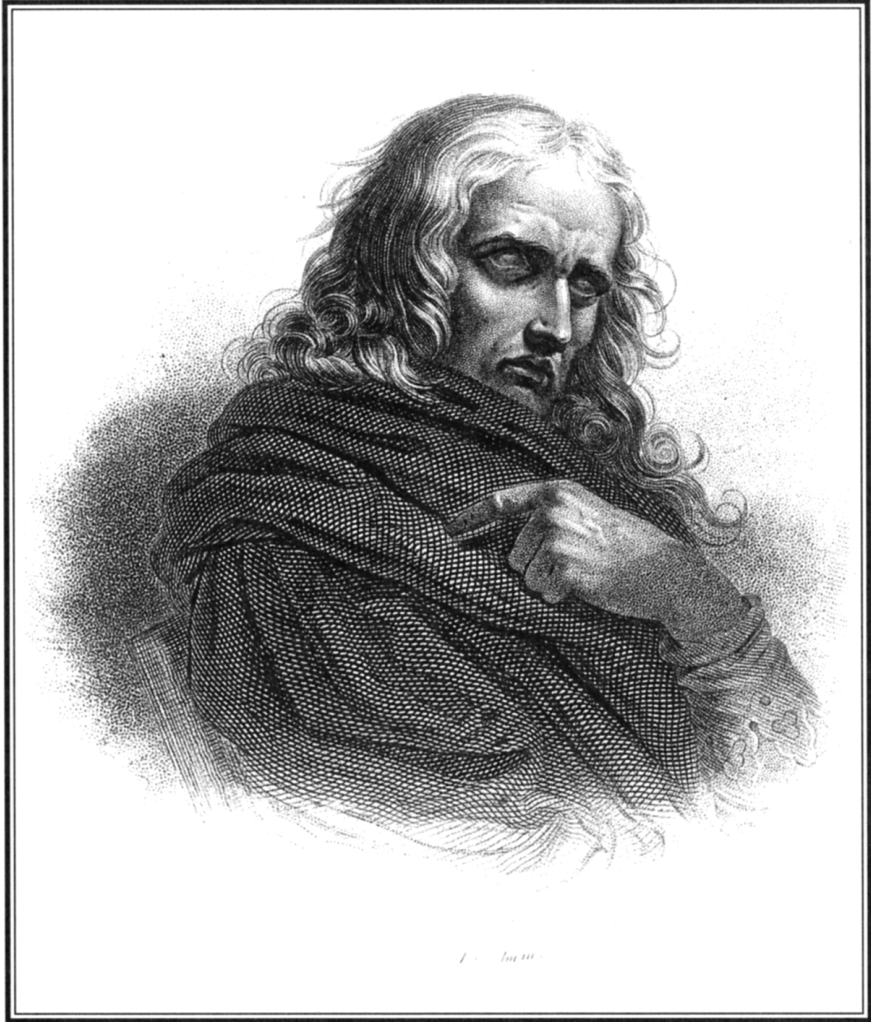


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*Areopagitica*  
AND OTHER  
Political Writings  
OF  
John Milton

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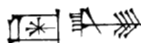


JOHN MILTON

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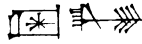
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JOHN MILTON  
FOREWORD BY JOHN ALVIS



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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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## FOREWORD: MILTON'S POLITICAL WRITINGS

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Throughout his career as poet, political theorist, and embattled publicist, John Milton pursued the one paramount project of discovering ground for his love of liberty in laws of nature and of nature's God. This effort required a delay of his plans for a national epic during a two-decade interval wherein Milton produced a series of prose works defending and seeking to affect the course of the Puritan revolution. Inspired by specific occasions, these writings were responses to antagonists within his party, preemptive strikes against Royalist partisans, or appeals to Parliament. Though Milton professed to deprecate these pamphlets as work of his "left hand," they develop a carefully articulated course of thought and reveal connections between principle and consequence on the order of acuity one looks for in works of more than partisan polemical intent and transitory significance.

Milton concerned himself with a diversity of issues: church government, divorce, freedom of thought, speech, and press, British constitutional history, church-state relations, the characters of regimes, the political implications of Christianity, the nature of representation in Parliament, the interdependence of civil and personal virtue, the progress of Reformation. Diversity of subject answers always, however, to the unifying theme of preparing individuals to understand and cultivate that coordination of freedoms and responsibilities that Milton identified in the phrase "Christian liberty"—that is, the freedom to work out one's salvation won for all mankind by the Savior's intercession, example, and express teachings.

