

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN JOHN MILTON'S POLEMICAL PROSE

by

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ABSTRACT

In a twenty-year prose career championing liberty, John Milton wrote works about the most important issues of his day, including religious liberty, freedom of publication, and freedom from tyranny. In addition, he wrote several tracts advocating for marriage reform. Throughout this entire period, the issue of freedom of conscience, the individual's ability to live according to personal and moral conviction without interference from the church or state, remained central to his thought. Although most prominently covered in his early-1640s writings against the Church of England, predominantly in *Of Reformation* and *The Reason of Church Government*, a concern for this natural right appears throughout all of his polemical prose, from *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, to *Areopagitica's* defense of freedom of expression, and lastly, to Milton's two most extensive works on civil liberty, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and *The Ready and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*. Analyzing, among others, all of these works, this thesis demonstrates the centrality of religious liberty throughout Milton's prose treatises. Treating each phase of Milton's prose career as its own separate, independent sphere dilutes the central unity of his beliefs. Religious liberty is the most important freedom a Protestant society can possess, but threats to the other aspects of liberty are equally dangerous because each is a necessary component of one's right to practice according to one's conscience. Corrupt prelates and power-hungry bishops are palpable threats to a Christian's soul, but so too are bad spouses, tyrannical kings (and monarchy in general), and censorship. Liberty, as a general concept, has been given to humanity so that it can pursue God's Truth unhindered. As this thesis argues, all of Milton's polemical prose works were written with this end in mind.

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ABBREVIATIONS OF TITLES

CPMP – Hughes, Merritt Y., editor. *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Macmillan, 1957.

DDD – Milton, John. *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. In *JMP*, below.

JMP – Loewenstein, David, editor. *John Milton: Prose: Major Writings on Liberty, Politics, Religion, and Education*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Introduction

In his *Second Defense of the English People*, Milton defined his polemical career as one grand defense of liberty, consisting of three parts: ecclesiastical, domestic, and civil (JMP 349). Outwardly, at least, this is in keeping with his two decades as a pamphleteer, as the private poet put down his laurel wreath and immersed himself in the public issues of his day. With the exception of one religious treatise written in 1673, the years of the English Civil War and Interregnum (1641-60), contain all of Milton's major polemical prose works. 1641-2 saw the publication of his major religious works, *Of Reformation, Of Prelatical Episcopacy*, and *The Reason of Church-Government Urg'd against Prelaty*, along with a few shorter religious tracts. From 1643-5, Milton took up the domestic issue of divorce, publishing the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, *Tetrachordon*, and *Colasterion*. In 1649 and 1650, as the English Civil War came to a close with the execution of Charles I, Milton wrote his famous defense of the regicide, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, as well as *Eikonoklastes*, Milton's rebuttal to the royalist *Eikon Basilike*, which purported to contain the final meditations of the late Stuart monarch. And lastly, 1659-60 ended with a flurry of publications on both religious and civil matters: *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church*, and *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*.

However, 1644's *Areopagitica*, which posterity has judged to be the best of Milton's prose works, does not easily fit into any of the categories Milton listed above. When discussing it in the *Second Defense*, Milton seems to include *Areopagitica* alongside his works on domestic liberty. In modern Milton scholarship, many scholars

either take Milton's self-categorization in *The Second Defense* at face value¹, or replace it with their own understanding of the prose works² without recognizing the uniqueness of *Areopagitica*. When an individual's private thoughts are put to paper and sent forth into the public sphere to be considered and judged, the issue is no longer domestic in nature, but rather social. To Milton's three categories, then, I would add a fourth, social liberty, the concept defined and defended in *Areopagitica*. By social liberty, I mean the individual's capacity to freely express personal thoughts and opinions, without fear of monetary or corporal punishment. While Milton is mostly concerned with civil or religious magistrates — the Imprimaturs or Censors — interfering with the individual's ability to publish private thoughts, this temporal power is implicitly supported by the tyranny of "Custome," the same tyranny Milton condemned throughout his prose career (*JMP* 105). While *Areopagitica* shares many characteristics with the other prose works of the 1640s, the particulars of this kind of liberty are not explicitly advocated in any of Milton's other writings. As a result, this thesis will argue that *Areopagitica* is worthy of its own category.

Milton's late prose, published after his *Second Defense*, more closely corresponds to the categories that Milton listed in the *Second Defense*, though it often contains a fusion of the different types of liberty. After publishing *Pro Se Defensio*, his 1655 defense of himself, the majority of his remaining prose was published in 1659 and 1660,

¹ Because of its rich autobiographical value, the major biographers (William Riley Parker, Barbara Lewalski, and Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns,) refer to it constantly, often without another competing source to contradict Milton's claims.

² c.f. Elizabeth Skerpan Wheeler, "Early Political Prose," in *A Companion to Milton*, edited by Thomas Corns, Blackwell Publishers, 2001, pp. 263-278, in which Wheeler argues for the political nature of Milton's early writings.

after the death of Cromwell and on the eve of the Restoration. As the title makes clear, *The Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* is religious in nature, as Milton argues against the enforcement of church tithes (*JMP* 398). It is important to note, however, that Milton was also a staunch opponent of a single, national church; he disdained the state mandating matters of conscience. The two arguments run hand in hand; although there should be no national church, even if there is, it should not have the power to exact dues from those who would not otherwise give them. This general theme is more explicitly taken up in *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*. While not focused on tithing, this work similarly fuses matters of civil and religious liberty. More than any other of Milton's tracts, *Of Civil Power* is most analogous to what we, today, would call the separation of church and state, which also works both ways. The state should neither prohibit (Catholicism excluded) nor support any established church. To do so, according to Milton, is to infringe upon the liberty of conscience which rightfully belongs to every "free born" man.

In any event, *Of Civil Power* and *Hirelings* (both published in 1659) concern both religious and civil liberty. *The Readie and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660) is more clearly political in nature; it is also, alongside *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton's most comprehensive attempt at political philosophy, as the former Latin Secretary for Cromwell's Council of State made a last, desperate, and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to persuade his countrymen to abandon their talk of restoring the monarchy. Within mere weeks of the tract's publication, Charles II was invited to return to England. And upon the Restoration, Milton's career as a prose polemicist effectively came to an end. He would not publish another prose treatise until 1673, the year before

his death. *Of True Religion* advocates for toleration and the freedom to follow one's own convictions on matters of conscience (*JMP* 448). As such, it can easily be classified as a defense of religious liberty.

While these categories — religious, domestic, social, and civil (or political) — can serve as useful guides for an introduction to Milton's prose, they only concern the external particulars. I believe that there is a single, central element that informs all of them. Religious liberty, or more properly, liberty of conscience, is by far the most important aspect of Milton's prose treatises, and no less central to his political and social writings than to the works overtly devoted to church matters. The following thesis will be a four-chapter attempt to prove this point. For the sake of simplicity, I will stay as true to the chronological order of the works as possible, although Milton is often difficult to pin down in this regard. It is occasionally necessary to reference works published fifteen or twenty years apart to gain a thorough understanding of his ideas on a given topic.

To prove that Milton's aims are primarily religious requires a particular type of evidence. First, one must differentiate between religious language and religious matters. Religious language permeates all manner of poetry and prose from the period, and one would be hard-pressed to find any piece of argumentative writing from 1640-60 that does not include some appeal to religious authority, whether scriptural or otherwise. For Milton and his contemporaries, society was ordered on religious principles; as a result, it would be tedious and unproductive to scour through each text for its biblical references, as if the mere number could make more evident what is already obvious. It suffices to say that, for Milton, as for any Puritan of his time, the Bible was considered to be the chief authority on all matters, social and political no less than religious. And so, rather than

ascribing any extra significance to Milton's use of the Bible for support, one must concentrate on the themes themselves and explore how, in each particular work, the author's understanding of religious liberty informs the text.

Chapter I begins where Milton began, with the religious works. Religious freedom is the primary issue and need not be proven, but a thorough analysis of exactly what that freedom meant to Milton will be invaluable for understanding his general concept of liberty analyzed in the subsequent chapters. Chapter II explores the divorce tracts, demonstrating that the relationship between man and woman is envisioned as the mirror image of the individual's relationship with God. Prohibiting divorce is an evil because an ill-yoked marriage from which there is no escape damages the soul and its relation to God as much as it contributes to a miserable earthly existence. Chapter III covers *Areopagitica* alone. As noted previously, it bears little external resemblance to any of Milton's other prose. Furthermore, *Areopagitica* is sufficient to withstand a more detailed examination than the rest; no other treatise equals its quality. Milton's prose in *Areopagitica* is imagistic, allusive, and almost artful enough to rival his greatest poetic works. In brief, while seemingly secular, the freedom of speech Milton desires most is the liberty to express one's conscience, to speak to his countrymen those truths which Divine Revelation has left to human endeavors to discover. Lastly, Chapter IV covers the political writings, demonstrating again that, for Milton, there is no greater evil in civil matters than for the state to impede one's freedom to pursue religious truth.

This project was inspired in part by what I consider to be the present overemphasis of Milton's political affiliations and social values. Such an occurrence is the natural consequence of the prevailing theoretical landscape. I am not aware, for

instance, of any currently living scholar whose critical lens is based upon his or her religious beliefs; modern academia is dominated by political and social ideologies. As a result, those aspects of Milton that align with a critic's research interests often garner the most serious attention. There are, of course, Miltonists whose knowledge of the man and his works is comprehensive enough to transcend the necessarily brief academic essays one finds in a scholarly journal or anthologized collection. However, I do not mean to disparage or depreciate the value of more focused interpretations; I reference several within this thesis. Nor do I believe that their conclusions are necessarily invalid, certainly not the ones I cite. Milton's attitude towards women and marriage, for example, or his complex relationship with Cromwell's regime are both topics worthy of study, ones capable of illuminating the poetry and prose in new and exciting ways.

Nevertheless, I cannot help but feel that any reader of Milton must take more from him than we ourselves can bring to the work. I value most those scholars who present Milton as history and his writings prove him to be. The major Milton biographies of the last fifty years — those by William Riley Parker, Barbara Lewalski, and the joint efforts of Thomas Corns and Gordon Campbell — are invaluable resources for any student of Milton. In addition to the biographers, I am especially indebted to the works of David Loewenstein, probably the greatest living scholar of Milton's prose; his *John Milton Prose* is the primary text I have used when referencing Milton's polemical treatises. These five combined give a nearly comprehensive understanding of Milton's life and times. But even among these luminaries, I have not encountered what I consider to be the proper understanding of Milton's prose, or at least its overarching theme. For the biographers, the primary purpose must always be to present the life. What time they

devote to the works themselves (for critical biographers like Parker and Lewalski) is spent explaining the meaning and significance to a general reader, one who may or may not have read the obscurer prose works in their entirety. Because of this, biographers seldom trouble the reader with disputable interpretations. Each work is properly situated within the life and its contents explained, as it should be.

For specialists who write for a primarily academic audience, the effort is more interpretive. In *Milton and the Drama of History*, Loewenstein argues that “Milton’s imaginative achievement encompasses both his prose and poetry,” and he laments that “too often his revolutionary prose writings... are treated as peripheral or secondary to the poems” (1). I agree, but I also want to stress the intellectual importance of the prose more than its imaginative or aesthetic quality. I take it as a given that anything Milton ever wrote is possessed of his characteristic genius and rhetorical talents. Surveying the poetry and prose with equal intensity, Loewenstein analyzes Milton’s understanding of history, both his own historical moment (revolutionary England) and human history in general. Another of Loewenstein’s works, *Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries*, examines, as the title indicates, political radicalism in Milton’s day. This thesis is not a challenge to either of these books, or to any work whatsoever. I merely believe that, even in the crowded field of Milton studies, some things may still be said. Loewenstein and other academics who have devoted their professional lives to Milton necessarily speak with great authority within their realms of expertise. The paths we forge for ourselves are made by seeking unexplored avenues of enquiry, fresh approaches, or overlooked truths. Religious liberty as the central theme of Milton’s prose may not be a revolutionary idea, or even a particularly contentious one, but, among the

best and most insightful Milton critics, I have yet to see sufficient attention given to its influence on Milton's conception of liberty. Freedom of conscience is the foundation upon which all of his polemical prose was built.

In order to prove this thesis, the following chapters are largely devoted to a close examination of the works themselves. I believe that the validity of my argument is best demonstrated by presenting Milton himself and by showing the reader the various and interconnected threads that connect his prose works to one another. After surveying the different periods of his polemical career, common themes and subtle similarities will begin to emerge, demonstrating the centrality of religious liberty.

Chapter I: The Religious Works

This thesis argues that religious liberty is at the forefront of Milton's mind throughout all of his prose works, even when the theme of a particular work is ostensibly about something else (civil liberty, freedom to divorce, freedom of publication, etc.). However, when it comes to the religious tracts, such an exercise is redundant. Church issues that Milton would address, such as the corruption of the episcopacy, freedom of conscience, the establishment of a national church during the interregnum, the mandatory collection of tithes, and so forth are all inherently religious. But the subtle ways in which Milton's religious convictions influence his thinking on other matters cannot be understood without a thorough examination of his explicit religious statements. This chapter, then, attempts to draw out those convictions, assign importance to them according to how frequently and forcefully they occur across his polemical career, and set a foundation upon which the arguments of this thesis can be built.

While Milton's vast learning cannot and should not be overlooked, all of his knowledge revolves around a moral center established by his religious convictions. Consequently, all of Milton's polemical works are based on his interpretation of Scripture and his humanistic belief that God gives individuals (and, by extension, society as a whole) the tools whereby they may improve themselves. Not all things are made manifestly clear by divine revelation. As Milton argues in *Areopagitica*, intense study and deliberation are indispensable means of drawing nearer to the will of God. Having spent the first thirty-two years of his life doing exactly that, Milton determined that, in 1641, the time had come to enter the public sphere as a pamphleteer writing about the

pressing issues of the day. It is more than incidental that the first work he would publish under his own name concerned the prelates and the proper governance of God's church.³

The religious works are most easily categorized into three distinct periods, which I will simply term early, middle, and late. 1641 and 1642, the early period, marked the beginning of Milton's polemical career and saw the publication of five different tracts; *Of Reformation, Of Prelatical Episcopacy*, and *Animadversions upon the Remonstrants Defense* appeared in 1641, while *The Reason of Church-Government* and the *Apology for Smectymnuus* belong to 1642. When discussing the early period, this chapter focuses primarily on *Of Reformation* and *The Reason of Church-Government* because these are the two most substantive treatises and give a good sense of Milton's religious thinking at the time.

After the publications of '41 and '42, Milton would shift to other concerns, most notably divorce and matters of state.⁴ He would not write on religious matters again until the penultimate year of the Protectorate, 1659, with the publication of *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* and *The Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church*. As the first title indicates, this middle period of his religious works represents something of a fusion of religious and civil matters. A decade earlier, in 1649, Milton had, with the writing of *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, become the chief pamphleteer and defender of Cromwell and the execution of Charles I; by 1659, he was far more comfortable blending the disparate elements of his thinking into a single

³ *The Reason of Church Government Urg'd against Prelaty*.

⁴ His divorce tracts were motivated by his tumultuous separation from Mary Powell shortly after their marriage in 1643; his career as a political pamphleteer was occasioned by the execution of Charles I in 1649.

pamphlet. However, the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 effectively ended Milton's polemical career, forcing him to express his beliefs, for the most part, through the subtler art of poetry. Later, when the fury of Cavalier retribution had subsided, Milton published one final treatise in 1673, the year before his death. As the title makes clear, *Of True Religion, Heresie, Schism and Toleration* returns to the particular issues of the church that had occupied Milton more than thirty years earlier.

Before concluding this bibliographic overview, it is necessary to make some mention of *De Doctrina Christiana* (DDC) and its absence from this chapter. The work is not a polemical treatise, nor was it published during Milton's lifetime, and so does not properly fall under the parameters of this thesis. A work of such magnitude demands a far more minute examination than I can offer in a chapter devoted to all of his religious works.⁵ In order to spend as much time with the polemical works as possible, I will not be discussing *De Doctrina*. The unorthodox views, most notably his denial of the Son's co-eternality, are never discussed in the polemics he published during his life, though his view of the Son does appear in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. I am confident, however, that the published works are more than capable of illuminating the issues of religious freedom that were crucial to Milton's understanding of liberty as a whole.

Milton's prose career was spurred into being by the events of 1639 and 1640. In the autobiographical digression in his *Second Defense of the English People*, published in 1654, Milton claims that it was the political atmosphere of England which drew him

⁵ For a thorough analysis of *De Doctrina*, see Lewalski's *The Life of John Milton*, 415-441.

home from his sojourn through Italy. While Campbell and Corns (121-122) doubt the truth behind this assertion, 1639 was nevertheless a momentous year for the English, one which contained more than its share of foreboding omens. In 1638, the year prior, Scottish Presbyterians had attempted to distance themselves from the Episcopalian model of the Church of England by establishing their own religious Covenant. In 1639, Charles I responded with an abortive and unsuccessful invasion of Scotland. As William Riley Parker writes, “English Puritans suddenly took heart, and some of them, for the first time, began to think of Presbyterianism as a definite and attainable consummation of their hopes” (185). William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the most powerful religious figure in England, had long been despised by zealous Puritans. The king’s failure to crush the dissenting Scots paved the way for a rapid deterioration of Laud’s power within England and the rise of Puritanism as a serious political force with which Charles would soon have to contend.

In 1640, in response to the burgeoning political and religious crisis, Charles (against his natural inclinations) called for an assembly of Parliament for the first time in eleven years, ending his Personal Rule. The gathered assembly, the Short Parliament, was called in April of 1640. Not getting the military funds he desired, Charles soon dissolved Parliament, only to call it again in November of the same year (Campbell and Corns 132-133). This second Parliament, which would later be termed the Long Parliament (because it would remain active and largely unchanged until Pride’s Purge of 1649) was comprised of a majority of moderate and radical members opposed to the religious rule of Laud and the Church of England. The Long Parliament proceeded to pass a number of religious reforms which would cripple the English episcopacy. While I will save the specifics for

“Chapter III: Areopagitica,” I will briefly mention here that, as Laud lost power, so too did his control of the press. This temporary collapse of printing regulation led to an unprecedented outpouring of tracts and pamphlets, published partly in response to a rapidly growing and interested reading public. It is unsurprising that, given the events of the preceding years, a substantial amount of the literature produced in the early 1640s was about religious matters. John Milton, having spent the first thirty-two years of his life in “studious retirement,” deemed this the appropriate moment to put his vast learning into practice. Even if, as he had earlier claimed in “Lycidas,” he had not yet matured enough to fully exercise his rhetorical potential, the issues of the day were simply too important to ignore.

