

The Truth in Areopagitica

John Milton's speech, "Areopagitica," on the surface level opposed licensing and censorship. The Licensing Order of 1643 was Parliament's threat to institute censorship on books prior to being publicized. This Act meant that the Parliament had to approve any and all books before they were allowed to be printed and published. Many readers believe Milton wrote "Areopagitica" to combat this threat the following year. Milton's speech has been thought of by many as simply a commentary on freedom. However, Stanley Fish believes there is more to Milton's argument as Fish writes in his essay, *Re-membering Milton*. Fish points out that Milton's "Areopagitica" has "almost always been read as a classic liberal plea for 'complete liberty'" (Fish 234). However, Milton never explicitly says that he opposes censorship. Milton's issue with this Act is that he disagrees with a law being passed that does not allow books to be judged before they are censored by Parliament. Fish argues that there is more to Milton's speech than simply freedom of speech. Fish argues in his essay that Milton's speech opposes against intellectual idolatry, which is evident in the complicated and hard to follow text of the "Areopagitica," and the speech is "*unMiltonic*" (Fish 236). Stanley Fish's essay argues that Milton's speech is not simply on freedom of speech and publication, but on a more complex opposition against intellectual idolatry.

Milton tricks his reader into idolizing books, showing his reader that with intellectual idolatry comes lack of faith and truth. He tells his reader the history of intellectual idolatry—specifically speaking on the Spanish Inquisition. The Spanish Inquisition was started in order for the Catholic Church to punish heresy, forcing their religion onto others. "Nor did they stay in matters heretical, but any subject that was not to their palate they either condemned in a prohibition, or had it straight into the new purgatory of an Index" (Milton 724). Milton and the

Parliament do not agree with Catholic beliefs and Milton is telling the Parliament that with this censorship, they are started to follow the footsteps of the Catholics with their idolatrous ways.

“Areopagitica” is composed in complicated wording and is hard to read for a purpose. Milton meanders through his argument, which Fish argues that it is with intention. The argument and thesis of Milton’s speech is difficult to locate; however Fish finds this pace to be deliberate. “The result is, of course, disorienting, but it is also (or so Milton's claim would be) salutary, for in the process of being disoriented the reader is provoked to just the kind of labor and exercise that is necessary to the constitution of his or her own virtue” (Fish 243). Fish is arguing that Milton is showing readers how easy it is for readers to be lead in the wrong direction of a text, especially when read through once. Milton is showing that through misleading text, the reader can determine the argument as something the writer had not intended. Within the context, Milton is showing how Parliament can read through text and determine that it should be censored without knowing the true purpose or argument of a book or text. Without the meandering, complicated pace of Milton’s speech, his true argument would be lost.

Milton speaks on the relationship between faith and reason, maintaining that the two work together in order to create virtue. According to Milton, if someone has faith with no reason, or reason with no faith, they will not lead a virtuous life. Rather than faith and reason working separately, they need to work together in one’s life. In his speech “Areopagitica,” Milton states, “But I am certain that a state governed by the rules of justice and fortitude, or a church built and founded upon the rock of faith and true knowledge, cannot be so pusillanimous” (Milton 739). Milton is claiming that faith and reason, or “true knowledge” need to be used together in Parliament, and in general, to maintain a virtuous life and not be “pusillanimous” or cowardly.

Milton argues that the only way to find the truth is when you face God. Modern people are conflicted on the idea of truth, especially with so many people having the freedom to believe what they want to believe. I, myself, am not sure whether or not the truth is hidden in faith or not; however, I think the argument between faith and truth is complicated enough to just believe in knowledge and learning as much as I can to find my own truth.

Works Cited

Fish, Stanley. "Driving from the Letter: Truth and Indeterminacy in Milton's *Areopagitica*."

Re-membering Milton, 1998, edited by Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson.

Milton, John. "Areopagitica." *The Complete Poems and Major Prose*, edited by Marriet Y.

Hughes, 1957, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2003