

A passionate defense of freedom of expression from the pen of John Milton

John Milton, *Areopagitica*. London, 1644. 7 3/8 inches x 5 7/16 inches (187 x 138 mm), 50 pages.

While he is most widely known as the author of the dark verse epic *Paradise Lost*, the most majestic of English poets was also a lofty and vigorous writer of prose. The vigor owes much to intensely personal circumstances: John Milton's several treatises on divorce derive from an unhappy marriage, *Samson Agonistes* ("eyeless in Gaza") from his blindness, and the pioneering tract *Areopagitica* from attempts at censorship of his polemical works. Milton's plea for the freedom of the press is addressed to Parliament, the modern equivalent of the old Athenian Areopagus.

The tempestuous political atmosphere of seventeenth-century Britain brought forth a new and separate idea of debate among the mass of religious and political controversy: How free can speech be? It was against this background that Milton's *Areopagitica* was published in 1644. In this work, Milton considered a new aspect of the problem of freedom of expression: the rights of a text itself, independent of the intention of its author. *Areopagitica* was issued in defiance of all official regulation — unlicensed, unregistered, and without the name of printer or publisher. Milton's name alone is boldly printed on the title page. Never was an occasional piece so certain of immortality. Many of its phrases have come to have the currency of poetry: "Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life ... As good almost kill a man as kill a good book ... A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life"

As the poet who gave these truths their most memorable expression, Milton has had a profound influence on Western culture. It is chiefly owing to Milton that freedom of the press has come to be seen as a distinct and exalted form of tolerance — a noble secular endeavor pursued almost with religious fervor. *Areopagitica* marks the birth of this persistent conviction, presented here as originally issued.

This copy from Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, is in a binding is of brown morocco by Joseph William Zaehnsdorf (1853-1930), considered to be one of England's preeminent binders. The smooth spine has the titling running head to tail and gold flower tools on both ends dated 1901. The bookplate on the pastedown was engraved for the Pennsylvania collector, author, and electrical manufacturer A. Edward Newton (1864-1940). During the period between 1915 and 1940 Newton was the leading American commentator on book collecting.

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