

**MILTON AREOPAGITICA  
EDITED  
WITH INTRODUCTION AND  
NOTES**

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Milton Areopagitica edited with introduction and notes by John W. Hales

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*AREOPAGITICA*

EDITED

*WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES*

BY

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## INTRODUCTION.

### SECTION I. THE YEAR (1644).

OF the circumstances under which the *Areopagitica* was written, Milton has himself given an account in his *Second Defence of the People of England* (*Defensio Secunda pro Populo Anglicano contra infamem libellum anonymum cui titulus Regii Sanguinis Clamor ad Cælum adversus Parricidas Anglicanos*). In that work, to refute fully the calumnies heaped on his name by his enemy, he gives a rapid sketch of his past life. After speaking of his earlier days, he mentions his travels abroad, and then how, coming home, he was drawn into the great struggle that he found prevailing, or beginning to prevail.

‘Then pursuing my former route through France I returned to my native country, after an absence of one year and about three months, at the time when Charles, having broken the peace, was renewing what is called the episcopal war with the Scots, in which the Royalists being routed in the first encounter, and the English being universally and justly disaffected, the necessity of his affairs at last obliged him to convene a parliament. As soon as I was able I hired a spacious house in the city, for myself and my books; where I again, with rapture, resumed my literary pursuits, and where I calmly awaited the issue of the contest, which I trusted to the wise conduct of Providence, and to the courage of the people. The vigour of the Parliament had begun to humble the pride of the bishops. As long as the liberty of speech was no longer subject to control, all mouths began to be opened against the bishops. They said that it was unjust that they alone should differ from the model of other Reformed Churches; that the government of the Church should be according to the pattern of other churches, and particularly the word of God. This awakened all my attention and my zeal. I saw that a way was opening for the establishment of real liberty; that the foundation was laying for the deliverance of man from the yoke of slavery and superstition; that the principles of religion, which were the first

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objects of our care, would exert a salutary influence on the manners and constitution of the republic. And as I had from my youth studied the distinctions between religious and civil rights, I perceived that, if ever I wished to be of use, I ought at least not to be wanting to my country, to the Church, and to so many of my fellow-Christians, in a crisis of so much danger. I therefore determined to relinquish the other pursuits in which I was engaged, and to transfer the whole force of my talents and my industry to this one important object. I accordingly wrote two books to a friend concerning the Reformation of the Church of England. Afterwards when two bishops of superior distinction vindicated their privileges against some principal ministers, I thought that on those topics, to the consideration of which I was led solely by my love of truth and my reverence for Christianity, I should not probably write worse than those who were contending only for their own emoluments and usurpations. I therefore answered the one in two books, of which the first is inscribed 'Concerning Prelatical Episcopacy,' and the other 'Concerning the Mode of Ecclesiastical Government'; and I replied to the other in some animadversions, and soon after in an apology. On this occasion it was supposed that I brought a timely succour to the ministers, who were hardly a match for the eloquence of their opponents, and from that time I was actively employed in refuting any answers that appeared. When the bishops could no longer resist the multitude of their assailants, I had leisure to turn my thoughts to other subjects; to the promotion of real and substantial liberty, which is rather to be sought from within than from without; and whose existence depends, not so much on the terror of the sword as on sobriety of conduct and integrity of life. When, therefore, I perceived that there were three species of liberty which are essential to the happiness of social life—religious, domestic, and civil; and as I had already written concerning the first, and the magistrates were strenuously active in obtaining the third, I determined to turn my attention to the second, or the domestic species. As they seemed to involve three material questions—the conditions of the conjugal tie, the education of children, and the free publications of the thoughts—I made them objects of distinct consideration. I explained my sentiments, not only concerning the solemnization of matrimony, but the dissolution, if circumstances rendered it necessary, and I drew my arguments from the divine law, which Christ did not abolish, or publish another more grievous than that of Moses. I stated my own opinions, and those of others, concerning the exclusive exception of fornication, which our illustrious Selden has since,

