

John Milton: Reading and Discussion Guide



In 1643, the Parliament of England was concerned that they had no control over what was being printed throughout the country. They were especially angry about people writing negative things about the church or the government. As a result, they passed a law known as the Licensing Order of 1643. This law required every written document to be approved by the government before it could be printed. The next year, famed author and poet John Milton published a pamphlet called *Areopagitica*. It presented his reasons for opposing this law and his argument for allowing freedom of speech and of the press.

KEY QUOTES FOR CLOSE READING AND DISCUSSION:

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

“I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.”

“He who destroys a good book, kills reason itself.”

“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.”

“And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter.”

“They are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity, who neglect and don’t permit others to unite those dissevered pieces which are yet wanting to the body of Truth.”

“Ye cannot make us now lesse capable, lesse knowing, lesse eagerly pursuing of the Truth, unlesse ye first make yourselves that made us so, lesse the lovers, lesse the founders of our true Liberty. We can grow ignorant again, brutish, formall, and slavish as ye found us, but you then must first become that which ye cannot be, oppressive, arbitrary, and tyrannous as they were from whom ye have free’d us.”

“And what doe they tell us vainly of new opinions, when this very opinion of theirs, that none must be heard but whom they like, is the worst and newest opinion of all others, and is the chief cause why sects and schisms doe so much abound and true knowledge is kept at distance from us; besides yet a greater danger which is in it.”

“Had anyone written and divulged erroneous things and scandalous to honest life, misusing and forfeiting the esteem had of his reason among men, if after conviction this only censure were adjudged him that he should never henceforth write.”

“There it was that I found and visited the famous Galileo, grown old, a prisoner to the Inquisition, for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought. And though I knew that England then was groaning loudest under the prelatical yoke, nevertheless I took it as a pledge of future happiness, that other nations were so persuaded of her liberty. Yet was it beyond my hope that those worthies were then breathing in her air, who should be her leaders to such a deliverance, as shall never be forgotten by any revolution of time that this world hath to finish.”

QUESTIONS:

1. Consider this statement: “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” Why would Milton consider this the most important liberty?
2. Look up any words you do not know in the following statement: “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.” Explain what this statement means to you.
3. What is meant by the following statement: “He who destroys a good book, kills reason itself.” You may refer to other quotations.
4. Compare these two statements: “And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter.” (John Milton) and “We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.” (Thomas Jefferson) What do they have in common? Is there any difference between them?
5. To which people is Milton referring in the following statement: “They are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity, who neglect and don’t permit others to unite those dissevered pieces which are yet wanting to the body of Truth.”?
6. What is the new opinion to which Milton refers in the following statement: “And what doe they tell us vainly of new opinions, when this very opinion of theirs, that none must be heard but whom they like, is the worst and newest opinion of all others...”? Why does Milton refer to Galileo in the last quotation?