Of Reformation and *The Reason of Church Government* are Milton’s two major works of the early period, containing within them the bulk of his thinking on religious matters in the early 1640s. *Of Reformation*, or more fully *Of Reformation Touching Church-Discipline in England: And the Causes that Hitherto have Hindered It*, was the first of his anti-prelatical tracts published in 1641. It begins with a lamentation of the state of the church and the corrupted Gospel, which, through the meaningless ornamentation of the episcopacy, whether Catholic or Anglican (to Milton, there is little difference), robs Christianity of its defining characteristic, its focus on the inner soul, which set it apart from its religious forbears. Milton would retain his opposition to ritualistic, external religion for the remainder of his life. Indeed, the sentiment is most memorably expressed in the invocation to *Paradise Lost*, when the poet states that his “Heav’nly Muse” (l. 6), God’s Holy Spirit, “dost prefer/ Before all Temples th’ upright

heart and pure” (I. 17-18). Both his great epic and his polemical prose career begin with a similar theme: true religion is an intensely personal, spiritual affair. By emphasizing external rituals and sacraments, Christianity is in danger of lapsing back “into the Jewish beggary of old cast rudiments” or inadvertently creating “a new-vomited Paganisme of sensuall Idolatry” (*JMP* 24). Milton could best be described as a Christian primitivist whose ideal church is modeled on that of the ancient Apostles. While hardly unique for a Protestant, and common for a Puritan of his time, this aversion to the high church forms a key aspect of his religious outlook.

Another crucial component of Milton’s religious ideology, found throughout his prose, is his zealous nationalism — the belief that God had specifically selected the English nation to bring about the reformation of the church. Like his disdain for high church ceremonialism, this conviction that the English were the elect beneficiaries of God’s reforming revelation is also present from the very beginning. Just a few pages into *Of Reformation*, Milton refers to John Wycliffe, the fourteenth-century theologian whom Milton identifies as the true founder of the Reformation. The glory of reforming the Catholic Church should have belonged to England, Milton argues. “Yet me thinkes the Precedencie which God gave this Iland, to be the first Restorer of buried Truth, should have beene followed with more happy successe, and sooner attain’d Perfection, in which, as yet we are amongst the last” (*JMP* 26). But just as the Catholics of England suppressed Wycliffe nearly three centuries before, the Anglican Church of Milton’s time, with its insistence that only bishops should have the power to ordain ministers, assigns the authority to preach God’s Word to a select, dogmatic few; in so doing, the Church of

England shackles the people's capacity to rival their Protestant neighbors on the Continent.

I would not dwell so long on Milton's antipathy towards bishops and prelates were it not characteristic of an entire period of his prose career. Having examined the English Reformation of Henry VIII and the peculiar causes that led to the preservation of the prelacy, *Of Reformation* proceeds to use Scripture and examples from early Christian history to argue against the existence of such prelates. Suffice it to say that when Milton makes an argument, he never does so alone. Arguing that the Early Christian Church had no equivalent to the bishops of the Catholic Church and the Church of England, Milton employs authorities ranging from Paul to Dante. Milton is also not afraid to condemn the opinions of Early Church Fathers if he believes them to be in error. While elsewhere giving respect to some early Christian writers, Milton accuses Justin Martyr, Clemens, Origen, and Tertullian of "foul errors, the ridiculous wresting of Scripture," and "Heresies" because they deviated from the Bible in their understanding of church government. However, as if to save himself from too harsh an invective against the early Fathers, Milton wonders aloud how many of their blasphemies were original to them, and which were spuriously inserted by later Catholic editors. While such instances as these provide hints of Milton's extreme anti-Catholicism, it is muted and overshadowed in the anti-prelatical tracts by his vitriol towards the English prelates. Because of this, I will save a proper discussion of it for later in this chapter. Since the targets of Milton's ire are most generally at least nominal Protestants, it can sometimes be difficult to comprehend fully his hatred for the Catholic Church. However, we will see sufficient examples in due time.

Of Reformation's second book considers the deleterious social and political effects of episcopacy. In a markedly different tone from his later republican, anti-monarchical writings, Milton here makes no argument against the legitimacy of kings. On the contrary, he argues against the notion that bishops are a necessary accompaniment to ensure the peaceful and untroubled rule of monarchs. A powerful and politically involved episcopacy "is not only not agreeable, but tending to the destruction of Monarchy." Like the aforementioned Dante, Milton was an adamant believer in the separation of ecclesiastical and civil power. This is not exactly our modern notion of the separation of church and state, which is more secularist in nature, but rather a division of labor which envisions a healthier church and civil magistracy when the two do not interfere in the domain of the other. Christian doctrine suffers when church leaders seek after temporal, political power. In a passage highly reminiscent of Dante, Milton similarly laments the corrupt bargain that the Church Fathers of late antiquity made with Constantine in order to gain power.⁶

But when through Constantines lavish Superstition they [the bishops] forsook their first love, and set themselves up two Gods instead, Mammon and their Belly, then taking advantage of the spirituall power which they had on mens consciences, they began to cast a longing eye to get the body also, and bodily things into their command, upon which their carnal desires, the Spirit dayly quenching and dying in them, they knew no way to keep themselves up from failing to nothing, but by bolstering, and

⁶ See *Inferno*, 19.109-11: "Ah Constantine, what evil marked the hour-/not of your conversion, but of the fee/ the first rich Father took from you in dower!" Trans. John Ciardi.

supporting their inward rottenness by a carnal, and outward strength. (*JMP*
43)

As Loewenstein writes in *Milton and the Drama of History*, Milton's view of church history was largely pessimistic (15-17). The Roman Catholic Church from the time of Constantine to Milton's present had been one of perpetual abuse; and even the Reformation, while a good thing, had been stymied in England by those bishops and prelates who refused to give up the power Constantine had given them.⁷ If the general Reformation of the church was to be realized, it could only come about through the annihilation of prelacy.

The remainder of the treatise proceeds along similar lines until the concluding stanzas, which are remarkable because of the change in rhetoric. *Of Reformation* ends with a prayer to God and, although it writes of the bishops in the same manner (wolves devouring the innocent sheep and so forth), it anticipates a glorious outcome in which the people of England thoroughly reject prelates of all types and draw themselves closer to God.⁸

Lastly, Milton also briefly hints of his aspirations as a poet. While this thesis is concerned with the prose works and the importance of Milton's religious beliefs within them, it is crucial to emphasize that religion was also a key component to his poetic

⁷ The so-called Donation of Constantine was a forged document from the Middle Ages purported to be the emperor's legal recognition of the religious authority of the Catholic bishops. Despite its inauthenticity, Constantine was crucial in legitimizing the Catholic Church and ending Roman persecution of Christianity.

⁸ Doctrinally, it is important to note that, in 1641, Milton still seemed to possess a more conventional view of the Trinity. He references the "Tri-personal Godhead" without discussing the subtler aspects of the three persons. Perhaps The Trinity was irrelevant to Milton's argument, but his denial of the co-eternality of the Son, a heresy present in both *Paradise Lost* and *De Doctrina Christiana*, is nowhere to be found here.

calling. Envisioning a near-Utopian future in which the English will enjoy ample religious freedom, having been liberated from episcopal government modeled upon “the great whore” of Babylon (the Roman Catholic Church), Milton anticipates a new poetic golden age, in which some great poet (i.e., himself) can sing God’s praises in thanks for the favor He has shown the English. “Then amidst the Hymns, and Halleluiahs of Saints some one may perhaps bee heard offering at high strains in new and lofty Measures to sing and celebrate thy divine Mercies, and marvelous Judgements in this Land throughout all Ages” (*JMP* 60). In a work that had been heretofore vitriolic in its hatred of the prelacy, Milton ends with a vision of hope, his prose and poetic goals in complete alignment. While it was currently necessary for Milton to employ his prosaic pen in order to assault the excesses of an overly ceremonial and elitist church, Milton remains confident that, his hopes for the church having been achieved, there will still be ample time to return to his true strength, poetry.

Characteristic of his prose career, Milton seldom published just one treatise on a single topic. *The Reason of Church Government Urg’d against Prelaty* takes up largely the same theme as *Of Reformation*, the central argument being that prelates and bishops have no scriptural basis for their existence and that, far from being a necessary good for the body of Christ, they work rather to its detriment. *The Reason of Church Government* is more linear, as Milton moves from one numbered point to the next, arguing in the seven chapters of Book I that church government is laid out clearly in the Bible (specifically the Gospels), that the priesthood prescribed in the Old Testament law should not be used a model for the Christian Church, and that the arguments of early

seventeenth-century Anglican writers (such as Lancelot Andrewes), which claim, among other things, that prelacy is necessary to prevent schism, are scripturally false; Paul, for instance, never prescribed it in his advice to bickering churches. Rather, Milton identifies prelacy as the originator of schism. “It was not the prevention of schisme, but it was schisme it selfe, and the hatefull thirst of Lording in the Church that first bestow’d a being upon Prelaty” (*JMP* 78). While hinted at in *Of Reformation, The Reason of Church-Government* makes the strongest case for a Congregationalist model of church government, which holds that individual communities of believers should have the power to select their own ministers. Milton, more so here than in *Of Reformation*, uses biblical exegesis and his own interpretation to demonstrate that Paul, in his first letter to Timothy, lays out a role for Presbyters and deacons, “not once naming any other order in the Church” (*JMP* 68). While *Of Reformation* argued against episcopacy on the basis of the social and religious evils it caused in Milton’s age, *The Reason of Church-Government* primarily uses Scripture to support the Presbyterian case for its abolishment. As Nigel Smith argues, Milton was only a half-hearted supporter of the Presbyterian church, “writing in broad and not detailed defence of Presbyterianism” (156). The primary motivation for Milton’s early religious writings was clearly his antipathy toward the high church rather than a deep-seated affinity for the Presbyterians; Milton simply found in them a common enemy of the Church of England. By the middle of the 1640s, Milton would oppose the Presbyterians on a number of social issues, and by the end of the decade, he would break with them politically over their objections to the execution of Charles I.

Before ending this analysis of *The Reason of Church-Government* and, more generally, the early religious thought, it is important to emphasize Milton's self-characterization in Book II. Milton explicitly links himself and those like him to the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah and the Greek seer Tiresias, both of whom willfully suffered the scorn and hatred of their peers and monarchs in the cause of truth. Not that any such writer craves scorn and derision, "for surely to every good and peaceable man it must in nature needs be a hatefull thing to be the displeaser, and molester of thousands" (*JMP* 86). But, in a lengthy digression on his own personal calling, Milton lays out that this was the moment for him to use his vast learning; the religious freedom of his people was worth making himself a nuisance to those in power and braving all dangers inherent to the task. Had he not done so, Milton tells us, he would have regretted it for the rest of his life. In his hypothetical self-rebuke, he lists the self-hatred and disappointment he would feel if he, who had been given "ease and leasure...for...retired thoughts out of the sweat of other men," was nowhere to be found "when the cause of God and his Church was to be pleaded" (*JMP* 87). It would have been to his perpetual shame. While admirers of Milton's poetry may think it a greater shame that he took a twenty-year hiatus from writing poetry (save a few sonnets), his own words betray no regret at his decision to enter the world of prose polemic. He is more than willing to use his gifts in whatever way his country, Church, or God Himself might need. In any event, Milton evidently did not anticipate that his prose career would last as long as it did.

In the closing lines of *The Reason of Church-Government*, Milton makes his plans for the future clear. Reminding his readers what posterity knows well, Milton claims that his true calling is to poetry, and spends a considerable amount of time musing on what

form would best serve his particular moment in history. Having completed his self-education at home, finding great favor in the academic circles of the learned men of Florence during his continental tour of 1638 and 1639, and returning to England in the early days of the civil war, Milton writes, “I began thus far to assent both to them [his Italian friends] and divers of my friends here at home, and not lesse to an inward prompting which now grew daily upon me, that by labour and intense study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joyn’d with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die” (*JMP* 88). Impassioned and confident in his own literary abilities, he set about learning everything he could from the wisest writers of the ancient nations he valued most, looking for a model on which to base his literary masterpiece. “That what the greatest choycest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine” (*JMP* 88). As the quotation makes clear, Milton does not differentiate between his professional self and his soul; the two are linked. Everything that he does, both in the present and in the future, is done for the glory of God.

Coming to the great work he plans to write, Milton ponders what vehicle will best serve his purpose “to lay the patter of a Christian Heroe” (*JMP* 89). While he considers pagan legends and secular history, already he has religious themes at the front of his mind, drawing inspiration from “the book of Iob, a brief model” of an epic, the “divine pastoral Drama in the Song of Salomon,” and “the high and stately Tragedy” of “the Apocalyps of Saint Iohn” (89). As Ann Astell points out, Milton was one of a long line of poets who had drawn poetic inspiration from the Book of Job, finding in the person of

Job a model of epic heroism (185). Just as Scripture is the chief authority on all religious matters, Milton finds the Bible more than sufficient to serve as a poetic model, as well. But the best examples mean little if the poet has neither the ability nor a proper understanding of the responsibilities of his or her profession.

These [poetic] abilities, wheresoever they be found, are the inspired guift of God rarely bestow'd, but yet to some (though most abuse) in every Nation: and are of power beside the office of a pulpit, to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu, and publick civility, to allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune, to celebrate in glorious and loft Hymns the throne and equipage of Gods Almightynesse (90).

Great poetry, however, because its highest aim is moral instruction, cannot be written when the spiritual well-being of a nation is hampered by “prelacy, under whose inquisitorious and tyrannical duncery no free and splendid wit can flourish” (91). Milton readily admits that his poetic plans have been stalled because their proper foundations must first be laid. Though poetry is a higher calling than arguing with episcopal half-wits, “were it the meanest under-service, if God by his Secretary conscience injoynt it, it were sad for me,” writes Milton, “if I should draw back, for me especially, now when all men offer their aid to help ease and lighten the burden of the Church, to whose service by the intentions of my parents and friends I was destin’d of a child” (91). As stated earlier, the purpose of this chapter is to understand Milton’s religious beliefs more thoroughly, but his religious, polemical prose tells us something more. Milton’s entire career was thoroughly devoted to God, and everything he ever produced as a writer was composed

with this duty in mind. Given what Milton himself tells us in *The Reason of Church-Government*, it may be more proper to dispense with using the word “religious” altogether when comparing his works with one another. They are all religious.

Having published these two major works and a handful of shorter treatises in 1641-42, Milton would drop the issue of church governance for a time, devoting his attention instead to the social and civil matters which affected him both personally and politically. As revealed in subsequent chapters, these too are religious in nature, but outwardly, the treatises address matters ostensibly quite different. The mid-1640s saw Milton publish a number of radical works on divorce, as well as *Areopagitica*, his classic defense of freedom of publication. Chapters II and III will deal with these, respectively. However, Milton did not leave church matters behind for good. Under drastically different political circumstances, Milton published both *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* and *The Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* in 1659, the year after Cromwell’s death and shortly before the collapse of the Protectorate.

As with the works of the early 1640s, some context will illuminate the specific concerns addressed in the texts. By and large, everything Milton had hoped for in *Of Reformation* and *The Reason of Church-Government* had come to pass. As the civil war between Charles I and Parliament waged throughout the 40s, the English episcopacy was dismantled; after his defeat, Charles was forced to sign the execution of William Laud in 1645 and tentative agreements were made between the king and Parliament to remodel the Church of England according to Presbyterian desires. Bishops would no longer control the ordaining of ministers; instead, any minister would possess the authority to

ordain another. However, as it became increasingly obvious that Charles had no intention of honoring the commitments he had made to Parliament under duress, and after an unsuccessful attempt by the king to escape his captors and resume hostilities, the New Model Army who had fought on Parliament's behalf, led by Oliver Cromwell, decided to preemptively seize control of Parliament and execute Charles. The Presbyterian members of Parliament, who had opposed the execution of the king, were forcibly removed from the Long Parliament by Thomas Pride, an army officer who acted on Cromwell's authority, in late 1648. The remaining assembly, a small collection of religious Independents who would later be termed the Rump Parliament, voted overwhelmingly to put the king to death, and Charles was beheaded in January of 1649 (Campbell and Corns, 188-190).

In 1649 and throughout the 50s, Milton would write a number of political treatises in defense of the new government. Meanwhile, questions of a national church settlement would persist unresolved throughout the entirety of Cromwell's rule, as the Lord Protector, like Milton, tended to favor independency and broad toleration for various Protestant sects. With Cromwell's death in 1658, questions that had largely been deferred during the Protectorate began to reemerge; and Milton once again employed his pen to argue in defense of religious liberty. It is important to note, as well, that by 1659 Milton had become one of the most famous prose writers in England and the most famous English Latinist in Continental Europe; his public disputes in the mid-50s with Claudius Salmasius, the French Protestant who had written a condemnation of the execution of Charles, had given Milton an international audience, making him the most prominent intellectual writing on behalf of Cromwell's government. Consequently, the rhetorical

flourishes and symbolic imagery that, as David Loewenstein points out in his prefatory notes and footnotes, appear throughout the works of the early 1640s, are noticeably absent from the later prose (*JMP* 22). Milton is direct and confident. While still as comprehensive and thorough as ever, there is also a clear lack of ornamentation in Milton's later prose style (Loewenstein, *JMP* 377). The imagistic and allusive prose that had been characteristic of his early style, particularly *Areopagitica*, had, by the late 1650s, given way to a direct and simple prose, a stylistic nod to his conviction that truth should always be plain and easy to understand.

To use its full title, *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes: Shewing That it is not Lawfull for Any Power on Earth to Compell in Matters of Religion* was published in February of 1659. As its title indicates, it argues against civil authorities mandating a compulsory, national system of belief. Unlike his earlier works on religious liberty (but following the pattern established in the divorce tracts and *Areopagitica*), *Civil Power* is written as an address to Parliament, in which Milton appeals to religious sensibilities and the good sense of England's rulers, and hopes that his arguments will be sufficient to persuade "Christian governors, and such especially as profess openly thir defence of Christian libertie." "Two things there be," begins Milton, "which have bin ever found working much mischief to the church of God, and the advancement of truth: force on the one side restraining, and hire on the other side corrupting the teachers thereof" (*JMP* 380). *Civil Power* addresses the first concern, while his subsequent *Means to Remove Hirelings* (which would be published later in 1659) would address the second.

From this introduction, Milton proceeds to define his criteria for determining religious truth. With the exception of divine revelation directly from God (which nearly

all mainstream Christians, Protestant and Catholic alike, believe to be a relic of the past), Milton claims that individuals can only discern the will of God definitively through Scripture. Anything not explicitly mentioned in the Bible should be left to the conscience of the believer. Furthermore, when the interpretation of Scripture is disputed (as is often the case), the individual alone has the final authority on what to believe.

