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The Ideas of Milton's *Areopagitica* in Contemporary Society

Milton fought against editors who sought to change his work and the work of others before it was published. The ideas conveyed in the *Areopagitica* are reflected in contemporary copyright laws and the concept of self-publishing. Specifically, the idea of self-publishing would have appealed to Milton so he could publish his works without constraint. Although he advocated for the people to write despite certain risks, such as censorship, Milton sought to inspire people to change the way society thought, not to display their sometimes ill opinions. The contemporary mediums of social media allow people to post these opinions without restraint, but the risk remains as nothing is private once it is on the internet.

During Milton's time period, editors could change the author's work as they sought fit before it was published. He felt that, "The sense of that great man shall to all posterity be lost for the fearfulness or the presumptuous rashness of a perfunctory licenser" (Milton 361). Milton advocates for the protections of an author's works from the relentless eyes of the greedy or cowardly editor who would change a man's work if they saw it necessary. What drove the editors to do this was competition between publishing houses; they did what they had to do for the sake of profit, not for the sake of the author. This idea of protection of an author's work, whether they are dead or alive, transcends time and takes form in the existence of modern day copyright laws. According to the 17 U.S. Code § 106 Exclusive Rights in copyrighted works, "the owner of copyright under this title has the exclusive rights to do and to authorize any of the

following: (1) to reproduce the copyrighted work in copies or phonorecords; (2) to prepare derivative works based upon the copyrighted work; (3) to distribute copies or phonorecords of the copyrighted work to the public by sale or other transfer of ownership, or by rental, lease, or lending,” (U.S. Copyright Office). These provisions protect the authors work by giving the author power to permit specific actions pertaining to their works. If these actions are committed without the author’s consent, legal action can be pursued. Milton desired laws of this nature to protect not only his work from being tarnished, but other’s as well. He wanted to stand up for the rights to his works rather than allowing an editor to have their way with it. Therefore, this allows writers to take risks by writing what they felt was right without having their work censored or removed.

As mentioned before, Milton’s major complaint with editors and publishing houses in the *Areopagitica* was, “But that a book, in worse condition than a peccant soul, should be to stand before a jury ere it be born to the world,” (Milton 346). While Milton never specifically spoke for the idea to self-publish, he was conveying was that an editor should not have the right to decide whether a book gets published or not based on their opinion. With self-publishing, Milton could have published *Paradise Lost* without fear of it being tampered with. It allows the author to independently put their work into the world with fewer obstacles rather than having to go through the grueling process of getting it accepted by a company. Writers get to reap the benefits of “greater profits and better control of their works,” (Starr). Without having to rely on publishers and big named companies, ideas can flow freely into the world. The only approval or disapproval they would receive is from those who choose to read the work itself. It allows writers to take risks that companies would not allow. An example of a successful self-published work is the novel *Still Alice* by Lisa Genova. In an interview with iUniverse, Genova said,

“Before I published with iUniverse, I tried going the traditional route. I spent a year querying literary agents. But no one wanted my book,” (Genova). Just as Milton had suggested, the book “[stood] before a jury ere it be born to the world,” (Milton 346). Genova took a risk with her writing, and thanks to the existence of self-publishing, she was able to put her work into the world after facing many obstacles. This displays Milton’s idea that works can be written and published without a hassle and still have the content protected legally. Milton sought for people to have the right to publish works in hopes to change the way people thought.

In the *Areopagitica*, Milton declared that all works should be published without being scrutinized or denied because of the content. This is described when he says, “As therefore the state of man now is, what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil?” (Milton 350). This quote shows that one must have an understanding of good and evil to be able to discern between what to say and what not to say. While this work largely supports the idea of freedom of speech, needlessly speaking your mind is not what Milton was trying to convey. Social media acts as platform of self-publishing in the sense that people can post whatever they want without or with very few obstacles. It’s common for people to think that they can say whatever they want without thinking of the consequences of their actions in regards to social media. Milton was expressing that works and ideas should be published with the intent to change the way society thought. While there are risks involved in this, there are many more risks when an opinion is released into the world unchecked. An example that opposes what Milton was speaking of is a recent case where a woman posted comments about Michelle Obama on her Facebook page. Forsyth County News reports, “Jane Wood Allen, a parapro at Chestatee Elementary School, shared articles on Facebook about First Lady Michelle Obama with comments that used derogatory words like “gorilla” and other posts that contained anti-Hispanic

