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ENGL 383
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11-27-13

A Message to Today: Why Milton Matters in Relation to the Edward Snowden Leaks

John Milton was very politically active, both when he was a private citizen and when he worked for the Commonwealth. He wrote his *Areopagitica* when he was a private citizen, speaking out against censorship in the name of both religion and secularism. In modern times, figures such as Edward Snowden have spoken out against government censorship. In the case of the American government, Edward Snowden, a former NSA employee, leaked information to the public about domestic surveillance and information collection and its usage against the American people. Some call him a traitor, others a whistleblower. People like Snowden have made it their mission to make sure that this information gets out to everyone, believing it's the public's duty to decide the truthfulness and significance of that information.

With all of the debate about the public's right to uncensored information when it comes to government documents, Milton's *Areopagitica* causes readers to rethink the boundaries between individual and corporation censorship in regards to the freedom of the press. There are things that people choose not to say but may think, and individuals have the right to withhold those thoughts. However, on a corporation level, the entity is dealing with large amounts of information that effect many people, and it becomes important for them to be clear about their aims and goals. With that in mind, the arguments in *Areopagitica* that are meant to function on the level of the individual may be taken to account for the level of the corporation as well, political or otherwise. While many scholars have argued that one cannot look at *Areopagitica* as a wholly political document, but as a mainly religious one, Milton's ideal government was a Christian commonwealth, and so it follows that he would intermingle religion and politics. His

arguments in the name of religion can be taken to have secular influence as well and make a comparison of Milton's works to Snowden possible.

For the purposes of this paper, I find it important to define both censorship and surveillance and to expand the definition of censorship to include surveillance and withholding information. The dictionary definition of censorship is "the practice of officially examining books, movies, etc., and suppressing unacceptable parts." Since this paper is dealing with government, and in America the government is responsible to the people, the American government is then responsible to deliver to the people accurate and full information so government can function in its intended form. I am thus expanding the definition of censorship to include a government withholding information about policies and regulations regarding its citizens. By extension, surveillance, which has the dictionary definition of "close watch kept over someone or something," is the ultimate form of censorship when done domestically by preparing to suppress ideas and information before they are even expressed to the public in the name of stopping terrorism.

Both in Milton's time and in our own, both issues of censorship raise the question, is there any time that information can and should be censored for the good of a nation, or do the rights of the individual to the uncensored, free flow of information take precedence? A look into Milton's work during and after writing *Areopagitica* ultimately affirms that in order for the people to be fully informed about decisions, especially regarding government, the world needs people like Snowden to help the public break free of government corruption and censorship.

In 1644, at the height of the English Civil War, Milton published his *Areopagitica*. With all the stress of war, the last thing Parliament wanted was for the royalists to publish their ideas. According to Thomas N. Corns, there were two primary ways that Parliament could go about suppressing texts in two primary ways: one, "wait until a book was published, prosecute its

author, printer, and bookseller, and call in the books and have it destroyed,” or two, “insist that no book be printed until its manuscript had first been examined by an appointed officer and passed as fit for publication” (55). In seventeenth century England, they favored the second option. And authors who bypassed this process, if caught, could be sorely punished. Indeed, the publisher of *Areopagitica* left off its printer’s mark so as to escape penalty for printing an unlicensed work. It shows how seriously Parliament took its licensing laws that they were scared to have their name on it.

Yet the severity of punishment and the fear of it also shows how strongly Milton believed in what he was asking for and defending: the freedom of the press. He believed in it so strongly he put his name on it. In order to let the people believe in the authenticity of his argument, he couldn’t publish the work anonymously; it had to have a name to go with it. Otherwise, it had no chance of being taken seriously. But why would he worry about people disagreeing with what he said? To the modern reader, the ideas presented in *Areopagitica* may not seem that radical, that they fall short of the liberal ideal we have today. But Milton was in a country at war; asking for complete tolerance would be advocating for the opposing side to tell their story, which mustn’t be allowed to happen. But according to Corns, that’s exactly what makes *Areopagitica* so dangerous. “The problem with *Areopagitica*,” he states, “is not that it limits toleration but that it bases some of its case on a cluster of arguments that point to complete toleration” (58).

Take, for instance, his argument in *Areopagitica* that you can’t get rid of all the sinful material that circulates. He tells Parliament, “They are not skillful considerers of human things who imagine to remove sin by removing the matter of sin.” The government can’t get rid of everything that suggests sin, and people come in contact with false material every day and are able to discern the good from the evil, so Milton doesn’t see the point in trying to regulate it; if government stops regulating then people won’t miss out on the virtue intermingled with the evil.