With our modern conviction that religious belief is an intensely personal and private affair, it can be difficult to appreciate how revolutionary Milton's attitude is. When writing of the matter, too many Milton scholars define his religious toleration as "radical" without bothering to explain why. One must remember that Western Europe, prior to the Reformation, had spent nearly a thousand years at least outwardly united as a single, catholic body of believers. Despite the great cultural variety found throughout the continent (and in the British Isles), the religious and political hierarchy of each nation acknowledged the authority of the pope on spiritual matters. As Milton pointed out in *Of Reformation*, even after Protestant nations broke away from Catholicism in the sixteenth century, bishops and magistrates (particularly those in England) now free of the Vatican remained keen on regulating what constituted acceptable belief within their own countries. Subsequently, oppression of dissident believers (whether Catholics or Protestant schismatics deemed overly radical) was as harsh if not harsher under the early Church of England than it had been under Roman Catholic rule. Because of this, in Milton's view, despite the gains made in the cause of Truth, the individual Christian was scarcely better off than under papacy.⁹

⁹ For an excellent overview of the European nations that influenced Milton's notion of toleration, see Nigel Smith, "Milton and the European Contexts of Toleration," *Milton and Toleration*, edited by Sharon Achinstein and Elizabeth Sauer, Oxford University Press, 2007.

The ultimate overthrow of the English episcopacy, finally accomplished in the mid-1640s, had been a step in the right direction, but even a people unencumbered with religious overlords could still be denied their rights by civil authorities. “If then we count it so ignorant and irreligious in the papist to think himself discharged in Gods account, beleeving only as the church beleevs, how much greater condemnation will it be to the protestant his condemner, to think himself justified, beleeving only as the state beleevs?” (*JMP* 381). If Parliament proceeded, as some of its members desired, to reestablish a national church, or at least codify which beliefs were broadly acceptable, it would be setting itself up as a new religious power; and in so doing, it would infringe upon the individual’s right to follow his or her conscience. Milton’s radicalism consists in his belief that the individual is answerable to no religious authority but God alone. To deny flatly that any temporal power should possess the authority to mandate another’s beliefs is characteristic of Milton’s hyper-individualism and marks him as a forerunner to the Enlightenment thinkers who would flourish in the following century.

Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church serves, in many ways, as a companion piece to *A Treatise of Civil Power*. As noted previously, Milton had earlier mentioned “force and hire” as the two evils of the Church that most threatened religious truth. Published in August of 1659, *Hirelings* addresses the latter threat, which Milton defines as “much the more dangerous” (*JMP* 401). Once again addressing Parliament, Milton first thanks its members for their forbearance “these 18 years” which he has spent writing in defense of liberty, an allusion to the origin of his polemical career, which began in 1641 with *Of Reformation* (400).

After the obligatory flattery which precedes most of his addresses to Parliament, Milton moves into the argument proper. By “hirelings,” Milton means those who seek church office in order to enrich themselves. “The maintenance of church-ministers,” Milton concedes, is not an evil in and of itself; after all, as Christ said in Luke, “the laborer is worthy of his hire” (*JMP* 402). But as with modern Christians and the contentious “root of all evil” passage from 1 Timothy, it is not the paying of pastors which harms the church, but rather those ministers who covet after an excess of worldly goods, using their elevated status to attain it. Milton lists Judas, Simon Magus, and the bishops who benefitted from the Donation of Constantine as the early forerunners of the “hirelings” he deplors.

Rather than having a tithe taken from the congregation by force, Milton asserts (as always, with Scripture to support his conclusions) that believers should only give what they deem appropriate. Milton concedes that ministers are beholden to the generosity of others, but a pastor who does right by his congregation should be more than adequately supported. Like the original, itinerate Apostles, who went from town to town preaching the Gospel, ministers should rely upon alms rather than a determined income forcibly extracted from the people.

To conclude this discussion of Milton’s brief treatise, it is worth taking a look at one of the final passages of the text, especially because it is representative of a strain of thought that appears throughout Milton’s works. As he had argued in the anti-prelatical tracts of the early 40s, Milton reiterates that this issue of mandatory tithes could easily be rectified if the Church were further decentralized. Not just bishops, but any wolf initially drawn to a minister’s income could be deterred

If Christians would but know thir own dignitie, thir libertie, thir adoption, and let it not be wondered if I say, thir spiritual priesthood, whereby they have all equally access to any ministerial function whenever calld by thir own abilities and the church, though they never came neer commencement or universitie. But while Protestants, to avoid the due labor of understanding thir own religion are content to lodge it in the breast or rather in the books of a clergie man, and to take it thence by scraps and mammocks as he dispences it in his sundays dole, they will be alwaies learning and never knowing, alwaies infants, alwaies either his vassals, as lay-papists are to their preists, or at odds with him, as reformed principles give them som light to be not wholly conformable, when infinit disturbances in the state, as they do, must needs follow. (*JMP* 425)

This theme can be found throughout Milton's prose, religious and civil alike. What he hates most is interference with the individual's ability to pursue the truth as it seems to him. Milton detests intellectual and spiritual laziness, and he believes that malicious thieves in the church arise because people are too slothful to do the work themselves. The same attitude is present in *Civil Power*, and also in the earlier works, most noticeably in *Areopagitica*, when Milton laments that "there be of Protestants and professors who live and dye in as arrant an implicit faith, as any lap Papist" (*JMP* 203). What he states explicitly in *Areopagitica* is implied in *Hirelings*, as well. Corrupt and greedy ministers are an overt and clear threat to the health of the Church; but even if the ministers of the church are faithful in the execution of their office, their very existence discourages laypeople from searching after truth themselves. Milton's vision of a perfect Christian society is one in which all people (Catholics excluded) are free to believe what their

labors and diligent studies suggest to be true: a society tolerant of the conclusions of others, recognizing (as Milton asserts) that, after the Scriptures, one's own conscience is the only legitimate source of religious authority.

In the months following the publication of *Hirelings*, Milton's dreams of such a society would rapidly die. In brief, the majority of Parliament (and of the people) had never been in favor of abolishing the monarchy. And after the death of Oliver Cromwell, Richard, his son and successor, found it impossible to keep the discontent of the outlying boroughs at bay. After the reassembled Rump Parliament ousted Richard Cromwell, they were forced by George Monck, the leading military figure in England, to issue writs for a new Parliament, sealing the fate of the Commonwealth and its republican experiment. In 1660, the new Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favor of asking Charles II, the exiled son of the late king, to return to England and take up his father's throne (Campbell and Corns, 291-292, 297-298, 301-302). As a member of Cromwell's Council of State and the most famous defender of the regicide, Milton was forced into hiding, briefly arrested, and only released after a sizable portion of his estate had been seized by the new Cavalier government. Understandably, Milton's polemical career was effectively over; the civic pamphleteer gave way to the private poet. Between 1660 and his death in 1674, Milton would publish *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*, his three major poetic accomplishments, and the chief reason he is still read today.

However, in 1673, the year before his death and thirteen years after his party's political defeat, Milton published one final religious treatise, *Of True Religion, Heresie, Schism, Toleration, and What Best Means May Be Used Against the Growth of Popery*.

Of True Religion is Milton's most singularly anti-Catholic work, understandable when we remember that the Catholic Church was now the only Christian institution Milton was free to criticize publically. In the wake of Charles II's return, the Church of England was restored, and the bishops and prelates that Milton had spent twenty years opposing were also restored to their former eminence. Catholics, however, were still an acceptable target. Despite openly Catholic members of the royal family, England as a whole was still virulently anti-Catholic, a sentiment that would soon lead to yet another expulsion of the Stuart dynasty during the reign of James II, Charles's Catholic brother and successor. Though Milton did not live to see the Glorious Revolution, he would have reservedly approved. A monarch and an episcopacy are bad enough, but for Milton, a Catholic king and the open toleration of practicing Catholics would have been unendurable.¹⁰

Of True Religion is brief and, on the whole, a concise restatement of sentiments Milton had expressed decades earlier. Milton begins by reiterating that Protestant belief is centered upon the primacy of Scripture, "that the Rule of true Religion is the Word of God only" (*JMP* 451). Milton again emphasizes, as he had done in *Civil Power* and *Hirelings*, that implicit faith founded upon church tradition runs contrary to Christian freedom; each Christian must take possession of and understand the tenets of their religious beliefs. If Protestants could only agree on these common points, and leave the rest to the conscience of the individual believer, they could "more firmly unite against the common adversary," Roman Catholicism (451). Briefly defining the terms "heresy" and

¹⁰ For comprehensive works on Milton's relationship with Catholicism, see David Loewenstein's *Milton and the Drama of History* and *Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism*. Additionally, *Milton and Catholicism*, edited by Ronald Corthell and Thomas N. Corns, contains an excellent assortment of essays on Milton's anti-Catholicism.

“schism,” both of which appear in the title, Milton states that Catholics are the only true heretics because of their implicit faith, heresy being defined as anything which adds or takes away from the Scriptures. Schismatics, on the other hand, are defined as those who pursue the truth based on a differing scriptural interpretation. Again, if Protestants could agree that disagreeing on the meaning of Scripture is an inherent and necessary component of Protestantism, then they would no longer feel the need to condemn one another to hell, “breaking... Communion” with one another (452). Milton concedes that contradictory beliefs cannot both be true, but says that error in well-meaning Protestants should be forgiven, provided that their motivation was pure. All humans are prone to error, and God will not hold it a mortal sin to mistakenly believe a false doctrine, especially if His will, as revealed in Scripture, does not address a particular issue.

But as he had done consistently throughout his prose career, Milton denies this same forbearance and toleration to Catholics. The implicit faith Milton condemns is an inherent part of Catholicism because of the primacy of the Pope, who aspires to both spiritual and political dominion; as such, he is a threat to both “true religion,” as Milton defines it, and to the legitimacy of Protestant governments. Toleration of practicing Catholics would be tantamount to a passive acceptance of subversive elements within English society who seek to overthrow both God and the King, replacing both with the Pope. The only things noticeably absent from *True Religion* are Milton’s characteristic assaults on episcopacy of all forms. Whereas his early and religious writing had targeted the Church of England for being too much like the Catholics, such an argument was no longer safe to publicly make. As I stated previously, Catholics were now the only target Milton could freely lambast. Doubtless, he still held the English bishops and prelates in

the same contempt he had before their dissolution in the 40s, but he made do with what the political realities of the 1670s afforded him.

The works discussed in this chapter illustrate the most important parts of Milton's religious thinking. Keeping these works in mind, the remainder of this thesis will demonstrate just how crucial these beliefs were to the rest of Milton's polemical prose. The same attitudes and concerns appear again and again, signifying that Milton always had spiritual matters in his thoughts. Indeed, every other form of liberty Milton would address eventually circles back to these same issues. While Milton certainly valued marital freedom, freedom of publication, and civil liberty on their own merits, their intrinsic connection to religious freedom is sufficient to bear out my core argument: for Milton, all the branches of freedom stem from a single tree, religious liberty.

Chapter II: The Divorce Tracts

After publishing the anti-prelatical works in the early 1640s, Milton experienced a personal crisis that would profoundly affect his polemical career. In 1642, a few months after *The Reason of Church Government* first appeared, Milton married Mary Powell, the daughter of Richard Powell, an Oxfordshire squire who had long been indebted to Milton's father (Campbell and Corns 40, 150). Edward Phillips, Milton's nephew and one of his earliest biographers, gives a brief description of the unusual circumstances that led to the marriage:

About Whitsuntide it was, or a little after, that he took a journey into the country; no body about him certainly knowing the reason, or that it was any more than a journey of recreation; after a month's stay, home he returns, a married man, that went out a bachelor. (*CPMW* 1031)

According to Phillips and other early biographers (with little subsequent evidence to call their claims into question), Milton simply felt that he had reached a suitable age for marriage, and found the daughter of a long-time family acquaintance to be adequate.¹¹

However, Milton would soon learn that marrying a woman about whom he knew very little made for a less-than-ideal marriage. Married in May or June of 1642, Mary Powell went to live with Milton in London. After a month or so, Mary returned, with her husband's consent, to Oxford to visit her family. Having spent the summer with her parents, she failed to return to her husband at the appointed time, ignoring his entreaties and indicating that the Powell family had rapidly come to regret their daughter's marriage

¹¹ Mary Powell was the daughter of Richard Powell, an Oxford merchant, who was a business associate and debtor to Milton's father.

to the young Puritan. The early biographers disagree as to why the new Mrs. Milton left her husband. Phillips, who was at the time a young boy living with Milton as a pupil, asserts that the reason was political.¹² The Powells lived in Oxford, which became a royalist stronghold during the civil war. Having his daughter married to and living with an increasingly outspoken Parliamentarian like Milton could have jeopardized Richard Powell's livelihood. Similarly, Campbell and Corns suggest that, if one wishes to know why a royalist father might have originally consented to his daughter's marriage in the first place, Milton's "immediate ideological orientation could well have appeared at the least uncertain" (161). Furthermore, the civil war had not yet started at the time of the marriage, so political differences may not have been a deal-breaker. By the time Milton called for his wife around Michaelmas (September), the war had officially begun.

However, one cannot read *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* without detecting strong personal undercurrents in Milton's writing. Though Milton affects to be a disinterested man arguing from principle, the particulars of his biography make his motivation for writing on divorce obvious (Patterson 279). Stephen Fallon notes that the divorce tracts were a particular challenge for Milton because they were written out of necessity and because of his own poor choice of a wife. Throughout his career, Fallon argues, Milton had presented himself as a blameless man, free of weakness and, for the most part, free of sin (111). While political differences between Milton and wife's family may have played a role in their separation, Cyriack Skinner's (a godson and close friend of Milton's) explanation seems much more probable. In the anonymous autobiography of

¹² Cyriac Skinner (mentioned below) in addition to Edward Phillips.

the late 1600s, which modern scholars overwhelmingly believe to be the work of Skinner, Milton's abandonment by his wife is attributed to Mary Powell's inability to adjust to Milton's lifestyle. "But she, that was very young," writes Skinner, "and had been bred in a family of plenty and freedom, being not well pleased with his reserved manner of life, within a few days left him, and went back into the country with her mother" (*CPMP* 1040). Skinner also acknowledges that the political circumstances of the civil war likely prolonged their separation, but he credits her dissatisfaction with Milton's austere and frugal living as the primary cause. This argument is further supported by the fact that Milton lists personal incompatibility as his chief argument in favor of divorce, something he would not have mentioned were it not true in his own case. And while his treatises argue for a man's right to divorce his wife in the event that he finds her personally lacking, it seems that Mrs. Milton found her husband similarly deficient. Milton makes brief mention of the hypothetical man who, through his inexperience and sexual purity, mistakenly selects a poor helpmeet, but he never truly acknowledges the fact that he may have failed his wife as much as she failed him. As Fallon argues, Milton fashions himself as the virtuous hero restoring the liberty of the Christian husband (113-115). Milton and Mary Powell would later reconcile; but during their three-year separation (1642-1645), Milton would write all four of his divorce tracts.

The *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* was first published anonymously in August of 1643, during Milton's separation from Mary. I would not give the full subtitle of the work (on account of its egregious length) were it not of great relevance to the point I wish to make, after which I will follow modern convention and simply refer to it as

Divorce or by its acronym, *DDD*. However, its full title reads *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce: Restor'd to the Good of Both Sexes, from the Bondage of Canon Law, and other Mistakes, to the True Meaning of Scripture in the Law and Gospel Compar'd. Wherein Also are Set Down the Bad Consequences of Abolishing or Condemning of Sin, that which the Law of God Allowes, and Christ Abolisht not.*

Generalized statements about Milton's radicalism (particularly his stance on marriage) occasionally create the misconception that Milton was somehow a precursor to women's rights advocacy. However, as egalitarian as "to the good of both sexes" may sound, the treatise shows little to no concern about the marital happiness of the wife. In fact, Milton's opponents would accuse him of being indifferent to the humiliation and indignity his lax divorce policies could potentially inflict on a dismissed wife, charges Milton would answer in his two subsequent divorce tracts. Like God's relation to His created beings, Milton saw marriage as a hierarchical union, made famous by the passage from *Paradise Lost*, "Hee for God only, shee for God in him" (IV, 299). We should, however, guard against taking the analogy too far. Marital unions do not correlate directly to the human-Divine relationship. The husband is not the god of his wife, nor is she to worship him. But Milton saw marriage, if not explicitly male-dominated, then at least as an unequal division of labor. Some Miltonists, like Gina Hausknecht, argue that all of Milton's prose writings are gendered: that his polemical treatises constantly portray a dichotomy of masculine liberty versus feminine submissiveness, and there is great evidence in favor of this assertion ("The Gender of Civic Virtue" 19). In any event, it is certainly true of his conception of marriage.

Whatever one may think of Milton's gender attitudes, *DDD* is a work of biblical exegesis more than anything else. The divorce laws of Milton's day were explicitly based on scriptural passages, most notably Matthew 19, in which Christ states that any man who puts away his wife causes both her and her future husband to commit adultery; essentially, any such remarriage is sinful.¹³ The only exception Christ allows is if the wife is already guilty of fornication. The sin having been committed prior to or during the marriage, the husband may divorce her without further imperiling her soul; she has done that to herself already. There is also nothing in the text to indicate that remarriage after the death of a spouse is impermissible, so Christian societies have always tended to allow it. However, for a man in Milton's position, whose wife was both alive and innocent of adultery, there were few legal options to pursue. Neither the state nor the church would grant him a divorce and remarriage would have made him guilty of bigamy. As Patterson notes, there were some extralegal options available to Milton, had he been willing to skirt the law. He could have potentially found a radical Puritan minister who, considering his first marriage terminated, might have agreed to marry him to another woman (280-282). Such an action, however, would still have rendered Milton a bigamist in the eyes of the law and imperiled his future prospects; it is fortunate that he never undertook such a desperate gamble. Nevertheless, his "hopelessly unrealistic" decision to write a treatise to Parliament, believing that he could convince them to amend their marital laws, was equally risky (Patterson 281).

¹³ Matthew 19:8-9. "He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery."

When Christ speaks definitively on an issue in the Gospels, one would think the matter closed. Arguing otherwise was a monumental and hazardous task for Milton to undertake, opening him up to charges of heresy and licentiousness. The work itself is a complex effort to assert that Christ did not mean for his words to be taken literally. To prove this, Milton frequently references Deuteronomy 24:1, which is far more permissive in its description of what constitutes an acceptable divorce. In effect, the Law of Moses permits a husband to dismiss his wife if he finds her displeasing to him, after which remarriage by both of them is encouraged. As a Christian, Milton cannot argue for the supremacy of Old Testament Law; the words of Christ have to be given priority. However, Milton believes that Christ would not directly contradict the Old Testament were it not to make a specific point. Jesus called himself the fulfillment of the law, not the abandonment of it. Furthermore, Milton reminds his readers that Paul called “charity” another fulfillment of the law, perhaps, we might say, its spirit. Milton cannot concede that Christ, whose New Testament was the basis of this charity and love, would introduce a stricter discipline than the rigid law of Moses. “For if under the Law such was Gods gracious indulgence, as not to suffer the ordinance of his goodness and favour, through any error to be ser’d and stigmatiz’d upon his servants to their misery and thraldome, much lesse will he suffer it now under the covenant of grace, by abrogating his former grant of remedy and releef” (*JMP* 115). Taking Christ’s marital statements literally reintroduces the very legalism against which he had elsewhere preached.

