



# Areopagitica

John Milton  
(1644)

The origin of the title is the rhetorical oration *Areopagiticus* (355 BC) by the Greek rhetorician Isocrates (436-338 BC), where a programme for a political reform of the judges of the Court of the Areopagus, the highest court in Greece, is outlined.

The fall of the king and the end of censorship had brought about an astonishing flourishing of tracts, libels and pamphlets. Thousands of pamphlets were published in the 1640s, often outrageous in content. Many, also among

the Puritans, found this disturbing and it was in this atmosphere that Parliament passed the **Licensing Order**, which reintroduced **censorship of printing** in June 1643. It was really the antithesis of what Milton expected from the Puritan republic. He argued against censorship in *Areopagitica* (1644); however his plea fell on deaf ears and it was not until 1694 that the principle that books should be published without Government control received legal sanction.



## The freedom of press

*In this text Milton states that destroying a book may be as bad as destroying a person. He refers to the story of Jason and the Argonauts; the teeth of the dragon he had just killed were planted in the ground and grow as armed men who he must fight.*

I deny not, but that it is of greatest concernment<sup>1</sup> in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how Books demean<sup>2</sup> themselves as well as men; and thereafter<sup>3</sup> to confine<sup>4</sup>, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors<sup>5</sup>. For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as  
5 that soul<sup>6</sup> was whose progeny<sup>7</sup> they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred<sup>8</sup> them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragon's teeth<sup>9</sup>; and being sown<sup>10</sup> up and down, may chance to spring up<sup>11</sup> armed men. And yet, on the other hand, unless wariness<sup>12</sup> be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book. Who kills a man kills  
10 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<sup>13</sup> to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed<sup>14</sup> and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life. 'Tis true, no age can restore a life, whereof<sup>15</sup> perhaps there is no great loss; and revolutions of ages do not oft recover the loss of a rejected truth, for the want<sup>16</sup> of which whole nations fare<sup>17</sup> the worse. [...]

As therefore<sup>18</sup> the state of man now is; what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear<sup>19</sup> without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits<sup>20</sup> and seeming pleasures<sup>21</sup>, and yet abstain<sup>22</sup>, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring<sup>23</sup> Christian.  
20 [...]

Since therefore the knowledge and survey<sup>24</sup> of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning<sup>25</sup> of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with less danger, scout into<sup>26</sup> the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason? And  
25 this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously<sup>27</sup> read.

John Milton  
*Areopagitica*  
(1644)

- 1 concernment. Concern. Timore.
- 2 demean. Si comportano.
- 3 thereafter. Così.
- 4 to confine. Confinare, rinchiudere.
- 5 as malefactors. As if they were malefactors. Come se fossero dei malfattori.
- 6 soul. Mente.
- 7 progeny. Discendenti.
- 8 bred. Generò.
- 9 Dragon's teeth. Secondo la mitologia greca i denti del drago piantati nel terreno generavano guerrieri.
- 10 sown. Seminati.
- 11 to spring up. Generare.
- 12 wariness. Cautela.
- 13 burden. Fardello.
- 14 embalmed. Imbalsamato.
- 15 whereof. Del quale.
- 16 want. Mancanza.
- 17 fare. Si comportano.
- 18 therefore. Quindi.
- 19 what continence to forbear. Quale morigeratezza per astenersi.
- 20 baits. Attrattive.
- 21 seeming pleasures. Apparenti piaceri.
- 22 abstain. Astenersi.
- 23 wayfaring. Viandante (riferimento alla tradizionale metafora della vita come viaggio verso il Cielo).
- 24 survey. Analisi.
- 25 scanning. Esame.
- 26 scout into. Esplorare.
- 27 promiscuously. Di tutti i tipi.



## READING COMPETENCE

### 1 READ the text and find the words which mean the following.

- 1 contradict .....
- 2 quickest .....
- 3 strength .....
- 4 occur .....
- 5 stored up .....
- 6 intellectual power .....

### 2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

1 In the first sentence, what is Milton saying? Select one of these statements.

- A It is not a good idea for the church and the government to watch both men and books and punish any which are criminal.
- B It is a good idea for the church and the government to watch both men and books and punish any which are criminal.

2 Find the phrase where he says 'But you have to be very careful'.

3 Concentrate on lines 3-6 where Milton states that books are important. Which words and phrases does he use to show that they are like living things?

4 Underline the phrase where Milton says that you might as well murder a man, and as censor a good book.

5 Circle the phrase where Milton says that a book can be immortal.

6 Read the last two paragraphs. Milton uses three antithesis. Complete the phrases below with the missing words.

- 1 Good and .....
- 2 ..... and virtue.
- 3 Truth and .....

7 What knowledge is needed in order to choose good according to Milton?

- A The knowledge of evil (line 17).
- B The knowledge of virtue (lines 21-22).
- C The knowledge of falsity (line 24).

### 3 FIND examples of

- 1 repetition;
- 2 words with the same meanings;
- 3 rhetorical questions.

What is the aim of these rhetorical devices?

- A To amuse the people.
- B To teach important truths.
- C To persuade people.



**4 FOCUS** on lines 8-13 and complete the paragraph below using the words from the box.

reasonable

treasure

mortal

reason

conclusion

age

destroy

immortal

man

First Milton gives his **(1)** ..... – it is as bad to **(2)** ..... a book as it is to kill a **(3)** .....  
Then he explains that a man is 'a **(4)** ..... creature, God's image' but a book is **(5)** ..... itself and  
by implication God himself. Man is of the Earth and **(6)** ..... , whereas a good book is a **(7)** .....  
for age after **(8)** ..... and it is **(9)** .....

**5 STATE** what conflicts the Puritan 'true wayfaring Christian' (line 19) has to struggle to gain his salvation.  
Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ Pleasure.
- ☐ The truth.
- ☐ Temptation and vice.
- ☐ Error.
- ☐ Sins.

**6 DISCUSS.** Censorship and the freedom of speech are still subjects of lively debate today. Milton thought we should have the moral strength and knowledge to be able to select the good from the bad, and no one else should do it for us. Do you agree with him?