We should not be surprised therefore to discover that religious and political issues are throughout the prose writings inseparably inter-

twined. Milton's life as religious controversialist parallels his changing affiliations in political controversy. The young man destined, as he thought, for the clergy, first made common cause with Anglicans against papist oppression. "Church-outed" by his refusal to subscribe to oaths of conformity, Milton subsequently joined the Presbyterians in their repudiation of the episcopal form of Protestantism, only to break with John Knox's sect when it became clear that the Presbyterians meant to establish another national church. During the Civil War, Milton initially found his party with the Independents, but eventually he ceased to hold communion with any sect and ended by constituting himself a church of one, professing the unique theology worked out in his posthumously published *The Christian Doctrine*.

Similarly, in politics Milton began by accepting a monarchy prescribed, he acknowledges, by British tradition, then transferred his allegiance to the parliamentary revolution while maintaining that his opposition to Charles I was a matter of resisting not monarchy but tyranny. Appealing to the right of the people to establish such government as they approve, Milton supported the Commonwealth and Oliver Cromwell but thereafter argued the right of a minority to act for the people against a return to royal government. He reposed his allegiance consecutively in the people, then in the Long Parliament, then in the Rump, then in Oliver Cromwell and his army, then, after Cromwell's death, in the restored Rump, then in the resealed full Parliament, and, at last, on the eve of the Restoration, in General Monk.

Against tyrant—as Milton judged Charles to be—and bishops Milton used the sword of a Presbyterian Parliament; against the Presbyters' usurpation of conscience he invoked a purged Parliament representing, he was aware, a minority. Against the Parliament remnant he appealed to the troops of a military dictator whom Milton considered a justifiable monarch. Against the return of king and bishops, Milton reverted to a lesser evil in his first weapon, a Presbyterian Parliament. Up through Cromwell's Protectorate Milton was bargaining for better terms, an ever-widening scope for the independent conscience. After Cromwell's death he sought to salvage the one indis-

pensable thing—a Protestant republic—by yielding on almost everything else: on tithing, on an established church, on a Parliament expanded to include his inveterate Presbyterian opponents. When he appealed to Monk in the letter that presented his eleventh-hour scheme for sustaining a republic, Milton was willing to impose liberty by force on a recalcitrant majority of the population. Presumably he did not know that General Monk was already compounding with Charles II for a Stuart restoration. At the end of his twenty years of pamphleteering, with most of his confederates dead or on the way to prison or execution, a Milton now blind and forced into hiding found himself without a church and without a party.

His enemies charged both blindness and isolation to a bad cause or inconsistency in a dubious one. The alternative lies in supposing that a prudent consistency of principle required Milton to change affiliations by adjusting to altered circumstances and by distancing himself from associates less firm in their adherence to the main point. That can be determined, if determined it can be, only by considering the force of the argument that recorded the transitions, the most substantial portions of which are represented in this collection of the political writings. Milton's career may be viewed as a continuing argument and self-examination, the chief stations of which the following synopsis will touch upon.

*Areopagitica* attests Milton's hopes for the reformers who would come to constitute the Long Parliament. The pamphlet is dedicated to that body, and its famous peroration on the nation's rousing from its long sleep under monks and prelates envisions all the good to be expected from continued reformation. Even under Tudor and Stuart monarchs censorship had been somewhat porous, and Milton himself had been able to publish half a dozen tracts without passing them before the eyes of a licenser. Parliament proposed no greater restrictions than authors had previously evaded. Nonetheless, Milton expects better from those who have stood out against Charles and his prelates.

Unlike his previously published divorce tracts (*Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in 1643, *The Judgement of Martin Bucer* in 1644) that had



subjected Milton to some notoriety, the argument for a free press provoked little response. An unconvinced Parliament went forward with its restraints upon what it deemed offensive publication. The interest of Milton's essay lies not in its effects—evidently it had none—but in its intrinsic merits of reasoning upon the scope and limits of political speech.

*The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (February 1648), arguing circumstantially from Charles's bad faith dealing with Cromwell's Parliament in the final months of the Civil War, attempts to convert, or at any rate to neutralize, a Presbyterian faction, which, after first opposing the Royalists, thereafter broke with an Independent-dominated House of Commons over the question of what to do with the defeated king. Against the Presbyterians-turned-Royalist Milton argues chiefly the pusillanimity of their having become thus belatedly squeamish after years of armed conflict during which they tried their best to kill Charles in combat. Why do they now pull back from an execution decreed after due judicial process? The more universal significance of the pamphlet derives from Milton's effort to discover theoretical grounds in reason and revelation for setting limits to the authority of monarchs and for punishing kings who overstep those boundaries.