Milton makes a number of radical assertions in the body of the text. Firstly, he directly opposes Saint Augustine and other early Church Fathers who were uniformly uncomfortable with human sexuality. For them, procreation was the only end of and

justification for marriage. Following Paul's advice, the early Fathers- had it been feasible- would have preferred universal celibacy, finding it better for the individual Christian's spiritual health. But, like the Wife of Bath, Milton is unwilling to concede that anything God made is inherently sinful. For Milton, like most of his Protestant peers, lifelong celibacy was a Catholic perversion of God's will. His commandment to Adam and Eve, that they be fruitful and multiply, was taken as a universal command. However, unlike the Wife of Bath, procreation and the satisfaction of lust, in Milton's mind, were not the primary reasons God sanctioned marriage in the first place. It was not Adam's lust, but his desire for a companion, which God fulfilled with the creation of Eve. By extension, marriage, far from being a distraction from higher, spiritual affairs, is a necessary part of making a Christian spiritually whole. Marriage is a reflection of God's relationship to His created beings, one of love and charity, forbearance and mildness. Edward Le Comte, in *Milton and Sex*, argues unconvincingly that Milton in the divorce tracts betrays a disgust or disinterestedness in human sexuality (30). I see no evidence that he was repulsed by it (Milton praises sexuality within marriage effusively in *Paradise Lost*), but Le Comte is certainly correct when he claims that Milton inverts the functions of marriage as they were traditionally understood. While the Book of Common Prayer had listed "mutuall societie, helpe, and comferte" as the third function of marriage, after procreation and the avoidance of sexual sin, Milton believes it to be the most important (Le Comte 30).

Secondly, if marriage is intended for the benefit of one's soul, then how can a marriage that thwarts its original end be forced to continue? As the title of Chapter II of *DDD* states, "no cov'nant whatsoever obliges against the main end both of it self, and of

the parties cov'nanting" (116). When a man and woman find no affection or companionship between them, but are prevented by the law from seeking out greater happiness, marriage becomes a source of sorrow and exacerbates what it was originally meant to cure, loneliness. The unmarried man can at least anticipate a future happiness, but the man unhappily married is without hope. And such a man, "by an easie mistake... reaping to himselfe sorrow while he went to rid away solitarines," will soon become, to use a modern term, toxic to both his neighbors and society at large. He will find in himself

a generall discomfort and dejection of mind, not beseeming either Christian profession or morall conversation, unprofitable and dangerous to the Commonwealth, when the household estate, out of which must flourish forth the vigor and spirit of all publick enterprizes, is so ill contented and procur'd at home, and cannot be supported. (*JMP* 116-117)

For a man like Milton who, as seen in Chapter I, had such lofty ambitions, marital misfortune threatened not only his personal happiness, but his capacity to realize his full potential. By rigidly adhering to such strict marital laws, society hurts itself in the long run.

Finally, and I would argue most importantly, Milton believes that marital freedom is a necessity for the health of the soul, not merely as it pertains to personal and domestic happiness, but for its religious health, as well. In a brilliant passage, Milton argues that when Paul says that "it is better to marry then to burn," he refers to the inner burning of the soul, whose very nature cries out for companionship. The true burning is with a "pure and more inbred desire of joyning to it selfe in conjugall fellowhip a fit conversing soul

(which desire is properly call'd love) (*JMP* 118-119). In a poor union, what should have been love turns to hate, and the soul, which burns again for want of love, consumes itself. When a marriage breeds such hatred, divorce is the only act of love which remains. "He I say who therefore seeks to part, is one who highly honours the married life and would not stain it: and the reasons which now move him to divorce, are equall to the best of those that could first warrant him to marry" (119). As referenced in the introduction, as much as Milton wishes this to seem a dispassionate argument from principle, there are passages which clearly veer into autobiography:

For if he be such as hath spent his youth unblamably, and layd up his chiefest earthly comforts in the enjoyment of a contented mariage, nor did neglect that fuderance which was to be obtain'd therein by constant prayers, when he shall find himselfe bound fast to an uncomplying discord of nature, or, as it oft happens, to an image of earth and fleam, with whom he lookt to be the copartner of a sweet and gladsome society and sees withall that his bondage is now inevitable, though he be almost the strongest Christian, he will be ready to despair in vertue, and mutin against divine providence. (120)

Given what we know of Milton's troubles with Mary Powell, he certainly seems to be describing himself. A good Christian trapped in a bad marriage can become resentful of God, if he finds the spiritual good of marriage which God promised him to be wanting, and all means of redress denied him. A poor marriage between Christians is little better than a marriage between a Christian and a heathen; both tend towards the degradation of the spirit. "What difference is there," asks Milton, "whether she [a bad wife] pervert him to superstition by her enticing sorcery, or disenable him in the whole service of God

through the disturbance of her unhelpfull and unfit society; and so drive him at last through murmuring and despair to thoughts of Atheisme” (122). Milton makes clear that this is not God’s fault, but rather the perversion of His Law and the failure to understand the teachings of His Son. God would not sanction perpetual misery, particularly not when His Old Testament had shown a more proper leniency.

Most of the remaining chapters of *DDD*’s first book present further scriptural proofs of the arguments given above. However, the final chapter, Chapter XIV, offers a unique take on the origin of religious heresies. Milton claims that strict and unjust laws, like the prohibition against divorce, give rise to sects that seek to topple religious discipline completely:

Seeing that sort of men who follow Anabaptism, Familism, Antinomianism, and other fanaticke dreams (if we understand them not amisse) be such most commonly as are by nature addicted to Religion, of life also not debauched, and that their opinions having full swinge, do end in satisfaction of the flesh, it may be come with reason into the thoughts of a wise man, whether all this proceed not partly, if not chiefly, from the restraint of some lawfull liberty, which ought to be giv’n men, and is deny’d them. (*JMP* 131)

The interjection, “if we understand them not amisse,” is likely part of Milton’s tendency to tolerate all forms of Protestantism. Nevertheless, in an appeal to those who decry schism in the church, he claims here that heresies are in part a product of overly strict religious laws. While Familists and Anabaptists were relatively mild religious dissidents, Loewenstein notes that “Antinomianism was the belief that elect Christians could not sin and were therefore free from adherence to any moral laws” (*JMP* 131). For Milton, such

licentiousness is the natural consequence of legalism. While he believed that schism and difference of opinion were not necessarily harmful to the religious health of the nation, some of the more extreme sects could have easily been prevented by more charitable laws. The unscriptural and uncharitable divorce laws Milton protests against damage both the individual Christian and the Church itself by forcing well-meaning and pious men to adopt radical creeds in search of relief.

Book II of *DDD*, like the second half of Book I, is full of yet more scriptural justifications for Milton's marital beliefs. Regrettably, the work begins to stagnate under repetitions and an overabundance of appeals to authority. This is understandable; Milton was arguing a position that few others would dare to argue and it was crucial to offer as much evidence as possible. However, little in Book II warrants further attention here, with one exception. In Chapter XXI, Milton argues for divorce in the same way he had for religious liberty. Both are matters of conscience, individual and private affairs that should not be regulated by either the church or the state. He locates the origin of this interference (as he often did) with the Roman Catholic Church. Milton never mentions annulment by name, but it seems that this is what he means when he accuses medieval popes of taking the power of divorce away from the husband and dispensing it however they pleased. As with his religion, a man should not be forced to give a public account of the details of his marriage to any magistrate.

Similarly, the power to break off the marriage should be his alone; he should not have to plead or present evidence to prove his case. Divorce is his natural right. Once again, I use these masculine pronouns because Milton consistently phrases it as the right of the husband. The woman may consent to it, and she and her husband may part

amicably enough. But there is no indication in *DDD* that Milton believes women should have a similar power. They cannot, on their own, initiate a divorce, nor can they prevent their husbands from divorcing them. Given the fact that Milton's wife left *him* and the state refused to grant him a divorce, it is easy to assume that *DDD* was a work written out of pure self-interest. The rights he wishes to reclaim apply almost exclusively to his exact circumstances, and so cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, despite his vested interest and the personal hardships that motivated the work, there is a consistency to his reasoning. As I hope I have demonstrated, particularly when we recall Chapter I, Milton was able to successfully integrate divorce into his general theme of personal liberty. For Milton, the right to divorce is no less important than any other freedom, and because marriage is inextricably linked with the well-being of the Christian soul, the right to end a failed marriage is itself a matter of religious liberty. As a man's religion should not be forced on him by the state or the church, neither should they force him to live out the rest of his days in an ill-yoked marriage. Sharon Achinstein, in "Contextualizing Milton's Divorce Tracts," argues that Milton's divorce writings are part of his larger political involvement, as he slowly broke ranks with the Presbyterians and came to identify himself more closely with the religious Independents. I agree with Achinstein's assertion (which I expand upon in Chapter IV) that the various aspects of liberty Milton addresses are interconnected; and certainly, there were political ramifications to the hostility which Milton's divorce tracts received from Presbyterian ministers and members of Parliament. But I contend that, given the textual evidence (both in *DDD* and in the other divorce tracts discussed below), political association is a secondary concern. Milton's political affiliations were made according to which group was most closely aligned with his

conscience. The justifications that Milton gives for divorce are grounded in religious liberty.

Milton would later publish three other divorce tracts, most of them expansions upon and defenses of what he had already laid out in the two editions of *DDD*, published in 1643 and early 1644, respectively. In the middle of 1644, Milton would publish his second divorce tract, *The Judgement of Martin Bucer, concerning Divorce*. Bucer was a prominent sixteenth-century Protestant theologian whose beliefs about divorce were similar to Milton's. The bulk of the tract is an appeal to Bucer's authority, which was widely respected amongst English Protestants. If Milton's arguments aligned with one of the great men of the Reformation, then why were his fellow Englishmen so unwilling to change? Milton had found Bucer's opinions after he had already written *DDD*, and he was eager to enlist the Protestant divine's aid. As Milton makes clear in the text, however, he initially reached his conclusions on his own. According to Lewalski, "[Milton] registers a keen sense of conflict between such appeals to authority and his insistent claims to scholarly autonomy and independence" (277). Although *Bucer* serves as further support for what Milton had already argued in *DDD*, there is little new content in it, and so I will not dwell on it at length. As stated previously in Chapter I, Milton seldom published only one treatise on any issue, and divorce was no exception. Having written two divorce pamphlets, more were still to come.

After *Bucer*, Milton would first turn his attention to a more pressing matter — freedom of publication. *Areopagitica* (published in the summer 1644) will be covered in the next chapter, but the failure of *DDD* and *Bucer* to convince his countrymen of his

beliefs soon brought Milton back to divorce. The introduction to *DDD* had anticipated some pushback, but, as Lewalski notes, Milton's "bold, even foolhardy campaign [for divorce] testifies to his confidence in the momentum of reform at this juncture" (163). The "juncture" to which Lewalski refers is the general atmosphere of mid-40s London. Milton had eagerly participated in the religious debates of the early 40s, and he believed that marriage was an equally fertile ground for reform, given that this new English society seemed suddenly willing to reexamine all things. However, to Milton's surprise, the Presbyterian reformers who had supported his earlier efforts were scandalized and appalled by his divorce tracts (Lewalski 176). They assaulted him in their sermons, and *DDD* even made it into an appendix of blasphemous and heretical works.¹⁴ Milton was disparagingly mentioned in Parliament, and some had called for his divorce tracts to be suppressed (Lewalski 177). Late in 1644, an anonymous tract also appeared assaulting Milton's marital beliefs in a lengthier and substantial treatment than Milton's other opponents had given him. "His [the unknown author's] strongest arguments," writes Lewalski, "call attention to practical issues Milton ignores," including the fate of the children of a divorced couple and the hardships a dismissed wife would have to endure (180). Late in 1644, Parliament considered official action against men like Milton who had authored scandalous and immoral works, with the divorce tracts attracting specific mention during their deliberations. Milton may have also been summoned before them to give a defense of himself, but the records are unclear. In any event, he suffered no real punishment at their hands (Lewalski 181-82).

¹⁴ See *Gangraena*, published in 1646 by Thomas Edwards, an English Presbyterian minister (Hughes 2). Also see Ann Hughes, editor, *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution*.

But whether or not Milton was actually called to appear before Parliament, a more timorous (or perhaps prudent) man would have let the matter be, lest he put his estate or his freedom in danger. Milton, however, was unwilling to back down, evincing a characteristic disregard for his own wellbeing which would be even more pronounced at the end of interregnum. Milton published two more divorce tracts in 1645, *Tetrachordon* and *Colasterion*. The two tracts were published simultaneously; *Colasterion* was a response to the anonymous treatise which had attacked *DDD*. The majority of the treatise is Milton's sustained, vitriolic dismissal of his opponent and, as such, adds little to his thinking on divorce. For the purposes of this chapter, it seems best to pass over *Colasterion*. *Tetrachordon* is more substantive and worthier of a closer look. It is a work of scriptural exegesis, as Milton reexamines the four passages (from Genesis, Deuteronomy, Matthew, and 1 Corinthians) he had previously utilized in *DDD* to support his argument, offering additional explanations and interpretations of each. The title *Tetrachordon* is a reference to a Greek instrument with four strings. With these four strings of Scripture, Milton hopes to write the music of marital harmony, which the harsh laws of his country currently denied him. The selections from Deuteronomy and Matthew are the same as before, the permissive allowance for divorce in the Law of Moses and the seemingly stricter teachings of Christ. The passages from Genesis highlight the reasons behind the creation of Eve and the meaning of humans being created in God's image; and the selection from 1 Corinthians is Paul's admonishment against divorcing one's spouse on the grounds of religious differences, provided that the marriage is otherwise sound.

Milton had covered Deuteronomy and Matthew exhaustively in *DDD*, and the minute examination he gives them in *Tetrachordon* provides little new insight into his

thinking. However, the Genesis passages, despite covering the same ground as before, offer fresh interpretations and expand concepts which had only seen limited exposition in *DDD*. For example, to support his understanding of marital and gender hierarchy, Milton dives back into Genesis 1:27, going so far as to explore the significance of individual words: “So God created man in his owne image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” Why, asks Milton, does it say “in the image of God created he him” instead of “them.” To Milton, the answer is simple: woman was not created in the image of God, but in the image of man instead. This inequality was implied in *DDD*, but finds its first explicit justification in *Tetrachordon*. “He not for her, but she for him,” writes Milton. This sentiment would be repeated almost verbatim in *Paradise Lost*, quoted earlier in this chapter. Milton certainly believes in the superiority of the male. However, as stated previously when discussing *DDD*, he also places clear limits on the power a man should be able to wield over his wife. “Man is not to hold her as a servant,” says Milton, “but receives her into a part of that empire which God proclaims him to, though not equally, yet largely” (*JMP* 217). Milton even concedes, somewhat surprisingly, that a woman may well exceed her husband in some aspects, surpassing him “in prudence and dexterity,” in which case the man should “contentedly yeeld” to the “more naturall law... that the wiser should govern the lesse wise, whether male or female” (217). James Grantham Turner argues that, far from being evidence of Milton’s gender egalitarianism, this admission that some men are inferior to their wives is meant to further ground Milton’s ideal of masculine authority (“The Aesthetics of Divorce” 36). Still, the man is not obliged to submit and, should he find his wife claiming more than her

just share of marital power, he is free to end the marriage and seek a better wife elsewhere.

Milton also states more clearly than he had in *DDD* that marriage is a reflection of Christ's relationship with His Church. "If man be the image of God, which consists in holiness, and woman ought in the same respect to be the image and companion of man, in such wise to be lov'd, as the Church is below'd of Christ." Thus, "Piety and Religion is the main tie of Christian Matrimony" (*JMP* 218). The wife is first "his image and helpe in religious society" (219). The command to procreate is but a secondary obligation. As he had also asserted in *DDD*, Milton here claims that if the woman becomes a hindrance to the man's relationship with God, then it is necessary for the good of his soul to end the marriage. Notably, divorce on these grounds works both ways. While Milton is unwilling to grant a woman the power to leave her husband over ill-matched personalities, she is permitted to seek a divorce if he endangers her spiritual wellbeing; "being herself the redeem'd of Christ," she "is not still bound to be the vassal of him, who is the bondslave of Satan" (218).

Perhaps because of the criticism *DDD* had received, Milton is more careful in *Tetrachordon* to take into account the rights and protections of the woman. As we have seen, he is not willing to elevate her to true equality, but *DDD* scarcely mentioned the wife at all without reference to the satisfaction of her husband. Here, at least, woman is given a proper place and some means of addressing her own grievances. Furthermore, as with *DDD*, Milton affords her a greater dignity than the early Church Fathers had in their understanding of marriage. Woman is not simply a necessary part of procreation, nor is procreation the only end of marriage. "The desire of children is honest and pious; if we

be not lesse zealous in our Christianity” (219). Since the wife has a higher purpose, Milton is hesitant to sanction divorce on account of barrenness alone; a childless marriage may be fruitful in its own way. Still, if the husband sees children as one of his greatest sources of happiness and divorce as his only means of fathering children, Milton will reluctantly allow it.

In order to support this understanding of marriage, Milton returns to Genesis, examining again the creation of Eve and the nature of her relation to Adam. While his scriptural analysis is in keeping with *DDD* (namely, that Eve [and woman in general] was created to ameliorate Adam’s [man’s] loneliness), it may be useful to look at an example of Milton’s ideal marriage in action, of which there is no better example than *Paradise Lost* itself. While the purpose of this chapter is to examine the divorce tracts, the view of marriage presented in *Paradise Lost* is much the same as what we find in *DDD* and *Tetrachordon*. Milton is remarkably consistent throughout his career and across genres; and so, although most scholars use the prose to help them understand the poetry, I believe that using the poetry to help us comprehend his earlier prose treatises is equally profitable.

