source: *The Adams Papers*, Papers of John Adams, vol. 4, *February–August 1776*, ed. Robert J. Taylor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979, pp. 86–93.]

¹⁰ Sensabaugh, George Frank, *Milton in Early America*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), p.ix.

characters; and yet, when called upon to frame a constitution of government, he may demonstrate to the world, that he has reflected very little on the subject. There is a great hazard in saying all this of John Milton; but truth, and the rights of mankind, demand it.¹¹

Adams saw the necessity for greater scrutiny towards those figures that had been so important in terms of their republican values when constructing the configuration of government. Adams writes about Milton's proposed means of government in *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* that his ideas "would have stripped the people of England of every shadow of liberty". He goes on to write "John Milton was as honest a man as this nation ever bred, and as great a friend of liberty; but his greatness most certainly did not consist in the knowledge of the nature of man and of government".¹² This mix of polemic and praise illustrates the complexity of drawing upon the ideas and values of a thinker who lacked an adequate antecedent model of a republic. As Thomas Corns writes, "Milton's prose articulates something altogether harder to control, that republican consciousness, founded in a sense of political self-worth and a powerful suspicion of the mystery of kingship"¹³. Milton was far from being a political theorist or ideologue; he was a poet, who felt compelled by his political context to write pamphlets with what he described as his awkward "left hand". The power of his words was effective in that they provided inspiration and opportunity "for a wide variety of tactical manoeuvres"¹⁴. This sort of engagement with Milton's work speaks to his philosophy expressed in the pamphlet *Areopagitica*, "the reforming of Reformation it self"¹⁵, looking for a constant progression of ideas.

Despite Milton's insufficient reflection on constitutional and legal matters, in being seen as a champion of liberty in early America, his words and influence have permeated into American law. Before drawing up the bill for the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom*, Jefferson read widely and made notes pertinent to the problem confronting the Assembly, one of the headings being "Notes on Episcopacy". Jefferson turned to Milton in this section, about half of which came from *Of Reformation in England* and *The Reason of Church-Government Urged*, two of Milton's early tracts on religious freedom. This statute subsequently became a precursor to the freedom of religion

¹¹ John Adams, A defence of the constitutions of government of the United States of America, ... By John Adams, ... In three volumes. ... 1794: Vol 1 p.366 < https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_a-defence-of-the-constit_adams-john_1794_1/page/368/mode/2up>

¹² Ibid, p.369

¹³ Corns, Thomas N., 'Milton and the Characteristics of a Free Commonwealth', in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. by David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner, Ideas in Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 42

¹⁴ Sensabaugh, George Frank, *Milton in Early America*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 122

¹⁵ Milton, Alvis, Alvis, John, and Milton, John, *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings of John Milton*, 1999, p.40

promised in the First Amendment. *Areopagitica* may also be viewed as having significant influence upon this Amendment. This may be inferred through the general message of the pamphlet being for the liberty of the press, but also through a number of explicit references to *Areopagitica* in court cases regarding the First and Fourteenth Amendments. I have found five instances of Milton being directly quoted or cited in mid-20th century legal cases. Milton's continual presence as a defender of the natural rights protected in the American Constitution cements the impression of him being foundational to its values.

Modern Perceptions of Milton

The legacy and perception of John Milton has changed significantly during the afterlife of his works. He has been considered "of the Devil's party" and a radical revolutionary by William Blake and other Romantics, as well as being largely regarded as a pious, religious, pastoral poet during the Victorian era.

Milton continues to be viewed as an important figure in America, especially by those involved in the protection of civil liberties. There is a significant online presence of modern-day advocates of freedom of expression referencing Milton's most influential pamphlets, particularly *Areopagitica*. An informative example is the Foundation for Individual Right and Expression (FIRE)¹⁶, a civil liberties group which initially focussed on freedom of speech on US college campuses before expanding its remit to being a defender of First Amendment rights for all American citizens. They emphasise Milton's continued importance, extensively quoting *Areopagitica* in numerous articles.