Of the four works written to justify the parliamentary cause in the Civil War—*Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, *Eikonoklastes*, *A Defence of the English People*, and *The Second Defence*—the first *Defence* is the lengthiest and most circumstantial. Milton wrote in response to an indictment of the Independents published in late 1649 by the famed continental scholar Salmasius (Claude de Saumaise). Milton's opponent's Latin work had been titled *Defensio Regia* (*A Defence of the King*) and had been addressed to the Stuart heir, Charles II. Milton's reply, written upon commission of Parliament, appeared in February 1651 bearing the title *Joannis Miltoni Angli Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio contra Claudii Anonymi, alias Salmasii, Defensionem Destructivam*; Milton had it reprinted in 1658 with fairly extensive additions. The text presented in this collection is the later, expanded version referred to subsequently by one of its variant abbreviations *Def. I*.

A reader today will likely direct his interest toward the key ideas that associate *Def. 1* with Milton's other political writings. In line with *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton proposes in *Def. 1* that one distinguish between kings proper—who by their devotion to the common good deserve allegiance—and tyrants who, ruling for their own interest at the expense of their subjects, ought to be resisted and, if the means are available, deposed or even slain. Milton also invokes Aristotle's *Politics* as he had in *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* to make a further distinction based on the four kinds of kingship Aristotle says are subordinate to law and the one form, *pambasileia*, which acknowledges no restraint upon the will of the monarch (p. 132). However, there may be a difference from *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* in the emphasis Milton now gives to church-state relations in *Def. 1*. Quite clearly he makes in the latter a large assertion regarding the source of a tyranny unique to Christendom. This new form of tyranny unanticipated by Aristotle and Cicero perverts Gospel liberty because, from Milton's point of view, secular authority may not justly employ civil coercion to produce doctrinal uniformity in religion. It is within this conception of a Christian liberty necessary for determining from scripture alone what to believe and thereupon freely living pursuant to such beliefs that Milton equates tyranny with the ruler's attempt to enforce orthodoxy of doctrine and uniformity of church discipline and liturgy.

The *Second Defence of the People of England* seeks, as had *Def. 1*, to reply to the partisans of Charles by upholding the right of Parliament to war against Charles and to execute the defeated enemy. This time, however, Milton found himself obliged in view of personal attacks launched by an anonymous author to vindicate not only his cause but also his own character and role in the revolution. Consequently, large portions of the work are personal apologia accompanied with vivid, if not always edifying, counter invective directed against the man Milton supposed to have been the author of *The Cry of the Royal Blood to Heaven Against the English Parricides*.

The other subject of the *Second Defence* is Oliver Cromwell. Milton

considers himself called upon to rescue Cromwell from the aspersions cast his way in *The Cry*, but he may also have been impelled by his own awareness that the deeds of the Lord Protector posed a serious problem for such a thinker as Milton prided himself upon being—one for whom consistency of principle was the touchstone guaranteeing self-respect and courage. The difficulty existed because championing Cromwell required speaking on behalf of a powerful figure who in turning out a parliament and ruling through the army seemed to have gathered in his hands fully as much power as Charles, or rather more. Without the title of king, was not Cromwell subject to the same onus against arbitrary power as Charles Stuart?

Cromwell can best keep his claim to the honors due the “*pater patriae*” if, but only if, he can reverse his present inclination to side with that Presbyterian faction bent upon substituting their own version of a state-sponsored clergy for the bishops they have displaced. Milton enjoins Cromwell to “leave the church to itself,” by which he means to require of Cromwell a positive effort in the direction of disestablishment of religion, entailing the abolition of laws taxing Englishmen for support of clergymen. Milton makes the principle as plain as he can state it: “I could wish that you should take away all power from the church” (p. 406).

Generally speaking, Cromwell must preside over a government that governs less. Milton would have him institute fewer new laws than he abrogates old ones: “laws have been provided only to restrain malignity; to form and increase virtue, the most excellent thing is liberty” (p. 407). Finally, the failed advocate of removing prior restraints upon publications renews his plea for “freedom of inquiry” (p. 407). Cromwell will forfeit his greatness if he should favor the repressive element of his party over the libertarian.

The more radical contractarian feature of the doctrine first argued in *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* still obtains: Cromwell’s tenure as chief magistrate rests, as had Charles Stuart’s tenure of his kingship, upon Cromwell’s observance of that natural, if implicit, understanding between rulers and ruled, which lays it down that the ruler forfeits his

authority once he begins to govern with a view to self-interest at the expense of the common good of the people. The common good Milton tends to view under the aspect of liberty, and liberty he tends to view, at least in the period from 1640 to 1660, in terms of a salutary but not an inevitable progression from what he terms private to what he terms “civil” freedom. On the political front that progress moves from ecclesiastical liberation (congregational replacing hierarchical organization) to republican government dominated by an aristocracy of Protestant leaders who act in the name of the people even if they cannot count on popular approval. This progress from one recovered liberty to the next constitutes the historic drama; in order to take a part in that drama Milton chose to put aside for a time his poetic ambitions.