In the first half of the epic, prior to their fall, Adam and Eve enjoy (in Milton’s view) a perfect relationship: Adam is the head of the union and Eve is the beneficiary of his benevolent and loving rule. They have their separate spheres of labor within the Garden, but their religious duties are performed together, such as “Thir Morning Hymn” in praise of God in Book III. Of Eve’s creation, little more is said than that she had to learn the proper hierarchy of Creation. After initially thinking herself the fairest creature in the Garden of Eden, Eve quickly comes to acknowledge Adam as her natural superior

and yields to his “manly grace/ And wisdom” (4. 490-1).¹⁵ As Eve had recounted her first memories to Adam, Adam relates his creation to Raphael during their four-book-long discussion in the middle of the epic, in which the bulk of Creation is explained: the fall of Satan and his allies, the war in Heaven, Satan’s expulsion, and the creation of the cosmos, Earth, and all its life. Having named each beast in his earthly paradise, Adam notes, “I found not what methought I wanted still” (8. 355). Mildly complaining to God, he asks, “In solitude/ What happiness, who can enjoy alone,/ Or all enjoying, what contentment find?” (ll. 364-66). After being asked by God if the various creatures of the earth are insufficient to satisfy his need for companionship, Adam answers that all beings need companions like themselves. Only the Creator is free from such a need, being Himself whole and singular. So says Adam to God:

Thou in thyself art perfect, and in thee
Is no deficiency found; not so is Man,
But in degree, the cause of his desire
By conversation with his like to help,
Or solace his defects. (8. 415-19)

Pleased with his words and assenting to his reasoning, God grants Adam the companion he desires. In turn, Adam praises God for His bounteous gifts, and he and Eve immediately wed, with all of Creation serving as the minister to this original marriage.

As Adam finishes his narrative, he remarks to Raphael that he is often captivated by her beauty, so much so that he finds his reason diminished.

Yet when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
And in herself complete, so well to know

¹⁵ Gender relations and the power dynamics between Adam and Eve have garnered considerable critical attention, one of the best of which is *Milton’s Eve* by Diane McColley. “In *Paradise Lost* subordination is not inferiority,” argues McColley (35). One could make the same argument for the divorce tracts; while perhaps not inferior, Milton certainly believes that the wife should be subordinate to her husband.

Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
 Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
 All higher knowledge in her presence falls
 Degraded, Wisdom in discourse with her
 Loses discount'nanc't, and like folly shows;
 Authority and Reason on her wait. (8. 546-54)

Given what we know of Milton's biography, it seems that he also fell victim to such a delusion. The young Mary Powell must have appeared to his fancy to be the ideal bride he had always envisioned and, deceived by her outward grace, he turned a blind eye to (or perhaps never bothered to inspect) the quality of her mind and character. Fortunately for Adam, Eve possesses more than enough wisdom and sociability to be the spiritual helpmeet he had requested from God. After Adam admits to his enthrallment to Eve, Raphael answers with a discourse on marriage highly reminiscent of Milton's earlier divorce tracts. Though Eve is graceful and attractive, the angel reminds Adam that she was not created merely for his sexual satisfaction:

But if the sense of touch whereby mankind
 Is propagated seems such dear delight
 Beyond all other, think the same voutsaf't
 To Cattle and each Beast; which would not be
 To them made common and divulg'd, if aught
 Therein enjoy'd were worthy to subdue
 The Soul of Man, or passion in him move.
 What higher in her society thou find'st
 Attractive, human, rational, love still
 In loving thou dost well, in passion not,
 Wherein true Love consists not; Love refines
 The thoughts, and heart enlarges, hath his seat
 In Reason, and is judicious, is the scale
 By which to heav'nly Love thou may'st ascend. (8. 579-592)

“Law cannot command love,” writes Milton in *Tetrachordon*, “without which, matrimony hath no true being, no good, no solace, nothing of Gods instituting” (*JMP*

239-40). While he uses this statement to argue that a loveless marriage is not aided by forcing a couple to remain married, it is predicated on the same understanding of marriage found in *Paradise Lost*. Milton and his Raphael speak the same message: love and the ideal marriage consist of spiritual and intellectual companionship. Sexuality is not evil; within a good marriage, it is to be celebrated. But it is not the reason God created woman, nor is it the first duty of marriage. Naturally, Adam had no alternatives and his wife was, as Milton amply demonstrates, possessed of wisdom, intelligence, righteousness, and so forth. Adam had no need to seek another wife; he merely needed instruction to appreciate her.

Soon enough, though, what had been an ideal pairing between Adam and Eve became more bestial. In Book IX, as they break God's commandment and eat of the tree, the resulting effects on their marriage are quick and destructive. Immediately after eating the apple, their love for one another turns to a ravenous lust: "There they thir fill of Love and Love's disport/ Took largely, of thir mutual guilt the Seal,/ The solace of their sin" (9. 1042-4). This is subsequently followed by quarreling and disdain as they realize they have forfeited Paradise. They hide their nakedness from one another and blame each other for their sins. Forced finally to confront their fallen natures and consider their future, Adam and Eve, like Milton and Mary Powell, eventually reconcile and, being cast out, leave the Garden together, consigned to a tragic and poignant new relationship. At the narrative's close, "They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,/ Through Eden took thir solitary way" (12. 648-9). While their marriage at the end of the great poem is far from the perfection they knew in the Garden, Milton nevertheless uses even the fallen Adam and Eve as a model of matrimony for sinful and imperfect mortals. At the end of

Book X, after considering how they might best appease God's wrath, they decide to pray together, seeking forgiveness for themselves and drawing nearer to God and to one another in the process:

They forthwith to the place
 Repairing where he judg'd them prostrate fell
 Before him reverent, and both confess'd
 Humbly thir faults, and pardon begg'd, with tears
 Watering the ground, and with thir sighs the Air
 Frequenting, sent from hearts contrite, in sign
 Of sorrow unfeign'd, and humiliation meek. (10. 1098-1104)

In a fallen and sinful world, nothing in marriage can be more sacred than for a husband and wife to help each other in their spiritual progress.

Tetrachordon is distinguished by the priority given to the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis, thereby justifying this brief aside to examine marriage in *Paradise Lost*. Milton spends almost half of *Tetrachordon* establishing the true reason behind woman's creation and the meaning of marriage, for which the example of Adam and Eve is his greatest proof. Moving now to the remainder of the text, Milton returns to the passages he had thoroughly examined in *DDD*. There is a fair amount of repetition, but *Tetrachordon*'s second half still has a few things worth noting. Of the Law of Moses and its allowance for divorce, Milton claims, "The Law is to tender the liberty and the human dignity of them that live under [it]" (*JMP* 236). The liberty to divorce, being granted by the law, is an inextricable part of the general human liberty which God grants to all people. To infringe upon this liberty is thus a sin against God, reducing free men and women to "the lowest slavery that human shape can bee put to" (237).

Milton would reconcile with Mary Powell soon after the publication of *Tetrachordon* in 1645 and, as far as we know, his marital troubles would come to a permanent end. Though biographers from Phillips on have speculated that the king's defeat forced the Powells into a reconciliation, John and Mary Milton enjoyed a happy (as far as we know) and fruitful marriage until Mary's death shortly after the birth of their fourth and final child in 1652. Milton would marry twice more, to Katherine Woodcock in 1656 (who subsequently died in 1658) and to Elizabeth Minshul in 1663; both of these later marriages were childless and far more amicable. After his reconciliation, he would never again write about divorce in his polemical prose, save where he mentions his previous labors in the *Second Defense*.

However, the conception of marriage laid out in these tracts resurfaces in *Paradise Lost* and again in *Samson Agonistes*. As we have seen, marriage in *Paradise Lost* is the same intellectual and spiritual union he had believed it to be in the 1640s. There is no evidence to suggest that his views on divorce ever changed. As Patterson observes, marriage in *Paradise Lost* is more reciprocal and egalitarian than the overt hierarchy of the divorce tracts; but the hierarchy is still there (292-293). If a man's wife is ill-equipped to be his comfort and solace, and he cannot love her as Christ loves His Church, then it is his right to seek a proper companion elsewhere. If the civil magistrate and religious law infringe upon this freedom, then not only is his personal happiness in danger, so too is capacity to live a life profitable to those around him. Furthermore, because the greatest happiness and support which God has promised him are found wanting, his soul is endangered because he may (unjustly) believe God's law to be the source of his misery. Finding the gift of marriage to be less bountiful than he had hoped,

and seeing no means of correcting his misfortune, an otherwise good Christian may blame and resent the God whose law had actually provided for his relief. Unjust, unscriptural, and unduly harsh prohibitions of divorce threaten every aspect of a man's liberty, civil and religious alike. And since nothing is of greater value to a man than his soul and its eternal fate, it is no stretch to claim that, for Milton, the freedom to divorce is chiefly a matter of religious liberty.

Chapter III: *Areopagitica*

Areopagitica has, with good reason, historically commanded the most attention of any of Milton's prose works. With its robust defense of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, it is often cited as a precursor to the writings and ideas of John Locke, the American Founding Fathers, and classical liberalism more generally. It is also the only work of Milton's prose career known by the general reading public, with several quotations engraved on libraries and university buildings across the Western world. However, one often gets the sense that *Areopagitica* is given less attention by literary scholars than it deserves. In striving to understand Milton's prose in its totality, critics occasionally depreciate the value of this particular tract, merely lumping it in with the rest. But *Areopagitica* is special and, I believe, unique enough to warrant its own chapter in this thesis, both on the grounds of its literary merit and its content. Despite what Milton himself claims elsewhere, *Areopagitica* is unlike his other works on domestic liberty, and certainly different from the prose treatises specifically about the evils of the church or the monarchy. And yet, in spite of these considerable external differences, *Areopagitica* is linked to the general corpus of Milton's prose in one key respect: the centrality of religious freedom. The bulk of this chapter, then, will have a purpose similar to the others, to show that *Areopagitica*, like all of Milton's prose, has religious truth at the forefront. Although many of the arguments made in *Areopagitica* can be justly applied to secular matters, freedom of conscience is what Milton desires most, the freedom to bear his religious convictions to the world at large, whatever the public may think of them.

To begin, it seems necessary to reiterate and further elaborate on the point made in the general introduction, that being that *Areopagitica* is worthy of its own category distinct from the rest of Milton's prose. As we saw before, when the issue of categorization is taken up by Milton scholars, they typically take Milton at his word, citing what he wrote in his *Second Defense of the English People*.

Since, then, I observed that there are, in all, three varieties of liberty without which civilized life is scarcely possible, namely ecclesiastical liberty, domestic or personal liberty, and civil liberty, and since I had already written about the first, while I saw that the magistrates were vigorously attending to the third, I took as my province the remaining one, the second or domestic kind. This too seemed to be concerned with three problems: the nature of marriage itself, the education of the children, and finally the existence of freedom to express oneself. (*JMP* 349)

But in what manner is the ability to express an opinion a purely domestic affair? Milton himself argues against this assertion in *Areopagitica*, making a clear distinction between private fancies and the "deeply consider'd" meditations which can reform a nation (*JMP* 183). Despite his general admiration for him, Milton laments that "Plato, a man of high authority indeed, but least of all for his Commonwealth, in the book of his laws, which no City ever yet received, fed his fancie with making many edicts to his ayrie Burgomasters, which they who otherwise admire him, wish had bin rather buried and excus'd in the genial cups of an Academick night-sitting" (*JMP* 195). Put less crudely, those thoughts which are purely domestic in nature, as likely to be the result of dyspepsia as of any intellectual profundity, are not worthy of consideration by the public. Every individual is

entitled to private thoughts, and even the most repressive states in human history, as much as they may wish to control the mind, can only control the outward expression of inward ruminations. It is this expression that Milton defends, and so more naturally concerns the individual's relation to the powers that be than to any domestic matter.

Furthermore, as Elizabeth Skerpan Wheeler points out, *Areopagitica* is a defense of more than the author alone. The Licensing Order of 1643, which prompted the composition of *Areopagitica*, was an attempt to regulate the entire book trade, and held everyone involved in the production of a book to be responsible for its contents and liable to similar punishment if the text was published without the permission of a licensor. "This Milton is a republican public citizen," writes Wheeler, and the truth of this could not be more evident (276). He speaks on behalf of an entire industry that must bear the brunt of the new Order. This is not to say that Milton overlooks the private individual's right to express dissenting opinions. After all, the treatise is written as an address to Parliament, in imitation of the written speech of Isocrates delivered to the Areopagus, the Athenian ruling council. Like Isocrates, Milton is not a public magistrate, nor does he possess any power whatsoever to alter official policy on his own; as a result, the introduction is partly a justification of his right to address Parliament at all. In this respect, *Areopagitica* is indeed a defense of the domestic individual's ability to share private labors; but such sharing can be revolutionary, more conducive to the reformation of entire nations than to household affairs. After the address to Parliament, the long journey through the history of censorship on which Milton takes the reader is a history of publication rights: what types of books were permitted, and which forbidden. As we will see later, this also has a religious purpose; but for now, the point remains that what is

being defended is not the individual's right to private thoughts, but rather the right to insert such thoughts into the public discourse, to participate in and, if the argument is strong enough, ultimately to shape the policy of the nation.

One more argument in favor of its unique status can serve to distinguish *Areopagitica* from the rest of Milton's prose, this time on the basis of quality rather than type. Stylistically, as one would expect, *Areopagitica* is most similar to the other works of the 1640s, the anti-prelatical and divorce tracts. However, *Areopagitica* is a literary creation of the highest order and, in my opinion, the only piece of Milton's prose which possesses a sustained artistic drive comparable to the poetry. It is also calmer and less indignant than the religious prose of the early 40s. As David Loewenstein remarks, with *Areopagitica* "Milton composed a pamphlet which simultaneously lacks the intensely virulent rhetoric of his previous polemics and embraces social conflict" (*Milton and the Drama of History* 35-36). Milton is not detached from his subject in any way, but in his other prose, there are times when the righteous fury of his convictions diminishes rather than strengthens his persuasiveness. *Areopagitica* is a personal plea, but one possessing greater magnanimity and restraint than his earlier works.

By 1649, Milton would, in his prose, largely abandon the figurative, allusive, and imagistic rhetoric of *Areopagitica*, replacing it instead with a blunt sobriety, apparently deemed more suitable for serious matters of church and state. The works from 1649-60 were often written on behalf of the Commonwealth or Cromwell's Protectorate, so Milton naturally had to suppress his personal voice in order speak for the collective body politic. But justifications of a regime and its actions hardly make for compelling literature. By contrast, the treatises of 1641-2 are often grandiose and intensely personal,

most noticeably in the outline of his poetic ambitions at the end of *The Reason of Church Government*. But nowhere else in Milton's prose do we find a figure as strikingly poignant as the mangled body of Truth in *Areopagitica*, which men of laborious study must, like Isis with the body of Osiris, work diligently to piece back together.

This is only one example of the many different figurations of Truth or, to be more specific, the interplay between Truth and books, which Milton conjures in the mind of the reader. Books, far from being "absolutely dead things," "may chance to spring up armed men" when possessed of sufficient force and persuasion (*JMP* 185). Similarly, Virtue, what we may perhaps call the sister of Truth, is later imagined as a mighty combatant in the field of human endeavors, more than capable of single-handedly vanquishing those who would threaten her. Magistrates and prelates do more harm than good when they seek to suppress what they perceive to be falsehood, because Truth is not like Proteus, speaking truly only when chained. Rather, Truth must be left free, and those who claim to advance her cause, whether correct or not, must also be left free to do so without threat of loss or injury. Figures such as these leave a far greater impression in the mind of the reader than any of Milton's other prose works, and this allegorical use of Truth does so as powerfully as Milton's personifications of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost*. All three are figures which drive home crucial aspects of the human experience in unforgettable literature. But unlike Sin and Death, Truth and Virtue are positive forces which heal and restore society as a whole. As William Riley Parker writes in his critical biography, "the oration is a masterpiece of eloquence. *Areopagitica* is Milton's prose hymn of hope" (275).

Areopagitica anticipates nothing less than a radical, global reformation, with England as the nation through which, like the ancient Hebrews, God will spread his truth to the world. It is in England that “God is decreeing to begin some new and great period in his Church, ev’n to the reforming of Reformation it self: what does he then but reveal Himself to his servants, and as his manner is, first to his English-men” (*JMP* 207). Those initial flames of Reformation, Calvin and Zwingli, inaugurated the recovery of Christian Truth which the Catholic Church had torn to pieces; but, as Rabbi Tarfon told his followers, “It is not thy duty to complete the work, but neither art thou free to desist from it” (*Pirkei Avot* 11). Truth is revealed only in bits and pieces and, being been the beneficiaries of the labor of others, it falls to those who receive it to take up the work anew. “The light which we have gain’d,” says Milton, “was giv’n us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge” (*JMP* 206). Although Milton knows well that human endeavors, like the Tower of Babel, cannot aspire to God’s eminence, nor can they ever reconfigure the truth of Christ into its original form (such work is God’s alone and must wait until the Second Coming), it is still the duty of every Christian to seek it and express their convictions when they believe they have found it. As Parker notes, laymen are no less likely to take part in a reformation than the clergy (266). And if the Catholic Church’s reaction to Wycliffe, Luther, or Galileo is any indication, the clergy is much more likely to be an obstacle. Milton implores the Presbyterian Parliament not to make the same mistake as their Anglican and Catholic forbears; let Truth fend for herself.

Truth is the closest likeness of God that mortals can look upon; and though the Bible is, for Milton, incontrovertible truth, it does not encompass the whole of human

existence. As Raphael tells Adam before the fall, God has not revealed all knowledge humanity, only that which is essential for its wellbeing. Refusing to directly answer Adam's question on the movement of the heavenly spheres, and which bodies orbit which, Raphael tells him that God will leave it to future generations to learn for themselves, "if they list to try/ Conjecture, he his Fabric of the Heav'ns/ Hath left to thir Disputes" (V, 75-77). While the God of *Paradise Lost*, according to Raphael, may be amused by mankind's feeble attempts to understand His Creation, Milton does not ascribe such indifference to God in *Areopagitica*. It is in one of the most memorable passages, alluded to above, where Milton argues that even the truth which God has directly revealed to humanity has become hard to discern.

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after him were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers, who as that story goes of the Ægyptian Typhon with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good Osiris, took the virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds. (*JMP* 205)

While Milton does not define who this "wicked race of deceivers" was (although we may guess with some certainty that he envisions it to have been the rising legion of bishops and prelates who infiltrated the early Christian Church), he is more concerned with the attempt to piece Truth back together in the present. To finish the quote from above, Milton believes that the greatest enemies of God's Truth are those who, whether Catholic or otherwise, stand in the way of recovering its original form.

From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear,
imitating the carefull search that Isis made for the mangl'd body of Osiris,
went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them.
We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe,
till her Masters second coming; he shall bring together every joynt and
member, and shall mould them into immortall feature of lovelines and
perfection. Suffer not these licencing prohibitions to stand at every place
of opportunity forbidding and disturbing them that continue to our
obsequies to the torn body of our martyr'd Saint. (*JMP* 205-6)

This assertion is, at its core, intensely Puritan, both with its emphasis on freedom of conscience and its implicit fundamentalist beliefs. For fundamentalists, of Milton's day no less than the present, the true Christian Church was established by Christ and further systematized by Paul, and the intervening fifteen-hundred or, for us, two-thousand years are of little consequence; the farther removed from the source, the more likely it is to be corrupted. Protestants who wish to recover the original religion which has been lost through the centuries can only do so by modelling church government on scriptural authority. Although Milton, unlike many of his modern-day fundamentalist counterparts, was certainly not ignorant of the history of the early Church in the centuries after Paul, he nevertheless demonstrates a subtle, but detectable, belief in the value of imitating the primitive Church of the Apostles.