in his "Hebrew Wife," more copiously discussed; for he, in vain, makes a vaunt of liberty in the senate, or in the forum, who languishes under the vilest servitude to an inferior at home. On this subject, therefore, I published some books, which were more particularly necessary at that time, when man and wife were often the most inveterate foes; when the man often staid to take care of his children at home, while the mother of the family was seen in the camp of the enemy, threatening death and destruction to her husband. I then discussed the principles of education in a summary manner, but sufficiently copious for those who attend seriously to the subject, than which nothing can be more necessary to principle the minds of men in virtue, the only genuine source of political and individual liberty, the only true safeguard of states, the bulwark of their prosperity and renown. } Lastly, I wrote my "*Areopagitica*" after the true Attic style, in order to deliver the press from the restraints with which it was encumbered; that the power of determining what was true and what was false, what ought to be published and what to be suppressed, might no longer be entrusted to a few illiterate and illiberal individuals, who refused their sanction to any work which contained views or sentiments at all above the level of the vulgar superstition. On the last species of civil liberty I said nothing, because I saw that sufficient attention was paid to it by the magistrates; nor did I write anything on the prerogative of the Crown till the King, voted an enemy by the parliament, and vanquished in the field, was summoned before the tribunal which condemned him to lose his head<sup>1</sup>.

Such is the account Milton himself gives of his writings just before the outbreak of the Civil War and during the continuance of it. The order of them is not indeed minutely accurate; for the 'some books' on the subject of divorce were not all published before he proceeded to the questions of Education and Unlicensed Printing; but it probably represents precisely enough the succession in which the various subjects discussed engaged his attention. The year of his life that especially concerns us here is 1644. It was in the November of that year that the *Areopagitica* was published. Besides this masterpiece, there appeared also these other works:—In February, a second edition of his first Divorce treatise (*The Doctrine and*

<sup>1</sup> See Milton's *Prose Works*, the one-volume edition, pp. 934, 935. For the original Latin, see *ibid.* pp. 719, 720.

Discipline of Divorce restored to the good of both sexes from the bondage of Canon Law and other Mistakes to the true meaning of Scripture in the Law and Gospel compared, wherein also are set down the bad consequences of abolishing or condemning as sin that which the law of God allows and Christ abolished not); in June, his tractate Of Education to Master Samuel Hartlib; in July, his Second Divorce Book (The Judgment of Martin Bucer concerning Divorce, written to Edward the Sixth in his second book of the Kingdom of Christ, and now Englished; wherein a late book restoring the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce is here confirmed and justified by the authority of Martin Bucer). So that the year 1644 was one of memorable activity in Milton's life.

This activity, it will have been noticed, was all in the direction of certain social and other reforms. It was all, as Milton himself puts it, in behalf of 'liberty'—of the 'domestic species' of 'liberty.' 'Liberty's defence' was always his 'noble task'; and there was never a time in his career when he strove with more fervent hope, or more brilliant skill, to secure for his age the freedom without which, as it seemed to him, life was cramped and starved, and the world a mere prison. In the interest of this great cause he had abandoned for a while those high studies to which his previous years had been devoted. Of his poetical writings only a few sonnets belong to this period of his life. 'God, by His secretary Conscience,' enjoined a far different 'service,' and 'it were sad for me if I should draw back.'

This particular year formed a crisis in Milton's life. It witnessed the culmination of his hopefulness. There is especially noticeable in the *Areopagitica* a certain sanguineness and anticipation, which subsequent events were bitterly to reprove. In fact Milton was yet but faintly conscious of the immense discrepancies between his age and himself. To him, when the Long Parliament met in the autumn of 1640, it had seemed that a new day was dawning for England and for mankind.

'The world's great age begins anew,  
The golden years return.'

And he had hailed with a profound exultation the opening acts