One may gather further indications of Milton’s reservations regarding Commonwealth achievements and his recognition of notable limitations of Puritan policy from the characterization of the revolution Parliament inserted as a digression into his *History of Britain* (included in the present volume as *Mr. John Miltons Character of the Long Parliament*). These observations were written most probably sometime in 1648 after Milton had had time to assess the illiberal turn given the revolution by Presbyterian ambitions toward establishmentarianism, by Parliament’s continuation of the Royalists’ restraints upon free speech, and by various repressive measures deemed necessary by the victorious Roundheads that bore down hard on the liberties of local communities and individuals within them. Milton seems to have considered his own personal financial reverses—suffered largely because his wife’s family were loyalists—to have been a parcel of the victor’s reliance on oppressive, if not downright vindictive, administration of their newly acquired offices. Still, by far the graver offense in Milton’s eyes was his party’s violation of that particular liberty won by Christ’s blood and the birthright *de jure*, though under neither kings nor Parliament *de facto*, of every Christian soul. The Puritan cohort had tainted their good cause, Milton maintained, by selling Christian liberty for such emoluments as hireling ministers could snatch from their

Anglican predecessors while committee men for their own gain practiced a similar debauchery upon civil freedom. In the *Character* Milton comes near stating outright the revolution has failed, and he does state clearly enough that his fellow partisans squandered the best chances of England for that full liberty that he had envisioned as his country's reward for assuming world leadership in reform.

*The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* holds interest for us as a record of Milton's final thoughts on the constitutional crisis that had absorbed his energies for two decades and now seemed to threaten his position, certainly, his life not improbably. The treatise has besides an importance out of all proportion to its brevity because it reveals the positive side of an argument Milton had hitherto conducted chiefly from the negative. Here he not only recasts the liabilities of monarchy but also itemizes the advantages of a practical and immediate republican remedy. The impending Parliament must seat members predominately "well-affected," meaning: opposed to monarchy, resolved against any reinstatement of a House of Lords, and sympathetic to the Good Old Cause. This urgent expedient merely gives force to the purpose of fashioning a polity adapted to advancing religious reformation as a confirmed way of life for the British people. That purpose in turn creates the genetic code that will find articulation in every feature of the new body politic.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Milton's proposal lies in its scheme for transforming England into a federation of semi-independent counties, "every county . . . made a kind of subordinate commonwealth." He urges a compound government on the supposition that national concerns diverge from local. The national legislative body would confine itself to matters of foreign policy, war, and "rais[ing] and manag[ing] the public revenue" (p. 427). The counties would send representatives to the national legislature and keep in their own hands the administration of civil law, elections of magistrates, and education. Milton seeks to remove some of the odium toward Parliament that had been aroused in the smaller towns and the countryside by Cromwell's "committees" (p. 432). But there are also

sufficient reasons of principle for the idea of decentralizing. Milton thinks a citizenry's exercise of its freedoms instills love of independence as well as energy and competency in the conduct of public business. From such a vantage a large, centralized government—even if it be the arm of a commonwealth—appears halfway to the despotism and sloth of a centralized monarchy. Milton acknowledges that the great failing of his party was its inability to put England on a course tending toward decentralization during, or at least after, the Civil War (p. 426). He takes confidence, however, from the example of the Dutch states, which have shown how even an excess of decentralization (individual states may nullify without limit) has produced vigorous industry and resolute Protestantism.

Milton would thus erect his commonwealth on the foundation of a new aristocracy determined by election rather than birth or royal patent. The electorate, one observes, has already been winnowed of the “disaffected,” leaving the reins of political power in the hands of men antimonarchical, antiprelatical, and pro-Reformation. Now, at the moment when he perceives England in such peril that he risks nothing further by plain speaking, Milton in this his most openly revolutionary work deals explicitly with a matter that may be discerned in earlier writings by investigation but that never before had been so manifest. Milton's political thinking veers toward democratic or seemingly democratic principles of contract when his object is to contest the prerogatives of monarchs. Yet when it comes to envisioning the terms of an actual workable model of a republic, Milton's distrust of the capacities of the populace comes to make itself felt. He devises institutions that in some sort consult the people so as to be able to claim the sanctions of general consent. At the same time, however, Milton conceives the necessity of so distancing the legislature from the general populace as to insulate policy-making from popular clamors. Accordingly, in the present model he proposes to moderate the democratic feature of nationwide elections with the aristocratic device of a pyramidal electoral scheme. He devises a combination of successively narrowing suffrages with successively refined rosters of candi-