Unfortunately, schism and difference of opinion are the inevitable results of a religious system in which individuals are free to follow their own beliefs. As much as fundamentalists might wish to recreate the original apostolic Church, a newly formed

congregation no sooner makes the attempt than that it splinters again over some doctrinal difference or conflicting interpretation of Scripture. But Milton can accept this and sees no reason why Protestants should be unwilling to amiably tolerate such disagreements. “We doe not see that while we still affect by all means a rigid externall formality,” writes Milton, “we may as soon fall again into a grosse conforming stupidity, . . . which is more to the sudden degenerating of a Church then many subdichotomies of petty schisms” (*JMP* 211). Plurality is not an evil Milton wishes to shy away from; in fact, it is not an evil, at all. “Yet if all cannot be of one mind, as who looks they should be? this doubtles is more wholesome, more prudent, and more Christian that many be tolerated, rather then all compell’d.” This conclusion is the practical application of Milton’s doctrine of freedom of expression, a society which can hardly be called secular. Rather, Protestants of varying religious convictions can live side by side in peace and unity of purpose (if not doctrine).

While *Areopagitica* could be considered anti-Utopian because of its dismissal of the imagined perfect societies of Bacon and More, Milton presents his own, more practical vision of social harmony. “To sequester out of the world into Atlantick and Utopian polities, which never can be drawn into use, will not mend our condition” (*JMP* 196). Instead, individuals who are actually useful in working towards a better tomorrow are those who thoroughly engage with the issues of the day, consider their causes and, after much study and deliberation, propose solutions. Such are the principles upon which London, Milton’s New Jerusalem, should operate.

Behold now this vast City; a City of refuge, the mansion house of liberty,
encompast and surrounded with his protection; the shop of warre hath not

more anvils and hammers waking, to fashion out the plates and instruments of armed Justice in defence of beleaguer'd Truth, then there be pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and idea's wherewith to present, as with their homage and their fealty the approaching Reformation. (*JMP* 207)

This is a nation genuinely striving towards perfection, and the disputes and disagreements build a more perfect city. Milton asserts, "There must be many schisms and many dissections in the quarry and in the timber, ere the house of God can be built. And when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in this world" (*JMP* 208).

Another of the chief arguments for the religious nature of *Areopagitica* can be found by what Milton condemns rather than what he praises. Milton's primary means of persuading Parliament that their Licensing Order contravenes all Protestant doctrine is to establish its Catholic origins. As Barbara Lewalski writes, "representing censorship as papist in origin and in essence because it suppresses liberty of conscience, he links to Roman Catholicism not only the 'apishly Romanizing' Laud and Charles I, but also the Presbyterian supporters of the new censorship law" (193). After surveying the history of the pagans and finding no comparable prohibition, Milton further shows that the early Christians were also liberal in what they allowed themselves to read; they were never given any explicit orders not to read the works of pagans. In fact, Julian the Apostate, the lone pagan emperor after Constantine, in his attempt to suppress Christianity and reinstitute paganism as the religion of the Roman Empire, forbade Christians to read the works of non-Christians, claiming, as Milton quotes him, "they wound us with our own

weapons, and with our owne arts and sciences they overcome us” (*JMP* 190). Milton is letting Julian make his argument for him: those who forbid the reading of certain types of books betray their own insecurities about the soundness of their beliefs. Much like the militant figure of Truth, those who profess themselves to be her devotees have nothing to fear from the publication of contrary opinions. If they are false, they will be duly refuted as such. And if they are true, only those who are the secret enemies of Truth will dare to stand in her way.

Similarly, Milton’s justification for the free publication of all kinds of writing is drawn from religious principle. Examining the ancient Hebrews and continuing through to the Fathers of the early Christian Church, Milton demonstrates that being conversant with the works of apostates and heathens, even possessing an intimate knowledge of their religious beliefs, does not work to the detriment of one’s faith. Moses was familiar with the religion of the Egyptians, Daniel was surrounded by devotees of the Babylonian religion, and Paul knew enough of the Greek Pantheon to use it in his evangelistic work. “To the pure, all things are pure,” says Paul, and men of great learning, as long as that learning is grounded in Christian virtue, are in no danger by being exposed to such works (*JMP* 190-1). Rather, if we look at one of Milton’s other wonderful metaphors, that of Virtue, she (Truth and Virtue are both personified as feminine figures) is glorified by trial in battle. She is not a Catholic monk or nun retreating from the world so as not to be corrupted; she shows her strength by vanquishing her opponents.

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister’d virtue, unexercis’d & unbreath’d, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring

not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is triall, and trial is by what is contrary. That vertue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evill, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank vertue, not a pure; her whitenesse is but an excremental whiteness. (*JMP* 193).

Like the Lady in *Comus*, the virtue of an individual, an idea, or a book is only proven by what it can withstand. Similarly, if the members of a given society fall back into regarding custom and prohibition as the only bulwark against their diminution, then Truth and Virtue are already on the decline.

This mixture of metaphors quoted above, in which Virtue is both a Gustavus-Adolphus-like Protestant warrior and the winner of an Olympic contest rewarded with the garland, is also a good example of Milton's syncretism. As Blair Hoxby argues, *Areopagitica* represents a blend of "Christian Liberty and Roman Manhood," though I would argue that the latter is in service to the former (221). Censorship is a paternalistic evil because it infantilizes its victims and judges the public to be incapable of distinguishing right from wrong. For Milton, the child-like Christianity of Roman Catholicism can be nurtured back to maturity by looking to the ancients and taking what is honorable, leaving behind the superstitions they mistakenly believed. "Unlike some Reformation theologians," writes Hoxby, "Milton is not at pains to draw a distinction between Christian liberty and the ideal of civil liberty that he finds in the ancients" (225). But the matter is easily resolved if we recall what Milton has said elsewhere in *Areopagitica*. Just as wicked books will not corrupt the studious and grounded Christian reader, the same reader should be able to decipher what is worth retaining and what

should be discarded when reading the works of non-Christians. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Milton clearly believes that there is value in the works of the ancients, despite their pre-Christian religious beliefs. Though it may seem odd to a modern reader, Milton is far more willing to overlook the religion of the ancient Greeks and Romans than that of the Roman Catholics.

One cannot fully appreciate the importance of this distinction without first understanding the extreme anti-Catholic vitriol and paranoia present in England at the time. In the anti-prelatical tracts of 1641-2, Milton had lambasted the episcopacy of the Church of England precisely because they retained too much of the priestly hierarchies of the Catholic Church; and, as noted above, he later excoriated the Presbyterian majority in Parliament when they seemed to be falling into the same habits. Looking at society more broadly, frequent mention was made by Parliamentarians during the English Civil War of Henrietta Maria, the French-Catholic wife of Charles I, as a way to question his fidelity to English Protestantism. And events like the Irish Massacre of 1641, in which thousands of English colonists in Ireland were killed by native Catholics, only served to fuel Protestant fears. Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns, in their biography of Milton, note the general growth of anti-Catholic sentiment throughout the early 1640s, as the crown and Archbishop William Laud, who had been fairly tolerant of Catholics, fell from power. Several Catholic priests were killed, some by mob violence (Campbell and Corns 172).

This anxiety and suspicion is present in *Areopagitica*, with Catholicism being the one thing that Milton is unwilling to tolerate, both in books and in society as a whole. Amongst the great figures of English literature, Milton may well be the most fiercely

anti-Catholic. After advocating for a general toleration of all Protestant sects, Milton assures Parliament that “I mean not tolerated Popery, and open superstition, which as it extirpates all religions and civill supremacies, so it self should be extirpat, provided first that all charitable and compassionat means be us’d to win and regain the weak and the misled” (*JMP* 211). Catholicism cannot be tolerated because it is more than a matter of personal conscience; for Milton and his contemporaries, Catholicism was a political and social threat because it was assumed that the main goal of Catholics in Protestant nations was the restoration of the Vatican’s rule. Permitting Catholics to freely publish and argue their doctrines would be to passively nurture and tolerate subversive and destructive elements within one’s own polity.

To return briefly to Milton’s initial introductory address to Parliament, and the role they can play in reformation, Loewenstein argues persuasively that Milton believes in Parliament’s inherent ability to steer the religious trajectory of the nation. As much as he supports the individual’s right to bring forth the religious truths that appears in one’s private meditations, and as much as Milton despises a national church, there is still room for governing bodies to glorify themselves by playing an active role in fostering the City on a Hill which Milton envisions. As discussed earlier, and as Loewenstein asserts, “Milton interprets the history of censorship as another version of the history of hindered reformation” (*Milton and the Drama of History* 39).

English magistrates, to the shame of the nation, had stood in the way of Wycliffe two centuries before, and in their stead let Germany and Switzerland reap the glories of the first blossoming Reformation. “Indeed,” writes Loewenstein, “had the prelates not suppressed Wyclif [Milton’s spelling] as a ‘schismatic and innovator,’ he might have

eclipsed such Reformation lights as Huss, Jerome of Prague, even Luther and Calvin” (39). While religion is never explicitly mentioned in Milton’s flattery of Parliament, his long catalogue of their virtues which fill the opening pages of *Areopagitica*, the arguments that follow make clear what Milton values most from civil magistrates. In the quotation given previously, Milton shows a type of national pride in the English possession of God’s favor. He comes first to the English, though like the ancient Hebrews, they frequently prove themselves unworthy of the distinction by neglecting their obligations. Although Milton certainly has great national pride himself, this is also meant as an appeal to the hubris of Parliament. It will be to their everlasting fame and praise if they do nothing more than let the studious labors of private citizens take up the work of reformation unimpeded.

Indeed, in another instance of flattery, Milton credits the Lords and Commons of Parliament he is addressing to be the authors of the freedom the English currently enjoy. While he does not say how they accomplished this, we can assume that Milton is referring to the disestablishment of the Church of England and the Council of Star Chamber, of which the Long Parliament was the chief architect. After the collapse of the state’s original censorship apparatus, London saw a publication explosion unlike any before in English history. As Ann Hughes writes, in “*Areopagitica* and the Parliamentary Cause,” the year 1641 saw over 2,000 works published, and that number nearly doubled in 1642. Part of this was due to the growing popularity of small treatises rather than massive tomes, the former being much easier to circulate in greater numbers (Hughes 206). But Parliament gradually grew alarmed at the outpouring of unregulated publications, passing their 1643 Licensing Order to combat this rapidly expanding

phenomenon. Milton reminds the members of Parliament that they were the ones responsible for this explosion, although Milton sees it as a cause for celebration rather than alarm. Parliament should relish its role as the liberator of a shackled people. Keeping in mind the glorious atmosphere of London which Milton is describing, Parliament should be wary of reinstating any of the oppressions of the old regime.

In conclusion, it was this new religious atmosphere, created by the conditions discussed previously, that Milton celebrates and defends in *Areopagitica*. The Licensing Order, as Hughes notes, did little to stop this flood of publication. But to Milton, principle matters, and the deleterious effects of a bad law extend beyond its enforcement (Hughes 212). When compared to later political theorists, or his contemporary Thomas Hobbes, Milton is far more hopeful in the potential for the state and its citizens to work cooperatively for the greater good; they do not need to be irreconcilable antagonists. And it is only with the aid and support of Parliament that Milton's ultimate religious hopes for England can be achieved: "For now the time seems come, wherein Moses the Great Prophet may sit it heav'n rejoycing to see that memorable and glorious wish of his fulfill'd, when not only our sev'nty Elders, but all the Lords people are become prophets" (*JMP* 208). With the state as its chief sponsor, the religious atmosphere of London, brought about and supported by the free publication of books and the ideas, can continue its work towards a national, even universal Reformation.

Chapter IV-The Political Treatises

While the divorce tracts had made Milton something of a social pariah, his political writings would eventually have him labeled a traitor to the Crown. Eighteenth-century conservative critics like Samuel Johnson, while admitting Milton's poetic talents, could never enthusiastically admire the man because of his political radicalism. Milton's writings on civil liberty spanned the entire interregnum, from 1649-60. With the publication of *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton became one of the most prominent apologists for Cromwell's regime. Furthermore, *The Tenure*, along with *Eikonoklastes* and some personal connections with those in power, led to Milton's appointment as Cromwell's Secretary of Foreign Tongues, responsible for all Latin correspondence with nations across the continent. What little poetry he published during this period was also frequently political, like his sonnets to Cromwell, Fairfax, and Vane, in addition to *On the Late Massacre in Piedmont*, which objected to the violent suppression of Waldensians on the European mainland. However, we should not overlook the fact that two of his most beautiful and widely anthologized sonnets were written during the 50s, Sonnets XIX ("When I consider how my light is spent") and XXIII ("Methought I saw my late espoused saint"). Additionally, while conventional scholarship long asserted that *Paradise Lost* was a product of the Restoration, modern scholars argue Milton began serious work on it during the 50s.

Nevertheless, the published work from this twelve-year period was almost entirely devoted to matters of state and proper governance. The aforementioned *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, published in February of 1649, a few weeks after the execution of Charles I, was a justification of the regicide. *Eikonoklastes* was published in October of

the same year and was a point-by-point refutation of *Eikon Basilike*, which purported to be the final meditations of the condemned King.¹⁶ In the early 1650s, Milton would write his first officially sanctioned Latin treatises, *Defensio pro populo Anglicano (Defense of the English People)*, in 1651, and the *Defensio Secunda (Second Defense)* in 1654. The first *Defense* countered the writings of Claudius Salmasius, a French Protestant living at the court of Queen Kristina of Sweden. Salmasius had written an invective against the execution of Charles, and Milton was tasked with answering it. The *Second Defense* replied to an anonymous attack on Milton's original *Defense*, and will be discussed later in this chapter. The *Second Defense* holds great interest, both for Milton scholars and for this thesis particularly, because Milton includes a long, autobiographical digression in which he sums up his life to that point, specifically defining the types of liberty he sought to defend. Lastly, his final political treatise would be his most succinct attempt at political philosophy. Published shortly before the Restoration of the Stuarts in 1660, *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* sees Milton warn his countrymen against the dangers of a return to monarchy.

Milton was no theocrat, and, to a degree, he believed in the separation of church and state. Neither was Milton a secularist, however, and the type of state governance for which he advocates is markedly Protestant, a nation which adheres to his notion of tolerance and freedom of conscience. As with the previous two, this final chapter will demonstrate that religious liberty, and the freedom of the individual to practice according

¹⁶ As Loewenstein notes in his introduction to the text, *Eikon Basilike (The Royal Image)* was almost certainly not written by the King himself. It was "compiled and probably mainly written by John Gauden, the future bishop of Worcester" (275). Regardless, the book became an instant bestseller and was printed in more than thirty editions in the space of a year (Lewalski 247).

to his beliefs, is foremost in Milton's mind. Even when writing against the King or when advising the state on how best to run the nation, he does so with an eye toward safeguarding the Protestant Christian's religious rights.

As suggested in the opening paragraph, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* was the boldest treatise Milton would ever publish. The subtitle leaves little room to question Milton's overall purpose: *Proving, That it is Lawfull, and hath been held so through all Ages, for any, who have the Power, to call to account a Tyrant, or wicked King, and after due conviction, to depose, and put him to death; if the ordinary Magistrate have neglected, or deny'd to doe it.* This convoluted title represents the complexity of what Milton was trying to accomplish. In the early 1640s, Milton had been very much aligned with the Presbyterians in their opposition to the prelates of the Church of England. However, as demonstrated in Chapter III, Milton broke with them in the mid-40s over their move to censor and suppress opinions they disliked, much as the Star Chamber under William Laud had done before them. *Areopagitica* thoroughly exposed their social hypocrisy, as the oppressed eagerly became the new oppressors. But for Milton and like-minded religious Independents, the Presbyterians soon became political enemies, as well.

The primary opponents to whom Milton addresses his argument are not the defeated Royalists, but these same parliamentary Presbyterians who, having previously supported the New Model Army of Cromwell and Fairfax, balked at their civil obligation to hold the King accountable for his actions. While the Presbyterian-dominated Parliament favored reconciliation with Charles, the Army wanted him dead. Cognizant that a full Parliament would never consent to a trial of the King, the Army arrested or

otherwise impeded the Presbyterian MPs, along with any others inclined towards leniency. Having removed all opposition, the Purged or Rump Parliament, as it came to be known, speedily tried and executed Charles I. As Campbell and Corns point out, Milton was essentially defending a military coup (*John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* 189-190, 195-199). However, Milton largely slides around this uncomfortable reality by claiming that when some, like the Presbyterians, fail to see their actions through to completion, it is acceptable for a minority to take upon themselves the well-being of the nation and act through force (Loewenstein 186). The arguments used by Royalists and Presbyterians against putting the King to death were religious in nature. The royal prerogative, the Divine Right of Kings, explicitly asserted that kings were God's chosen rulers. Though they were not infallible, kings were not to be subjected to the laws of civil society. At his trial, Charles I refused to testify before his accusers, claiming that he was answerable to God alone and that no court had any right to prosecute him. Though the tactic failed to convince the Rump Parliament, his assertion was common belief, both in England and on the European continent. After two-and-a-half centuries of incessant social and political upheaval, a leader being executed by his own people may seem run-of-the-mill to a current student of history; but from the middle ages on, kings had been consistently linked with the will of God. To revolt against them was to imply that God had chosen poorly when he selected the leader of a nation. Passive acceptance of civil rule was supported by various verses of the New Testament, such as rendering unto Caesar

what belongs to Caesar.¹⁷ *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* attempts to refute all of this by disassociating God and the Bible from the political interests of the ruling class.

Mine is not a Marxist reading of the text, and Milton is no hero of the proletariat. He shows no specific concern for a particular class of people. Instead, he claims that his primary interest is the health of the entire nation. Furthermore, appeals to scriptural authority are not an issue in and of themselves. As seen in previous chapters, Milton, like his Puritan contemporaries, believed that religious truth is fully contained in Scripture. If Milton was to prove that kings had no right to elevate themselves above the law, then he had to do it using the same scripture to which the King's allies appealed.

