

Osiris, Astronomy, and the Sea: How Milton Made His Case Against Censorship

Both in his poetry and prose, John Milton's use of poetic figure seeks to make or support one or more of Milton's ideas. In *Areopagitica*, he intersperses his clearly stated points against censorship with poetic elements in an attempt to strengthen his point. In this piece, fittingly printed without license, Milton argues against the "Parliamentary order...prohibiting unlicensed publications" (Milton 923) that had been proclaimed the previous year. He fuels his argument with the elements that regularly dominate his poetry, namely imagery and extended metaphors. Compared to his poetry, however, Milton has more freedom in this prose work to elaborate the extended metaphors; therefore, a select few can be found, thoroughly elaborated, in *Areopagitica* so as to support his argument. His most prominent metaphor is the Egyptian myth involving Osiris and Typhon, addressing the idea of the many broken pieces of Truth. He also strategically places shorter poetic images within his argument, such as the figure of the sun and planets and that of sea warfare, for further support. Milton's vast experience with poetic devices in his shorter works allows him to employ his well-honed skills in crafting *Areopagitica* and consequently gives value to what he has to say. He has taken classical and relevant images and expanded on them in order to address his specific audience and gain favor from them for his belief against censorship.

Milton's most useful mythological allusion is that of Osiris and Typhon, which he uses to support his point that truth can be found everywhere and censorship prevents further findings of truth. According to Milton, "Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master...but when he ascended and his apostles after him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers," the Master being Jesus, Son of God, and these deceivers alluding to those guilty of sinfulness — namely all of humankind (955). This sinfulness has prevented Truth and human

beings from the perfect union that the Son exemplified could be reached, and Milton holds that censorship continues to prevent the human race from recovering all of the pieces of Truth possible. He compares the destruction due to sinfulness to the myth of Osiris and Typhon, which holds that Typhon murdered Osiris, his brother, cut him into many pieces, and dispersed them. Isis, wife of Osiris, searched for “the mangled body of Osiris, went up and down gathering up limb by limb” (955). Milton makes the point that our sinfulness has “hewed her [Truth’s] lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds” (955), just as Typhon did to Osiris. The pieces of Osiris were not lost forever, though, and Milton argues that the pieces of Truth should not be eternally lost through censorship either.

If one delves deeper into the myth of Osiris’s death, it is found, in both versions of the myth, that his wife “Isis ... found every part of his body, save his phallus” after he was torn to pieces (McDevitt). Though Milton does not specifically address this point, his audience at the time had the knowledge to infer another important meaning of this: the phallus is the life-giving part of the male body and without it, nothing new can spring forth. In relation to the scattered pieces of Truth, Milton says, “We have not yet found them all...nor ever shall do, till her Master’s second coming” (955). The piece of Truth that remains with the Master parallels the lost phallus of Osiris: no new knowledge or truth will come upon the world without the piece held by Jesus – the life-giving piece. Also, Truth portrayed as a female character reveals that the essence of Truth completes humankind. Truth and the Son — female and male — are complete and perfect, similar to union during sexual intercourse. Mankind will never reach this perfection without the missing pieces of truth that Milton believes exist in books that may be censored under the laws of the time. He realizes that Christ will always hold the final piece of Truth, but

petitions his audience to search for the parts still on the earth to put themselves closer to completeness.

In addition, Milton argues that “the sad friends of Truth imitate the careful search that Isis made” and that “licensing prohibitions...stand at every place of opportunity, forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking...the torn body of our martyred saint” (955). The fact that Isis found all but a most vital piece of Osiris did not stop her from “recovering the pieces of the body ... one by one” and creating shrines to Osiris throughout Egypt by burying the pieces (Benderitter). Milton proposes that people should not stop searching for remnants of Truth even though the most vital piece will be missing until the Second Coming, just as Isis did not stop searching. Her search for the pieces of Osiris resulted in the construction of Osiris shrines all over Egypt, and Milton parallels that the search for more pieces of Truth will result in more respect and desire for Truth. Licensing prevents this search, for who can know in which books another piece of Truth will lie?