He spends a great deal of time with examples in order to make two very important statements, statements that have been quoted in many a speech for advocating freedom of the press: "Give me liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties" and "Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?"

Using these two quotes as a basis for discussion, I will now demonstrate the radical nature of these statements in their suggestion of complete toleration by comparing them to a modern case of freedom of information and truth: Edward Snowden and the NSA document leaks. I will proceed to give a short account of Snowden's actions and then compare and examine them using Milton's principles of the freedom of the press and if that has limitations in the name of national security.

Edward Snowden acquired a job at the National Security Agency after leaving college and was living comfortably in Hawaii earning \$200,000 a year. Yet as he started coming across disturbing information about NSA surveillance and how it enabled the government to prosecute people for actions it considered illegal and use an entire lifetime of data to make its case, he started copying documents to go over, and he decided the public needed to know that the government was impeding on their rights. He fled to Hong Kong to give the information to *The Guardian*, a British newspaper that handled all the Snowden documents until the government ordered them to destroy the documents and could now face criminal charges for distributing the information (Barrett).

Under the First Amendment and the laws put in place to protect whistleblowers, Snowden should have been safe from government action. Shouldn't he be free to disclose important information to the American public to expose tyrannous acts committed by their government, especially when the information being withheld deals directly with basic rights

supposedly guaranteed to America's citizens—namely the rights to privacy, free speech, and the right to against unreasonable search and seizures?

What Snowden is arguably dealing with is a new form of censorship, censorship that benefits the government in the name of national security. Yet knowing this makes freedom to that withheld knowledge even more important. Milton understood that it was a risk to let the public have full access to information, but he still held the right to the “liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” This asking for the freedom to argue and discuss information and ideas in Milton's day and in ours can be looked at as a way to subvert government and security. Charles R. Geisst in discussing Milton's political thought, says that Milton believed in “reliance upon personal judgment and virtue” despite the fact that these “were scanty ideals in any political context” because he believed that “individual action was the precursor of political action” (34). Milton never believed that systems and institutions could be trusted to correctly judge and determine virtue. “To him,” says Geisst, “the man possessing virtuous knowledge would have no need for such a set of impossible procedural rules, or any confining rules for that matter” (62). The point here is that according to Milton's political thought, the individual had a civic duty to act when he saw something wrong. The individual was bound to impart information to the people so they could judge whether it be of any relevance to them. Of course, this implies that the individual should closely examine that information or those ideas and be sure that releasing them is the right thing to do. Milton spent considerable time constructing his arguments against censorship before publishing them. But what about Snowden?

In an interview with Glenn Greenwald, Snowden gave the following reason for deciding to release 200,000 NSA documents:

“I think that the public is owed an explanation of the motivations behind the people who make

these disclosures that are outside of the democratic model. When you are subverting the power of government, that's a fundamentally dangerous thing to democracy. And if you do that in secret consistently as the government does . . . it'll kind of give its officials a mandate to go . . . tell the press about this thing and that thing so the public is on our side. But they rarely, if ever, do that when an abuse occurs. That falls to individual citizens. I'm no different from anybody else, I don't have special skills; I'm just another guy who . . . watches what's happening and goes, this is something that's not our place to decide, the public needs to decide . . . and I'm willing to go on the record to defend the authenticity of them and say . . . I didn't modify the story."

Snowden's reasoning and motivations line up well with Milton's thoughts during his day. Milton's argument that ideas should be freely expressed applies in the Snowden case precisely because the point of releasing the information was to effect social change. But what about national security? That was also just as important in Milton's day as it was in ours. Weren't secrecy laws and licensing acts put in place for our own protection? The name of government protection is precisely what makes Milton's next statement I will examine so controversial: it implies that if truth always wins against falsehood, then the only reason for government to want any form of censorship is to protect the government from accountability and justice for tyrannous actions, something that caused the civil war that the English were fighting and something that caused America to fight a revolution in order to protect what they saw were their inalienable rights.