Charles I is seldom referenced explicitly in the work; rather, Milton sets out to define the limitation of a king's power, arguing that, as the lengthy subtitle indicates, it is justifiable to execute a king who acts out of self-interest to the detriment of the nation (Parker 347). As Elizabeth Oldman argues in her article, "Illegitimate Monarchy and Legally-Sanctioned King-Killing," and as noted above, it is hard to overstate how little legal precedence there was for putting a monarch to death (294-295). Milton was in uncharted territory. However, through his vast reading, he could always summon an army of thinkers to support whatever he believed. The actions of the New Model Army are perpetually framed using religious terminology. Referencing Jeremiah, Milton claims that the Parliamentary cause was "the worke of the Lord." Similarly, Milton's ascribes the success of Cromwell and his allies to "God and a good cause" (*JMP* 246). Refusing, as

¹⁷ Matthew 22:21.

the Presbyterians did, to hold Charles accountable for his actions was not only cowardly, but was also an abdication, according to Milton, of their moral responsibility.

Others who have been fiercest against thir Prince, under the notion of a Tyrant, and no mean incendiaries of the Warr against him, when God out of his providence and high disposal hath deliver'd him into the hand of thir brethren, on a suddain and in a new garbe of Allegiance, which thir doings have long since cancell'd; they plead for him, pity him, extoll him, protest against those that talk of bringing him to the tryal of Justice, which is the Sword of God, superior to all mortal things, in whose hand soever by apparent signes his testified will is to put it. (246-247)

It is no great wonder that a religious society frames all things in religious terms. That Milton uses biblical passages and precedents to make his political arguments is not, on its own, enough to prove that he was specifically concerned about religious freedom.

Milton locates a specific reason why the Presbyterians wanted to spare the King: religious domination. For Milton, such leniency was doubly harmful to the nation. Firstly, as mentioned previously, sparing Charles's life would be an abrogation of Parliament's moral responsibility, permitting a man whose policy was based on personal interest to continue to afflict the English people. Secondly, Milton concludes that the Presbyterian members of Parliament were never truly on the side of religious and civil freedom. The general toleration of all practicing Protestants, which was a key issue for Milton and the English Independents, was never part of the Presbyterian plan. While waging war, both on the battlefield and in the press, they were ready enough to label Charles a tyrant and an enemy of freedom. But having secured victory over him, they were eager to rapidly

consolidate their gains and securely ensconce themselves as the new power in England. As seen in the previous chapter, Milton had earlier censured the Presbyterian members of Parliament in *Areopagitica* for seeking to reestablish censorship laws similar to those previously instituted by the Church of England. Though Milton had initially supported their efforts against the bishops of the Anglican Church, he subsequently found that the religious, social, and political freedom that had temporarily ensued was an unintended byproduct of the Presbyterians' grander scheme. Milton makes plain in *The Tenure* that they initially fought against the King because they coveted his power. Realizing that they could not, on their own, tyrannize the nation as Charles had, they sought to make him their ally (*JMP*). During his capture, Charles, in an effort to buy himself sufficient time to rally more troops to his cause, had agreed with Parliament to allow for the Church of England to be redesigned according to the wishes of the Presbyterians. His subsequent attempt to escape captivity and resume the war led Milton and his contemporaries to doubt how serious he ever was in permanently dismantling the episcopacy. Even so, Milton's point seems historically accurate: the Presbyterians wanted to keep Charles alive because his presence (as a puppet monarch passively supporting them) would make their political and religious ambitions more legitimate and easier to implement.

Taking leave of his assault upon the Presbyterians, Milton turns next to his understanding of the origins of kingship. Using Aristotle and other authoritative sources, Milton argues that kings are crowned so that justice and the rule of law can be equitably distributed throughout society, that the authority of kings originates from and is maintained by the perpetual consent of the people, and that, breaking any of the covenants upon which their coronation originally depended, it is necessary for the good

of all that kings be removed from power. “What can be more just and legal,” asks Milton, “if a subject for certain crimes be to forfeit by law from himself and posterity all his inheritance to the king, than that a king, for crimes proportional, should forfeit all his title and inheritance to the people?” (*JMP* 251). Kings bear a tremendous responsibility for their subjects, and, should they fail to work for the general good, or, more perniciously, actively undermine it for their own gain, they then forfeit the right to rule. Such a king is a persistent threat to the rights and freedoms that each citizen should enjoy. On principle, execution is not merely an option; it is a necessary corrective.

But how precisely do the political arguments of *The Tenure* connect themselves to religious freedom? We have already seen that the goals of the Presbyterians were at least half-religious in nature. With Charles in tow, they would have instituted Presbyterianism as the religious practice of the nation. I do not doubt that when Milton wrote against the Presbyterians on any matter, he saw it as a battle at least peripherally related to religious freedom. We have also seen that the issues are consistently phrased in religious terms. For Milton, the regicides were merely carrying out the “wrath of God” upon a guilty monarch. Furthermore, Milton makes frequent appeal to scriptural precedent, surveying what God explicitly sanctioned and permitted in the Old Testament, such as when He allowed the Israelites to choose their own form of government, transitioning, against His will, from the rule of the judges to that of the kings. But none of these things is a direct or explicit matter of religious liberty. To find the influence of those beliefs requires looking at the specifics of Milton’s political philosophy, noting that he argues against kingship in terms reminiscent of his religious writing.

To clarify the parallels, it is necessary to examine his understanding of humanity's original state. "No man who knows ought," he writes, "can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were borne free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey" (*JMP* 249). However, after the fall of Adam, which brought with it humanity's sinful inclination to violently harm one another, it was necessary to form a civil society for protection and defense. Milton's rudimentary theory of civil government is startlingly similar to what Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers would term "the social contract," the implicit agreement of civilization in which each member sacrifices a portion of his natural freedom in order to safeguard his life and property. For Milton, kings and other rulers were the natural byproducts of this agreement, as it was most expedient to place the power of the collective within a single individual entrusted with enforcing justice. As kings began to abuse their privileges for their own ends, laws were enacted to curb the reach of executive power. "While as the Magistrate was set above the people," writes Milton. "so the Law was set above the Magistrate" (250). Thus, the King swore fealty to the law, and the perpetuity of his reign was directly linked with how faithfully he adhered to this vow. Far from being above reproach, the King was subjected to the approval of the people and ruled at their sufferance.

The spiritual nature of Milton's political philosophy is subtle, but it becomes clearer when recalling how similar it is to his understanding of religious freedom. As seen in Chapter I, there were few things Milton hated more than implicit faith, the surrendering of one's conscience to the dogmas of a church or creed. His concept of civil liberty works the same way: the individual is naturally free. Magistrates and governments

(sometimes kings) are necessary to curb the sinful nature of mankind, but there is a clear limit to how much the individual can withstand before his spirit succumbs to servitude. Like the believer who is too slothful to seek out the truth for himself, those who claim that kings are beholden to God alone and beyond the reach of civil law have traded in their God-given freedom for the easy comfort of a subject. Furthermore, they have conflated their King with God Himself and are consequently guilty of a lazy idolatry, assuming that whatever the King (a fallible man) does is done with God's approval.

The natural conclusion from this line of thought is that, in the interest of freedom, kings should not exist at all. Milton hints at this in *The Tenure*, but his primary effort is spent proving that the removal and execution of a tyrannical monarch is justifiable. He would save his thorough repudiation of monarchy for *The Readie and Easie Way*, published eleven years later. *The Tenure* was a work of political necessity, rapidly produced as a justification for the execution of the King, which Cromwell and his supporters (like Milton) must have known would elicit a backlash. *The Tenure* sought to assure the reading public that Charles had been deposed and beheaded with the interest of the people in mind.

As Cromwell and his allies would soon learn, killing the man often gives birth to the martyr. With the execution of Charles, the defeated Royalists gained a powerful tool of propaganda, as they strategically fashioned their slain King into an image of grace and longsuffering, a persecuted monarch who had preferred death to the abandonment of his convictions. It can be difficult, at the remove of three-and-a-half centuries, to gauge what the popular sentiment may have been. Histories, particularly those of a stratified society

in which only some of its members can read and write, are skewed towards the interests of the social elite. However, English society at the time of Milton was becoming increasingly literate, particularly in London, as evidenced by the explosion of publication discussed in Chapter III. Perhaps more than ever before, political partisans understood that propaganda was a necessary component of winning the hearts and minds of the reading public. *Eikon Basilike*, stylized as Charles's final will and testament, containing his thoughts on his imprisonment and his actions during the Civil War, was published a few weeks after Charles's execution in early 1649, instantly becoming one of the Royalists' strongest rhetorical weapons against Cromwell's government.¹⁸ That this subversive writing, in blatant and open defiance of the new rulers of England, enjoyed such popularity supports the argument that the majority of England, indeed, a majority of the reading public, had been opposed to the King's execution. Milton and his fellow members of the Council of State were aware that *Eikon Basilike* was not genuinely authored by Charles, but its success demanded a response. Milton's *Eikonoklastes* (*The Image-Breaker*) was not the first published refutation of the work; at least two had been published weeks before Milton's (Lewalski 248). But Milton, as a member of Cromwell's circle, certainly had the most authority, and his response to *Eikon Basilike* was effectively the official response of the new republican state.

For rhetorical purposes, Milton treats *Eikon Basilike* as if it were the genuine work of the late King. As Lewalski says, Milton "had especially to deal with the 'idolatrous' image" of Charles (248). He understood his counter-arguments would carry

¹⁸ See note 1 on the genuine authorship of *Eikon Basilike*.

more weight if they were levied directly against the King rather than the underling who actually wrote the text. Nevertheless, Charles is not his primary opponent. Milton's true enemies are the same Presbyterians he had spent the last five years opposing. "It appears manifestly the cunning drift of a factious and defeated Party," writes Milton, "to make the same advantage of his Book, which they did before of his Regal Name and Authority, and intend it not so much the defence of his former actions, as the promoting of thir own future designes" (*JMP* 277). Milton mentions this to assure his readers that he would not otherwise bother to respond to the text. A dead monarch is no threat, but those who seek to use his image to advance their agenda are. Furthermore, the King's book may still work to the detriment of the "liberty" Cromwell was seeking to establish in the nation. Thus, in the interest of freedom, Milton undertook the task.

Throughout the treatise, Milton consistently seeks to undercut the religious presuppositions of *Eikon Basilike*, which included in its frontispiece an image of Charles receiving inspiration from heaven while composing the work. As previously discussed, Milton had argued in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* that kings were not the natural superiors of their subjects. On the contrary, a proper king should be the servant of the people, not the other way around. Similarly, *Eikonoklastes* argues against the belief that kings are also morally and intellectually superior to their countrymen. In a passage of delicious arrogance, Milton implies that Charles is not even his (Milton's) intellectual equal:

No man ever gain'd much honour by wrting against a King, as not usually meeting with that force of Argument in such Courtly Antagonists, which to convince might add to his reputation. Kings most commonly, though

strong in Legions, are but weak at Arguments; as they who ever have
accustom'd from the Cradle to use thir will onely as thir right hand, thir
reason alwayes as thir left. Whence unexpectedly constrain'd to that kind
of combat, they prove but weak and puny Adversaries. (277)

Milton is only willing to engage Charles in an intellectual debate because of the near-divine status to which his followers seek to elevate him. There is nothing remarkable about *Eikon Basilike*

Save only that a King is said to be the Author, a name, then which there
needs no more among the blockish vulgar, to make it wise, and excellent,
and admir'd, nay to set it next the Bible, though otherwise containing little
els but the common grounds of tyranny and popery, drest up, the better to
deceiv, in a new Protestant guise. (277)

This is the idolatry to which Lewaslki alludes. Following naturally from the Divine Right of Kings, which supposedly gives monarchs a heavenly mandate by which to rule, *Eikon Basilike* also grants Charles an unscriptural religious authority, assuming that his station makes him naturally closer to God and more understanding of His will. This conscious effort on the part of Charles and his allies to fashion his person as an image of religious authority finds its receptive counterpart in the people's tendency to backslide into image worship, "a civil kinde of Idolatry in idolizing thir Kings" (*JMP* 279). This, Milton contends, is yet another instance of humanity's propensity to forget the freedom which God gives them. Like the golden calf, which the children of Israel commanded Aaron to build for them, too many of Milton's contemporaries were wont to worship the graven image of a tyrant in place of their natural liberty. Milton blames this weakness on the

English prelates and their spiritual successors, the Presbyterians, “whose Pulpit stuff, both first and last, hath bin the Doctrin and perpetual infusion of servility and wretchedness to all thir hearers” (*JMP* 280). This is yet another example of the overlap between Milton’s religious and political ideologies. The Presbyterians, like the Anglicans before them, preach a gospel of spiritual servitude, the effects of which are felt throughout society. The people are refashioned into religious and political vassals, as dependent upon their various lords as they had been under medieval Catholic rule. Thus, it is in defense of both “Religion and our Liberties” that Milton contends with Charles (*JMP* 282).

Because *Eikon Basilike* was partly a justification of the King’s actions before and during the Civil War, Milton counters each of these arguments with astute observations. For example, where Charles claims in *Eikon Basilike* that he called Parliament in 1640 by his own will and not through any external pressure, Milton painstakingly demonstrates that Charles was instead forced to do so by his lack of money and military failures in his campaigns against the Scots. Milton’s grasp of history is firm, and the opinions of modern historians support his conclusions. Charles’s actions were dictated by necessity, and Royalist assertions to the contrary were merely attempts to shine a more favorable light on their defeated monarch. Milton makes a number of other political and historical counterarguments in the text, but it is the religious arguments that are of greater interest to this analysis. Charles (like Milton, let us pretend that Charles was the legitimate author) claims that, had he had his way, he would have reformed the Church and state in due course. To this, Milton cites “the superstitious rigor of his Sundays Chappel, and the licentious remissness of his Sundays Theater; accompanied with that reverend Statute for

Dominical Jiggs and May-poles” (*JMP* 285). As Loewenstein states in his footnote to the text, Charles had offended Puritan sensibilities throughout his reign with his practice of attending plays and other festivities on Sundays (285). Additionally, Milton notes that Charles had plenty of opportunities to curb the worst abuses of his religious and political favorites, but chose not to do so. His belated claim that he had intended to reform the corrupt aspects of his administration ring hollow when one examines the actions (or inaction) of his rule. Charles’s personal rule, unwillingness to punish corrupt nobles, and reluctance to call necessary sessions of Parliament all stand in mute testament to his indifference towards reformation.

In a feat of scholarship that only someone of his learning could accomplish, Milton catches Charles in an act of plagiarism. One of Charles’s prayers found in *Eikon Basilike* is taken almost word for word from a prayer in Sir Philip Sydney’s *The New Arcadia*. Anyone who would steal another’s prayer and present it to God as his original, devotional thoughts is, according to Milton, a spiritual fraud. To pray is not a mark of righteousness; Shakespeare’s Richard III prayed in the depths of his wickedness, and at least his prayers were original to him.

Like the aforementioned debate about the summoning of Parliament, some of the King’s statements which Milton contests are purely political, having little to do with the Church or religious liberty. Passing over these, Milton reminds the reader that it was the people, not the King, who demanded the great liberating reforms of the 1640s. The dismantling of the English episcopacy, the closing of the High Commission and Star Chamber, and the

demand that the King call regular Parliaments were all expressions of the popular will, not the “seditious and schismatical Proposals” that Charles labels them (293).

Where Charles claims that Parliament denied him his rights as both a Christian and a man, to say nothing of his royal prerogative, by defeating and imprisoning him, and by passing laws and decrees to which he did not consent, Milton reminds him that the rights he sought to claim included the power to deny others their natural freedoms, which “concludes all men... to be neither Men, nor Christians” (*JMP* 298). As Milton had argued in *The Tenure of Kings of Magistrates*, a king who conflates his power and personal ambition with the health of the state, and whose actions negate the will of the people, can blame no one but himself if those he abuses decide to hold him accountable. If “his outward and imperious will must invade the civil Liberties of a Nation,” then dethronement and execution are proper means by which a free people may reclaim what is theirs by right. Similarly, Charles, in a near-echo of Milton’s earlier writings on religious liberty, claims that his ability to act according to conscience had also been denied him; he had only done what he had judged to best, both in religious and political matters. But again, Charles is affording himself a greater liberty than a commoner could ever possess. Had he only, “both as a Man, and as a Christian... reigned within himself, in full sovranty of soule,” then no one would have taken issue with him. But, to quote a popular maxim, one’s freedom is absolute until it includes denying another the same freedom. “It was not the inward use of his reason and of his conscience that would content him,” writes Milton, “but to use them both as a Law over all his Subjects” (298). At that point, his freedom ended.

Toward the close of *Eikonoklastes*, Milton returns to more strictly religious issues, both the religious decrees of Parliament and Charles's personal religious statements. Regarding the former, Charles claims that "the expelling of Bishops out of the House of Peers, this was ruin to the State, the removing them root and branch, this was ruin to the Church" (306). As one would expect, Milton vehemently disagrees with this characterization. It was an act of religious liberation, "the recovery and saving" of the church and state. As if to add a further excuse for his behavior, Charles claims that, in addition to his personal support for the bishops, he was bound by his coronation oath "to preserve that Order and the rights of the Church" (306). However, Milton points out that the oath originated from the time of Edward the Confessor, when England was still a Roman Catholic nation. If Charles were to take his coronation oath literally, he could as readily justify leading the English people back into Catholicism. Besides, in both word and deed, Charles never showed much concern for his other oaths. For a monarch, who was otherwise dismissive of his duties and obligations, to claim that he was oath-bound to preserve the prelates of England is a weak excuse. Furthermore, when Charles did eventually agree to strip the bishops of all political power, he did so intending to undo his declaration as soon as it was feasible. Negotiating from a position of weakness, even captivity, Charles was willing enough to consent to whatever Parliament demanded; but had he ever been restored to his former power, he would have immediately gone back on his word.

Milton makes many other counterpoints in this long treatise, the majority of which are similar to those already discussed. For instance, many of Charles's statements about his enemies use biblical language, the condemned King forgiving his executioners

just as Christ forgave him on the cross. Milton's responses, which highlight Charles's theft and spiritual mimicry, are further instances of *Eikonoklastes*'s main objective, breaking the idolatrous image of Charles, which is presented to the people as an object of veneration. As Milton painstakingly reminds his readers, Charles should be judged by his previous actions, not the sanctimonious and quasi-religious statements of *Eikon Basilike*.

In the last chapter of *Eikonoklastes*, which are Milton's responses to the final meditations of the condemned monarch, "Meditations upon Death," Milton compares himself to Zorobabel (Milton's spelling), the Judean ruler who "freed his Countrey, and the people of God from the Captivity of Babylon" (*JMP* 310). Rather than being a political or military champion, Milton proclaims himself a champion of Truth, more powerful and valuable than anything in the world. Second or perhaps equal to Truth is Justice, which is simply Truth in action. *Eikon Basilike* is filled with falsehoods from beginning to end, but the final chapter of Charles's lies is perhaps the most dangerous. To complain about God's Justice and inveigh against those who passed his sentence is the ultimate proof that Charles was no friend of Truth. Had he accepted his fate with equanimity, or at least with silence, perhaps Milton would have been content to let him rest in peace. But even in death, his specter still loomed as a threat to Justice, the rule of Law, peace, and Truth, all of which he had disrupted during his rule. By violating the oaths of his office and betraying the trust of Parliament and the people, Charles, in Milton's eyes, placed himself above all the precepts of God laid out repeatedly in Scripture: God's Word to Noah, the Law of Moses, the law during the reign of the kings, and the words of Christ and the Apostle Paul, to say nothing of his violations of British laws and precedents (310-11). Even under papal rule, England understood its king to be

bound by the rule of law, and subject to excommunication, dethronement, or execution if he placed himself above it. What excuse is there, then, for a people free from papal tyranny to submit themselves to an even more tyrannical king? (312).