A FIRE article entitled 'Why John Milton's free speech pamphlet, 'Areopagitica', still matters'¹⁷ views Milton's pamphlet "as one of the foundations of our modern understanding of free expression". In this article, Milton is initially presented as being a repeatedly thwarted progressive revolutionary. It states that: "Written in 1644, 'Areopagitica' was a work of its own tumultuous political moment. The British Parliament had just overthrown and beheaded the king of England, Charles I." The inaccuracy of when the regicide took place is significant, given that after Charles I's execution in 1649, Milton's involvement with the government became much greater as he became an apologist for the killing of a tyrant. In *Areopagitica*, written five years earlier during the midst of the English Civil War, Milton is an unaffiliated religious pamphleteer, aware of the new freedoms that the end of the personal rule of Charles I has brought. Yet Milton remained

¹⁶ <https://www.thefire.org>

¹⁷ Nick Clairmont, Why John Milton's free speech pamphlet 'Areopagitica' still matters, (2024)
<<https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/why-john-miltons-free-speech-pamphlet-areopagitica-still-matters>>

discontented with the inconsistency of publication restrictions and the increased sense of chaos with a wider availability of the works he considered “impious or evil absolutely”.¹⁸ In the FIRE article, the Long Parliament is presented as being tyrannical itself: “the forces that had overthrown Charles I and now wanted to change the law so that all books published must be “licensed” first by the government.” The article fails to mention that the Licensing Order of 1643 was to replace the highly restrictive Star Chamber Decree of 1637. This decree passed under Charles I’s reign had the sole focus of preventing “Seditious, Schismatical, or offensive Books or Pamphlets” being published, whereas the Licensing Order of 1643 had the stated intent of “suppressing the great late abuses and frequent disorders in Printing many false, forged, scandalous, seditious, libellous, and unlicensed Papers, Pamphlets, and Books to the great defamation of Religion and Government.” The order of priorities is demonstrative of the Long Parliament seeing the necessity for “governmental regulation as a safeguard from inaccurate reprints in small, cheaply made editions and as a protection for printers against the unlawful publishing of their copies”¹⁹. Therefore, to judge that “Milton argued that Parliament was acting like the tyrant king they’d just overthrown”²⁰ is reductive and misguided. However, there is merit in seeing Milton in a continual fight for greater liberty, as his pamphlet is frustrated with the “slow-moving Reformation which we labour under”.²¹ The FIRE article itself adopts this position of continual development of principles of liberty. It considers that Milton’s advocacy for post-publication censorship is contradictory to his arguments for the liberty of the press and does not fulfil modern free speech principles. Milton’s language does indeed have a lasting resonance in its arguments for championing individual reasoning, which chimes with the ideals of the First Amendment.

Milton’s Pamphlets

Of Milton’s political works, *Areopagitica* holds the most power through its long-term influence upon the philosophy of freedom of expression. Sentences such as “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties” resonate with American ideological texts. *Areopagitica*, an illegally published pamphlet, upholds the values of liberty through its very existence.

¹⁸ Milton, Alvis, Alvis, John, and Milton, John, *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings of John Milton*, 1999, p. 47

¹⁹ Dobranski, Stephen B., ‘Licensing Milton’s Heresy’, in *Milton and Heresy*, ed. by Stephen B. Dobranski and John P. Rumrich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 147

²⁰ Nick Clairmont, Why John Milton’s free speech pamphlet ‘Areopagitica’ still matters, (2024)

<<https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/why-john-miltons-free-speech-pamphlet-areopagitica-still-matters>>

²¹ Milton, Alvis, Alvis, John, and Milton, John, *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings of John Milton*, 1999, p. 47

Despite its initial lack of success in persuading the repeal of the Licensing Order of 1643, *Areopagitica* is a testament to Milton's longevity of ideas, values, and rhetoric. The pamphlet embodies a rebellious force fighting for liberty in its unlicensed publication and with Milton's name proudly stamped on the front page. Its force outlived Milton, being heavily involved in subsequent ideological and political revolutions. I have discussed how Milton's language has been appropriated and made to fit new contexts but Milton himself demonstrates the tendencies of extraction to warp meaning in the epigraph of Theseus from Euripides's *The Suppliants*. The frontispiece of *Areopagitica*, the Greek which Milton quotes is in four lines as opposed to his translation which is in five.