and anti-Muslim remarks, according to screen-captured posts,” (Robins). The woman was later released from her job because of her remarks. This exhibits the risks of posting personal thoughts online without a regard for the consequences. Some would argue that this is censorship, but she was not forced to take the posts down, she simply removed her page herself as it later states in the article. She had the right to make the post, but the content of it had no beneficial purpose. Milton expressed that works and thoughts should have a benefit to society when he said, “Bad meats will scarce breed good nourishment in the healthiest concoction,” (Milton 349). This shows that Milton believed that works full of negativity could not change society or at the very minimum have a positive outcome. The same principle can be applied to this woman’s Facebook post; nothing good could have come from that post, and it ended up bringing negativity and scrutiny into her life. Writing for the wrong risks, such as picking fun at or degrading others, will not be beneficial to society.

Milton felt that if society wanted to change, it needed to be able to move forward without powerful groups, such as the government, restricting the ideas that they did not agree with. In the *Areopagitica* Milton says, “last, that it will be primely to the discouragement of all learning, and the stop of truth, not only by disexercising and blunting our abilities in what we know already, but by hindering and cropping the discovery that might be yet further made both in religious and civil wisdom,” (Milton 340). This states that authors should be able to publish their works without fear of backlash or disapproval. This shows the importance of communicating all ideas because of the benefits they could have on society, or as Milton put it, “discovery that might be yet further made both in religious and civil wisdom,” (Milton 340). Milton suggested that certain works can have a positive impact on society should be published without needing approval. A contemporary example of an impactful work is the novel *1984* by George Orwell. The novel

depicts a futuristic, government controlled society that eliminates the freedom of speech and even the freedom of thought. Although the ideas were radical at the time, they've had a major impact on society as time has gone by. A user on the website The Literature Network says, "Many of the frightening warnings in *1984* are becoming increasingly relevant as time rolls on, with constant surveillance and the new purpose of war being two of them... It opens up our eyes to our country's possible future, and I think most people would agree that we don't want to end up like Oceania," (cheergurl01). By presenting the lack of freedom, it inspires people to prevent this situation from happening to protect their rights. The risk of pointing out the direction that society is heading could be received or ignored depending on the person. No matter the choice that someone makes in regards to the work, it supports Milton's idea of writing with a purpose. This work would be considered "civil wisdom" in the eyes of Milton and serves to benefit society.

The risk of censorship becomes an issue when one wants to write about the government. Milton felt that the free circulation of ideas was necessary if society wanted to better itself. In the *Areopagitica* he specifically says, "For is we be so jealous over [the common people] as that we dare not trust them with an English pamphlet, what do we but censure them for giddy, vicious, and ungrounded people, in such a sick and weak state of faith and discretion as to be able to take nothing down but through the pipe of a licenser?" (Milton 362). While the ideas of copyright and self-publishing would protect and project the work into the world, what would protect the author from the groups the works scrutinized? This question is especially important when the work itself may not even be a written work. A contemporary example is the constant leaks of private emails and other government documents from the website WikiLeaks. While it is not necessarily a written work like Milton specified, the ideas that he spoke for can be directly applied to the

concept of WikiLeaks. People who want to have access to these documents believe the government should be transparent, and Milton would have advocated for this. The quote from the *Areopagitica* supports this claim, “we dare not trust them with an English pamphlet,” (Milton 362). This criticizes the publishers, or in a contemporary light the government, for keeping the public in the dark regarding certain issues. These documents are beneficial because they can uncover dark secrets and can have a direct effect on society’s perceptions. The Washington Post made it clear that, “The First Amendment offers the same protection to the media as to the rest of us, including when it comes to possessing or distributing illegally obtained material (so long as you weren’t involved in the original illegal hack or interception or leak),” (Volokh). So while it’s technically illegal to steal the documents, once they are uploaded to the internet anyone can view them without being in fear of their government. Not only do people get to view these thought provoking documents freely, but they do not have to be fearful of backlash. This allows society to better itself by creating their own opinions about what needs to be done instead of leaving it in the hands of the politicians. Censorship does not stop a society from moving forward as long as people are willing to take risks to uncover the hidden truths.

In contemporary society, Milton would be fond and proud of copyright laws and the concept of self-publishing. They would have protected his works and allowed him to avoid having to deal with greedy editors. With these concepts, an author can write without fear of government backlash or censorship. Mediums like Facebook allow people to self-publish without restrictions, but it is up to them to decide whether what they post will be beneficial or impactful. Milton wanted society to have the freedom of thought and to have those thoughts reach all ends of the earth without restrictions or obstacles. No matter the risks, an author should fight for their right to encourage the mind to think differently.

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