The King, as Milton makes clear, was certainly no paragon of religious liberty, preferring as he did the dominion of the Church of England and the power of his favorites (like William Laud) to lord over the spiritual affairs of the nation. But even if he had been friendly to religious Independents like Milton who stressed freedom of conscience, his political tyranny threatened to undo the gains the English had made. An infringement upon one aspect of an individual's liberty is equal to an attack on liberty in general. I have stressed throughout this work the centrality of religious liberty in Milton's mind, and to that I hold firm. But the different facets of Liberty are interconnected: political thralldom is an evil in and of itself, which ends in spiritual degradation and servitude. The same can be said of divorce or the muzzling of one's right to express unpopular opinions. Religion, whether of church-government, tithes, or the right to practice according to conscience, is the trunk from which a great society must flourish, but (to borrow an image from Thomas Jefferson) the Tree of Liberty plants its roots far and wide, drawing from all corners of society. Political and civil life, even private affairs of the home, will poison the spiritual health of a nation if they are not afforded the same degree of care. Charles was a threat to "the true Religion" because of the totality of his actions, both religious and political (*JMP* 314). It is not a single act of Charles or a particular damaged aspect of society that attracts Milton's concern. The King endangered all of it. Such is the tendency of monarchs, and Milton hopes that the actions of the English might help the peoples of the world rise up and reclaim their natural rights.

Perhaps no better closing argument can be made for the religious nature of such an effort than what Milton tells us: “The earth it self hath too long groan’d under the burd’n of thir [kings’] injustice, disorder, and irreligion. Therefore To bind thir Kings in Chaines, and thir Nobles with links of Iron, is an honour belong to his [God’s] Saints; not to build Babel... but to destroy it, especially that spiritual Babel.” During the rule of Samuel, God had only reluctantly agreed to the Israelites’ demand for a king, and the harmful effects were immediate. Within a century, Israel had split in two, and, from this weakened position, the divided kingdom would fall- Israel to the Assyrians and Judah to the Babylonians. Similarly, the vast majority of Christian nations, from the early Middle Ages to Milton’s England, had been ruled by a king. But, with the execution of Charles and the establishment of a republican Commonwealth, Milton hoped that the era of kings was coming to a permanent end.

I have already relayed the historical events of the 1650s in previous chapters, so there is no need to repeat them all here. For Milton personally, in his official capacity as Secretary of Foreign Tongues, most of his time was spent translating the international correspondence of other nations from Latin into English, and then converting the response of Cromwell’s government back into Latin. It is a pity that a mind so brilliantly creative was too often occupied in rendering the words of lesser men palatable to a continental audience. I do not mean his original prose (which are exemplary specimens of his rhetorical power), but rather his work as a simple translator. Fortunately, at least, Milton occasionally was tasked with penning justifications of the regime and its actions on his own. *Eikonoklastes* had been written to persuade the English people of the

righteousness of the republican cause, but whatever their fellow Englishmen thought of them, most of the monarchies on the European mainland were less than pleased by the execution of Charles. Even the two Protestant nations for whom the English Puritans had the greatest admiration, Sweden and the Netherlands, were hesitant to establish official diplomatic relations with the Commonwealth. Indeed, it was a member of the court of Queen Kristina of Sweden who published the fiercest denunciation of the regicides. Claudius Salmasius, the Latin name of the French-born Protestant Claude Saumaise, had written *Defensio Regia* at Charles II's behest in 1649 (*JMP* 321). Charles II, the son of the late King, spent most of the 1650s as an exile in France, rallying support for his claim. The work condemned the Cromwellian government both for its actions and for its ideology. Milton's response, his first *Defense of the English People*, was published in 1651 and established Milton's international reputation as a first-rate Latinist.

Many of the arguments and justifications found within it are the same as those he had previously written to his fellow countrymen, so I will focus on his later *Second Defense*. The first *Defense* elicited a response, *The Cry of the Royal Blood to Heaven*, from an anonymous author who excoriated both the Commonwealth and Milton personally. Milton responded with his *Second Defense of the English People*, another Latin treatise written to justify Cromwell and the Protectorate. As Loewenstein writes, Milton "mistakenly believed the author to be a Frenchman by the name of Alexander More" (*JMP* 319). In reality, *Royal Blood* had been written by Peter du Moulin, "a French-born Church of England clergyman and religious controversialist" (319). Given this knowledge, Milton's assaults upon More and his alleged sexual indiscretions lose some of their potency, but the work is still an example of the power of Milton's merciless

rage. However, it is not the quality of his insults that makes the *Second Defense* worthy of a close reading; it is Milton's self-defense of his career (including his most comprehensive definition of liberty) and autobiographical digressions that make it truly unique.

The *Second Defense* is of great importance to this thesis because Milton explicitly lays out his career in defense of freedom, surveying the same works examined in the previous three chapters. Before describing the various types of liberty, Milton recounts his realization that the nation was in the process of liberating itself from bondage of all types:

I perceived that men were following the true path to liberty and that from these beginnings, these first steps, they were making the most direct progress towards the liberation of all human life from slavery- provided that the discipline arising from religion should overflow into the morals and institutions of the state. (*JMP* 349)

I would assert that this is indeed the case. Any time his writing turns to autobiography, Milton is careful to craft a particular image of himself and his career, and so it is dangerous to take him fully at his word. But the statement quoted above is precisely what I set out to prove, demonstrating in each of the major works that, for Milton, religious freedom is the fount of all liberty. In this respect, his previous work gives this assertion validity. It is regrettable that in following paragraph of the *Second Defense* he promptly undercuts what he had just written by redefining liberty and its three varieties (religious, domestic, and civil) without restating the primacy of religious liberty. This oversight has caused a great deal of confusion, with too many subsequent readers assuming that each of

the three (or as I argue, four) is equal in Milton's mind. However, like his understanding of the Trinity, the three aspects of Liberty are not equal. As I have shown, and as we will see lastly with *The Readie and Easie Way*, marital liberty, the freedom to express oneself, and freedom from tyranny are all subordinate to religious liberty, without which all other freedoms are fruitless.

In the *Second Defense*, Milton quickly returns to his assaults upon More, the supposed author who had lambasted Milton and his *First Defense*, or repeats arguments he had made more thoroughly in his previous tracts. As such, I think it appropriate to now examine the last political treatise Milton would write, *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*. As stated previously, the work was published only a few weeks before the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660, with Charles II invited to retake his father's throne. Realizing that the English were on the cusp of returning to monarchy, Milton nevertheless published his most succinct and ideological political treatise, establishing in detail the evils of kingship and pleading with his countrymen to reconsider their present course.

As was his wont, Milton begins by justifying the actions of Cromwell and the Purged Parliament. Rather than the "regicides," it was Charles I who broke covenant with "his endeavoring to bring in upon our consciences a Popish religion" (*JMP* 429). The Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, which had promised "to preserve the Kings person and autoritie in the preservation of the true religion and our liberties" (429) was, at the time, assumed by many to be Parliament's promise against harming the King even as they fought his armies on the battlefield. Naturally, Royalist sympathizers had taken

Charles's execution in 1649 to be a violation of that oath. However, as Milton reminds them, it was conditioned on Charles's adherence to Parliament's understanding of "true religion." For both Presbyterians and religious Independents like Milton, Charles's High-Church Anglicanism, with its prelatical privileges, was not authentic Protestant Christianity. By refusing to grant Parliament the religious liberty it demanded, Charles forfeited the protection granted to him by the Covenant.

Milton also returns to the conspiracy which blamed Charles for the massacre of English settlers by Irish Catholics in the early days of the Civil War. Executing such a palpable threat to life and liberty was the only rational choice for the good of the nation and, because of this, the Commonwealth was a legitimate government. "We could not serve two contrary maisters, God and the king," writes Milton, establishing once more that the origins of the Commonwealth lay in its religious priorities, whose mandate to rule was derived from its adherence to "the law of nature only, which is the only law of laws truly and properly to all mankinde fundamental" (*JMP* 430). Reformation is unattainable if a people and its leaders are unwilling to look past "ecclesiastical canons," which tend rather to the preservation of the ruling class far more than religious truth.

To return to monarchy would be to undo all the religious gains the Commonwealth had made. The King and his bishops, Milton warns, will soon reclaim all the power they had lost, and the struggle for liberty will have to begin anew.

If we return to Kingship, and soon repent, as undoubtedly we shall, when we begin to finde the old encroachments coming on by little and little upon our consciences, which must necessarily proceed from king and bishop united inseparably in one interest, we may be forc'd perhaps to

fight over again all that we have found, and spend over again all that we have spent, but are never like to attain thus far as we are now advanc'd to the recoverie of our freedom. (*JMP* 433)

So many English lives given in the cause of liberty would have been lost for nothing; and more tragically, all the effort Englishmen like Milton spent in pursuit of true religion will have been wasted if the nation returns to the bondage of monarchy, “treading back again with lost labor all our happie steps in the progress of reformation” (433). The Commonwealth, according to Milton, had been a government modelled after Christ’s teachings, in which the magistrate was not elevated above the rank and file. This was “a free Commonwealth; wherin they who are greatest, are perpetual servants and drudges to the public at thir own cost and charges” (433). By comparison, “a king must be ador’d like a Demigod” (433). As kingly courts are, by design, removed from the world and ignorant of the concerns of the people, monarchical governments breed only base ambition and a desire for royal favor, not an interest in the common good. As for the people, there is no need to look for a king to lead them; a wise people, claims Milton, need only rely on the counsel of God, who is always willing to listen to the prayers of an honest and upright people. “All Protestants hold that Christ in his church hath left no viceregent of his power, but himself without deputie, is the only head therof, governing it from heaven” (*JMP* 435). How then can a nation that holds this to be true willingly sign away its other freedoms to a single individual? Milton argues that it is on these religious grounds no less than the common political reasons that a Commonwealth is the best form of government.

The concrete details of Milton's ideal government are less interesting than his abstract theories. He advocates for the continuation of a Council of State similar to the one under Cromwell, with his main addition being that he believes members of the Council should serve for life. In the final paragraphs, however, he returns to the religious foundations of a free society.

The whole freedom of man consists either in spiritual or civil libertie. As for spiritual, who can be at rest, who can enjoy any thing in this world with contentment, who hath not liberty to serve God and to save his own soul, according to the best light which God hath planted in hum to that purpose, by the reading of his reveal'd will and the guidance of his holy spirit? (*JMP* 443).

The lesser, civil liberties cannot possibly exist in a society that denies its people religious freedom. Milton declares unambiguously that religious liberty should be the first aim of a reformer. "This liberty of conscience which above all other things ought to be to all men dearest and most precious, no government more inclinable not to favor only but to protect, then a free Commonwealth" (444). Monarchs, rather than supporting and fostering such efforts, see righteous religious reformers as threats to their sovereignty. According to Milton, Queen Elizabeth I was likely the best Protestant monarch the English could have hoped for, but even she oppressed those who challenged Anglican authority. Milton warns that Charles II, should he return as England's King, would undoubtedly restore the prelates of the Church of England to their former power; no king would willingly tolerate the religious independence and freedom of conscience the Commonwealth enjoyed. To believe that the younger Charles would show any regard for the Presbyterians' assertions of religious autonomy is, for Milton, incredibly naïve.

Interestingly, Milton ends *The Readie and Easie Way* with a prophetic tone somewhat similar to the one he had used almost twenty years earlier, at the beginning of his polemical career. This time, however, he is not John the Baptist preparing the way for the coming restoration of God's Word, but Jeremiah lamenting the collapse of a godly nation. Though his warning may be "the last words of our expiring libertie," he is hopeful that they might be heard by "som perhaps whom God may raise of these stones to become children of reviving libertie; and may reclaim, though they seem now chusing them a captain back for Egypt, to bethink themselves a little and consider whether they are rushing" (*JMP* 446-7). As great a blow as the imminent Restoration would be for England, Milton seems confident that there are others who, whether late or soon, will continue the struggle for liberty.

In the weeks after the publication of *The Readie and Easie Way*, Milton's worst fears were realized. The liberties for which Milton had fought were overturned. Charles II, to his credit, was not as fierce in his retribution as the Cavalier Royalists might have wished. After his brief imprisonment late in 1660, Milton was allowed to live out the rest of his days in relative peace and security, returning at last to his poetic ambitions, wizened (though undeterred) and rhetorically strengthened by the experiences of the previous two decades. For obvious reasons, he would never write on political matters again. As discussed in Chapter I, Milton did publish a religious treatise in 1673: *Of True Religion*, his anti-Catholic screed, which was in broad agreement with the popular sentiment of the day. But his days as a prominent polemicist ended in 1660. His reputation as a defender of the regicide would persist well into the eighteenth-century,

and would only be rehabilitated by the political radicals of the Romantic and Victorian periods. But where men like Wordsworth, Shelley, and Carlyle saw the Commonwealth as a precursor to the secular revolutions in France and America, Milton's works make it clear that religion was at the forefront of the Commonwealth's political agenda. All the civil liberties for which Milton advocates are predicated upon first securing freedom of conscience, the ability to express one's beliefs and practice according to them without interference from the church or the state.

Epilogue

When considering as a whole each major work critically and specifically analyzed in the previous chapters, the dominance of religious liberty becomes clear. There are, of course, external motivations behind each period of Milton's polemical prose, which I hope the biographical and historical material have properly contextualized. It is unlikely, for instance, that Milton would have published four divorce treatises had his own marriage been a success. As much as Milton attempts to hide his personal connection to the subject of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, he is a naturally passionate writer, and his prose is always a direct response to a pressing issue, whether for him personally or society at large. Similarly, *Areopagitica* would not have been written if Parliament had not passed the Licensing Order of 1643. And, as Loewenstein demonstrates in *Milton and the Drama of History*, Milton's political writing is his attempt to understand, shape, and influence his particular historical moment. Nevertheless, the textual evidence I have provided sufficiently demonstrates which aspect of liberty meant the most to Milton: freedom of conscience, the liberty of the mind to pursue Truth wherever it may lead. As Milton writes in *Areopagitica*, "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties" (*JMP* 209). Milton did not hesitate to exercise this liberty to argue in favor of whatever he judged to be right, whether religious, social, or political. And oftentimes, exigencies beyond his control determined the subjects of his works. But conscience is a moral faculty more than an intellectual one, and no aspect of one's conscience is more important, according to Milton than the ability to follow God's Truth.

Spurred by his zeal for Truth to engage in the controversies of the early 1640s, Milton began his polemical career with a defense of religious liberty. As the previous three chapters have shown, those religious concerns never left Milton's mind. Each subsequent stage of his prose publications also betrays this characteristic concern for freedom of conscience or the closely-related liberty to correct or avoid dangers to one's spiritual health. His initial fight against the bishops and prelates of the Church of England was based upon his understanding of the individual's relation to God. In Milton's view, prelacy is evil because it inserts a temporal and corruptible intermediary between God and humanity. For him, this was the very corruption that the Reformation had sought to correct. Wedded to their privileges and powers, the Church of England under Henry VIII, in Milton's opinion, had converted to Protestantism without reforming enough. The abuses of individual liberty that characterized the Catholic Church were still present in England. For Milton and his allies, the work of reformation was far from over. Through his efforts, Milton hoped to contribute to the advancement of religious Truth, so that England might finally realize its potential as the nation through which God would restore His beleaguered Church, with London as the "City of refuge, the mansion house of liberty" in which the "approaching Reformation" would take place (*JMP* 207).

Not only is freedom of conscience the most prominent and important aspect of Milton's understanding of general liberty: it actively informs the all of his polemical writing. After his battles against the Church of England had been won (with the collapse of English episcopacy), Milton turned his attention towards the still-unreformed areas of society. In the *Second Defense*, Milton calls both his divorce tracts and *Areopagitica* works in defense of "domestic" or "personal" liberty, which I have taken pains to

separate into two distinct spheres: the private affairs of the home and the social and public realm of publication. A man's relationship with his wife and his relation to the general public are sufficiently different to justify this distinction. Nevertheless, Milton's fight for liberty in both realms have their similarities. The husband and wife reflect Christ's love for His Church, and their relationship with one another is meant for the good of the soul; the biological necessities of procreation are a secondary matter. First and foremost, they are meant, in their proper roles, to assist each other on the path to spiritual fulfillment. A man's freedom (for Milton, the husband's rights supersede those of the wife) to separate from a wife who impedes this progress is necessary to ensure that he may live according to Christian principles. Trapped in an irreparably damaged marriage, the good Christian man and (in this case) woman may find their souls unnecessarily endangered by an uncharitable and unscriptural canon law.

An individual's relation to the public is not so intimate, but it is no less Christian. Secure in one's domestic felicity, the individual may make public his or her private labors for the good of all. And for Milton, there is no greater labor than to participate in the general work of Reformation, restoring Christ's Church to what he considered to be its original apostolic origins. Such work, as Milton makes clear in *Areopagitica*, will always include disagreement, quarreling, and unpopular opinions. But to stand in the way of the great debate is to risk inadvertently silencing the Truth. Censorship does not protect true religion; it limits its capacity to flourish. "And though all the windes of doctrin were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licencing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength" (*JMP* 210).

Politics, the realm of government and law, was, for Milton, founded upon the same general principles. Beginning with *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton claims that a tyrannical monarch, who rules according to his personal ambitions, threatens every aspect of civil society. This argument gradually matured into a rejection of kingship itself, with *The Readie and Easie Way* offering Milton's ultimate conclusion: a free Commonwealth is the best form of government because it permits its citizens to live according their individual consciences. Charles I, like many kings before him, was as much an impediment to the religious health of the nation as he was to the law or to Parliament. By supporting corrupt and power-hungry prelates, and by elevating his image to near-Divine status, Charles placed himself between the people of England and the proper worship of God. The civil magistrate is no less capable of interfering with religious progress than prelates. If anyone infringed upon what Milton believed to be the individual's natural rights, he was willing to risk life and reputation to defend it. Crucially, any infringement upon one aspect of liberty is a threat to all of them. And as the evidence shows, in nearly all of the major prose works across his polemical career, Milton returns time and again to religious liberty, without which no freedom can exist.

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