“This is true Liberty when free born men
Having to advise the public may speak free,
Which he who can, and will, deserv's high praise,
Who neither can nor will, may hold his peace;
What can be juster in a State then this?”

With an additional line, Milton expands the scope of Theseus' speech, emphasising a duty of those “who can” advise the state to do so and asserting that those without good advice will not. Rather than laying out an environment which permits anyone to be heard, as Theseus' message appears in other translations, Milton imagines this to be a meritocracy of intellect in which it appears to him that any speech “deserves”. His tone is far more assertive in its ideal of free speech and self-censorship, in anticipation of his puissant rhetoric and arguments.

Milton's pamphlet sets out an important condition in viewing freedom of expression: that pamphleteers “write that which they foresee may advance the publick good”. Furthermore, Milton writes that he considers writing pamphlets “no meane endeavour” and that in the process the author will be “not a little alter'd and mov'd inwardly on their mindes”. Milton's pamphlet itself is a proof of the effort of producing such a work. Its forty pages detail arguments with moving rhetoric and classical and religious allusions. As such, the form of the pamphlet has an urgent immediacy, strongly rooted in its own time, as well as being a thoughtful construction of the author's deeply felt arguments. To draw parallels between freedom of expression in publications such as pamphlets and in modern short form social media, although initially appealing, becomes complicated by these qualities of the pamphlet detailed by Milton. Individual online postings, particularly hate speech or misinformation, evidently lack the aspiration of contributing to the “publick good” and any deep

thought and literary craft. Therefore, applying Milton's arguments to such a dissimilar context must be done critically and carefully.

The intentions of Milton's pamphlets were to allow him and other Puritan pamphleteers the freedom to publish their religious ideas, believing that they might change the way religion was practised through rhetorical argument. He writes in the *Second Defence* that the aims of *Areopagitica* were:

that the determination of true and false, of what ought to be published and what suppressed, might not be in the hands of the few who may be charged with the inspection of books, men commonly without learning and of vulgar judgment, and by whose license and pleasure, no one is suffered to publish anything which may be above vulgar apprehension.²²

One of the great similarities between Milton's pamphlets and American foundational law is in the belief of natural rights. The Declaration of Independence says that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Likewise, Milton's *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* maintains "all men naturally were borne free"²³, and that the tyranny of Charles I held them servile. Milton asserts that it is the people's choice how they should be ruled, believing in the natural right of liberty over the divine right of kings: "the people as oft as they shall judge it for the best, either choose him or reject him, retaine him or depose him though no Tyrant, meerly by the liberty and right of free born Men, to be govern'd as seems to them best."²⁴ The Declaration of Independence resounds with this choice for individual liberty when it states "when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."²⁵ Milton's apologist response to the regicide offered a template of argument and inspiration for future revolution, the kind that had not been available to the English revolutionaries of the mid 17th century. As Thomas Corns writes, "In a sense, the most active and most militant of the senior army officers and their civilian supporters blundered into the foundation of the republic, without a constitutional theory, without a sustained critique of other models (of course, specifically, monarchy), without a vision or an image

²² Milton, Alvis, Alvis, John, and Milton, John, *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings of John Milton*, 1999, p.366

²³ *Ibid*, p.58

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.63

²⁵ < <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript> >

of the state they were founding, and even without an appropriate political vocabulary.”²⁶ It is these sort of pre-existing rhetorical arguments for liberty which became so crucial in the establishment of the ideals and values of the government of the United States of America.