## Foreword

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dates. Obviously Milton desires to see an aristocracy arising from a popular base so as to combine the advantages of consent-grounded authority with the less universally distributed virtues of intelligence, stability, and deliberative ability, not to say, dedication to Protestant reform. Milton's aim in this final effort is the same as that which underlines both *Defences*, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, *Areopagitica*, and *Of Education* as well as the antiprelatical arguments and even the divorce tracts: to seek in a select minority of Protestant anti-Royalists the seedground for a commonwealth devoted to recovery of the civil liberty produced by ancient republics combined with that inner, private liberty to be had only by adding to classical republicanism the purifying zeal of a Christianity intent on perpetual reform.

JOHN ALVIS

## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

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For the texts of *Areopagitica*, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, the *First and Second Defence*, *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, and *Mr. John Milton's Character of the Long Parliament*, I have worked from the Columbia University Press edition of *The Works of John Milton*, 18 vols., ed. Frank Allen Patterson *et al.* (New York, 1931–38). The most definitive edition of the prose is the Yale *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols. (New Haven, 1966), under the general editorship of Don M. Wolfe.

Consistent with the editorial aims established by Liberty Fund, which have in view the needs of the general reader, the annotations have been compiled for the sake of providing only so much information as seems indispensable for making Milton's thought accessible to a nonspecialist, twentieth-century audience. For this purpose I have drawn upon, and in most instances distilled, the more copious annotations to be found in such sources as *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957); *John Milton: Political Writings*, ed. Martin Dzelzainis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and the Yale *Complete Prose Works*. The latter two editions are especially exhaustive in their treatment of allusions obscure or subject to scholarly controversy and should be consulted by readers who require a sense of the present state of the scholarship.





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*Areopagitica*  
AND OTHER  
Political Writings  
OF  
John Milton

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## AREOPAGITICA

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*By a decree of Charles's Star Chamber July 11, 1637, the licensing of all printed works was deputed to the two archbishops, the chancellors of Oxford and Cambridge, and the Bishop of London, thereby insuring that control would ultimately fall to Archbishop Laud. Although Milton expected prior censorship to be relaxed under the revolutionary regime, on June 14, 1643, Parliament passed an ordinance providing for licensing the press. Milton composed Areopagitica as an appeal to Parliament to reconsider its recent decision, arguing that England now deserved a press freed from most of the restraints that the king had imposed. Milton published his pamphlet in 1644 under a title intended to recall the usages of ancient Greece. The Areopagus was a court and senate of oldest Athens composed of about three hundred members elected by the entire body of free Athenian citizens. Its name derives from the site of assembly, a hill within the city dedicated to the god Ares. Although Milton writes the appeal in the form of a public address to the legislative body in the manner of the Greek orator Isocrates, he never intended that it be delivered as an actual speech before Parliament. The argument failed of its practical purpose—Parliament continued to impose constraints of prior licensing upon authors.*

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# AREOPAGITICA

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A Speech of Mr. John Milton  
for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing,  
to the Parliament of England

*This is true liberty, when free-born men,  
Having to advise the public, may speak free,  
Which he who can, and will deserves high praise;  
Who neither can, nor will, may hold his peace:  
What can be juster in a state than this?*

EURIPID. HICETID.

## FOR THE LIBERTY OF UNLICENC'D PRINTING.

**T**hey who to States and Governours of the Commonwealth direct their Speech, High Court of Parliament, or wanting such accesse in a private condition, write that which they foresee may advance the publick good; I suppose them as at the beginning of no meane endeavour, not a little alter'd and mov'd inwardly in their mindes: Some with doubt of what will be the successe, others with feare of what will be the censure; some with hope, others with confidence of what they have to speake.<sup>1</sup> And me perhaps each of these dispositions, as the subject was whereon I enter'd, may have at other times variously affected; and likely might in these formost expressions now also disclose which of them sway'd most, but that the very attempt of this addresse thus made, and the thought of whom it hath recourse to, hath got the power within me to a passion, farre more welcome then incidentall to a Preface. Which though I stay not to

1. Milton places himself in the position of a speaker who benefits from the state of liberty praised by Euripides in the passage from *Suppliants*, which Milton takes as his epigraph for *Areopagitica*.