Immediately following his Osiris case, Milton refers to truth in accordance with the sun and the planets. “We boast our light, but if we look not wisely on the sun itself, it smites us into darkness,” meaning that society and the intellectuals boast the truth that they already possess, but if they do not refer back to the source of truth, they will be left with nothing (956). The sun is the origin of light for all of the planets and something essential to life on Earth as well. The earth may not receive all light that the sun has to give — just as people cannot receive all Truth until the Master comes again — but society cannot live without either truth or light. The absence of both leaves complete literal and figurative darkness. Milton continues, “The light which we have gained, was given us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge” (956). The sun does not exist for people to sit and stare at day after day,

but instead to give people the light necessary to make discoveries of the world around them and progress in society. Likewise, the truth that has been given already was not there to end the search for more. It was given for use in finding more truth in less-likely places – in Milton’s mind, in less-likely books: ones that would not pass the censorship order in place. This image appeals well to Milton’s audience — due to the time at which he writes — and continues to strengthen his argument. The study of the planets, the sun, and the stars was an ancient study, but new discoveries were being made daily during his time; a reference to the celestial bodies would spark great attention. The advancements being made in the astronomical study helps support Milton’s appeal for advancement in the discovery of lesser-known truths – astronomy was progressing, so why should literature not as well?

Also on page 955, Milton evokes the image of sea warfare in comparison to the censorship of truth. He proposes that licensing causes more loss “than if some enemy at sea should stop up all our havens and ports, and creeks” because “it hinders and retards the importation of our richest merchandize, truth.” This image would find favor with his audience because England is an island greatly reliant on sea trade. If all waterways in the country were blocked at that time, the country would be doomed when resources ran out. Milton suggests that the blocking of truth will do more damage to the country than a loss of all traded resources. He makes a striking claim here, one important enough to catch the attention of Parliament. The leaders of a country do not want their homeland to struggle, and that is exactly what Milton advises will occur if licensing continues: the people will lack access to the most important “merchandize” and will deteriorate without it.

Milton’s mention of ports also evokes the knowledge that ports are the areas which develop most quickly in relation to the rest of a country because of their access to other parts of

the world. These areas must develop industries for receiving shipments and moving them to the rest of the country; a more modern day example would be New York and Chicago, both located on bodies of water and both booming cities, especially during times in which main transports came by water. If England remains a country without censorship, Milton suggests, the ports to receive truth will remain open and accepting, putting it ahead of countries who censor and allowing for more development.

Although mythological and religious images in today's time seem to rest greatly at odds with one another, in Milton's time they have the ability work well with one another and support Milton's point that resources and opportunities to seek truth must be made use of and cannot be under the order of censorship. One did not need to believe in religion or mythology to understand them, and he knows references to either could gain him support. Milton uses imagery involving both mythological instances, such as Osiris and Typhon, as well as quoting Bible passages featuring Moses, Jesus, or the temple. While Milton was a religious man, though not traditional, he still uses images of classical myth in order to appeal to the intellects of the time. In universities, mythology was still greatly emphasized and the men to whom he is addressing would therefore connect to these references. However, religion was also a great topic of debate and proved to be another area in which Milton could find support. The branches uphold different sets of beliefs – polytheism in mythology and monotheism in Christianity, for example – but both promote Milton's point well and can be widely understood, thus Milton utilizes them.

Milton's poetic figure in these three instances in *Areopagitica* strongly supports his belief that truth cannot be advanced, or even found, if the paths to it are blocked by censorship. Isis furthered the worship of her husband by perpetually searching for all of his body parts; the sun provides society light to further their discoveries; and countries, most importantly England,

will lose all if ports are blocked, and will not see any more advancement. These images and metaphors allow Milton to evoke interest in his audience with allusions to situations relevant to his present-day nation and create a strong basis on which to place his demand. His references almost always have other underlying messages that a typical scholar of today must search for more deeply, but at the time were usually well known within the intellectual sphere. Images involving religion or classical mythology do not necessarily agree in today's world, but they worked well for Milton to address multiple perspectives that his audience could comprehend no matter what they believed in. Without his images and metaphors, Milton's point that censorship destroys the opportunity to search for more truth would have been greatly weakened. He made use of his well-developed poetic skills in order to further his political goals and succeeded, in the very least, at stirring the attention of his audience and forcing them to actually contemplate the situation at hand.