Materiality

Milton’s pamphlets are specific to their context and yet have long-lasting value in the principles of liberty, toleration, and reason that they promote. This duality in the pamphlets’ relevance appears connected to their materiality not having a guaranteed longevity. The pamphlets were printed cheaply and efficiently, folding one large sheet of paper into sixteen sides or an octavo, before sewing the pages together, often without proper binding, allowing for the pamphlets to answer, without delay, to opposing arguments in the immediate context. Pamphlets would answer each other directly, quoting the title against which they were arguing on the frontispiece. Milton’s pamphlet on religious toleration, *Of True Religion*, was squeezed onto one full page in sixteen sides by reducing the size of the text on the last leaf. (In one of the original versions that I examined, the pamphlet had been over trimmed, cutting off the last couple of lines of text when it was bound at a later date, the missing text handwritten overleaf.) In *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, Milton opens the pamphlet with the following:

Although since the writing of this treatise, the face of things hath had som change [...] I thought best not to suppress what I had written, hoping that it may now be of much more use and concernment to be freely published [...] I took the opportunitie from this occasion to revise and somewhat enlarge the whole discourse.

These pamphlets were written at a time of such great turmoil and with such specificity to the immediate political and religious contexts that even in the process of writing them, they fail to remain completely relevant and topical. Yet, as Milton notes, this lack of specificity does not deny them the ability to offer comment on the broader discussion of liberties.

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

²⁶ Corns, Thomas N., ‘Milton and the Characteristics of a Free Commonwealth’, in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. by David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner, Ideas in Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 26

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. This impression of the Constitution having an unwavering permanence in the modern age was visually evident in the second presidential debate (10 September 2024) with its words forming the background to the nominees. The image of this handwriting has become immortalised as a symbol of America; its words are symbols for its ideals that are beyond their actual meanings in that they are recognisable and therefore hold symbolic power even when blurred and illegible. These words surround a presidential candidate in Donald Trump whose actions have been unlawful and threatening to American democracy and whose stated plans run counter to the First Amendment, namely the prosecution of flag burning. Perhaps this display of constitutional iconography could be seen as an endorsement of an undemocratically minded former president, a view which would lead to the conclusion that the use of constitutional symbols contradicts its values. On the other hand, it may be seen that the image of the constitution protects American democratic values against such threats. Regardless, the handwritten constitution has acquired a powerful symbolic weight which may partly be attributed to its material qualities encouraging a sense of permanence. While the form of a pamphlet encourages quotation in response, the handwritten and signed constitutional documents uphold a sense of unanswerable completeness as a distillation of the values of the founders of the United States. This impression is emphasised by the Bill of Rights being a supplementary addition to the Constitution rather than being incorporated in it, which had the effect of the Bill of Rights having little impact in law until the 20th century, when the first important decisions protecting freedom of speech were made. Therefore, 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

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"²⁷. Milton was demonstrably motivated to develop, to reassess, to not ossify and venerate ideas and texts. It seems clear that Milton was initially venerated by the Founding Fathers; his place in the English poetical canon, second only to Shakespeare, afforded him an influence in respect of his political writings and ideologies. Milton

²⁷ Milton, Alvis, Alvis, John, and Milton, John, *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings of John Milton*, 1999, p.38

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. 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 though deeply considered ideological doctrines. The impermanence of these expressions is reflected in the materiality of the pamphlets themselves. When it came to establishing the constitutional parameters of a new nation, Milton's proposed models for the mechanisms of state had to be critically reviewed and roundly dismissed.

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. The ideas in his pamphlets prove difficult to selectively extract in quotation without ignoring crucial and critical aspects. In *Areopagitica*, Milton writes that "a wise man will make better use of an idle pamphlet, than a fool will do of sacred Scripture". He consistently advocates for close reading, careful reasoning and scrutiny – a principle which must be applied in the reading of his own work.

Milton's metaphor also chimes with the modern day veneration of the Constitution of the United States which, in its application to a different age with evolving concerns and issues, is open to speculative interpretation. 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.

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