According to Nigel Smith, even after *Areopagitica*, when Milton worked for the government in the 1650s, the people had come to recognize the power in republicanism. John Streater, a soldier and printer who was against Oliver Cromwell, seems to carry on Milton's ideas of freedom of the press. Smith says that Streater's argument for republicanism stated, "There should be, and there will be, a complete freedom from censorship, as well as the right to

free speech and public assembly” (141). While Milton worked for the government as a censor himself, as far as we can tell he never renounced his ideas about freedom of the press, and indeed it is risky to say that in the later years he withdrew from the government because of its militaristic aims. It is more likely that he was trying to work within the system to instigate change, although the lack of documentation doesn’t allow us any certainty. The militaristic government of the English Civil War during that time is not known for unbiased transmission of information, and it could be that is precisely why Milton is missing in action for so many years in government record beyond his position. But according to Robert Thomas Fallon, the time Milton spent in government service “had a strong influence on the shaping of his political thought” (211), and that for Milton, “liberty of conscience lay at the heart of life itself, indeed eternal life” (212). That liberty is tantamount when deciding upon freedom of the press. Can society have a free conscience if they aren’t allowed to do what they see as right, just, and moral?

Just as a licensing act in Milton’s day impeded the populace from receiving full information, the lack of transparency in government and the restrictions, threats, and actions the government takes against the press to keep that information hidden disables the people from making informed decisions about their government and its policies. Where in Milton’s day a work had to be reviewed before it could be published, in our day the NSA is drag netting all the information about you before you even do something they find suspicious. In this new information age, we are seeing a new form of censorship: a hybrid between pre– and post-censorship tactics. Milton was in favor of the latter, not the former form of censorship. While Milton would be okay with post censorship, it is arguable that he would be uncomfortable with a system such as the NSA has created, which enables the government to use everything you’ve ever done, published or not, against you in a court of law if they find your actions suspicious. The actions the NSA is taking are well into the process of creating a surveillance state, and that in itself is one of the

highest forms of censorship, a form of censorship that Milton's argument about truth strives to tear apart.

When Milton stated, "Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?", he was essentially stating that Parliament shouldn't have to worry about Catholic and royalist propaganda because it would always fall to the truth. Even though he isn't outright saying that Catholic viewpoints shouldn't be suppressed, the statement begs for that open interpretation. This is why Professor John Rogers of Yale strikingly described Milton's political career in half a sentence: he said that Milton's "name is cited as one of those figures most dangerous to the State" (Yale). Why was he dangerous? He was dangerous because he wanted a society that allowed people to think for themselves, to decide what was right and what was wrong in order to create a better State. These same ideas are what make Snowden such a dangerous figure in the eyes of the American government. While Snowden claims that he isn't against the government and that he is acting from his conscience, the American government calls him a traitor and is using every intelligence agency to try and bring him to face criminal charges. But the peoples of the world see things differently than the government, which is among the reasons why so many countries have offered Snowden asylum for exposing the worldwide scale that the NSA surveillance had reached (although Russia's granting Snowden asylum could be seen for other political reasons).

This is where the stories diverge somewhat. Much as Milton feared not only government action but also government inaction regarding censorship, Snowden's main fear about the information he released wasn't that he would face government action, but that he would see complete inaction. "The greatest fear that I have regarding the outcome of America, of these disclosures, is that nothing will change," he said to Greenwald. In the case of Milton, the strictness of the licensing act actually increased, his argument in *Areopagitica* backfiring. Milton

was further labeled as a dangerous radical for his ideas. In the case of Snowden, governments around the world were outraged at the international spying and members of Congress are currently taking action to stop the NSA's collection of phone calls on a domestic level (Dinan). While this hasn't stopped the government from seeking to persecute Snowden, it has made individuals in America on both a personal and a governmental level seek to enact changes to make a more just government system.

The success that is coming from the Snowden NSA document leaks offers validation to an issue that Michael Wilding calls "the functional one of allowing the expression of what has hitherto been suppressed" (177). In Milton's day freedom of the press was allowed for a short while before Parliament again enacted a licensing act, and that time period saw more flourishing than either before or after it. When the circulation of ideas was suppressed, the Commonwealth, after a number of years, gave way again to a monarchy. America has been offered a display of what happens when ideas are suppressed: it discourages change for the better and makes the people go backwards. When, as with Snowden, the people have freedom of the press to publish important ideas and information, no amount of persecution from government sources can stop the change that initiates from those ideas if the people see the truth and value behind it. This is why *Areopagitica* holds so much validity today for cases like Snowden and the NSA documents: the only way for the people to enact change for the better is for them to have the freedom to discuss that change, and to discuss that change they need to have the freedom to do so through the press and other forms of media. It is only through discussion and then action that a people can move toward the creation of a better State, whether that means a completely new government or modifying the old one.

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