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Hadley Griggs

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Can There Be an Ideal Coffehouse?

John Milton as Proponent and Critic of the Public Sphere

Hadley Griggs

It's 1711 in a coffeehouse in London. Glasses are clinking, pages are rustling, and the burbling of conversation fills the building. People are holding up newspapers, discussing current events, and debating politics. Even more people are pouring in, paying a penny for their coffees, and joining the conversation. Joseph Addison, a writer of the era, explained his relationship with the coffeehouses in his publication, *The Spectator*: "I appear on Sunday nights at St. James's Coffee House, and sometimes join the little Committee of Politicks in the Inner-Room, as one who comes there to hear and improve" (Addison). This may be the character of what Enlightenment scholars have come to call the "public sphere": an unprecedented venue for the exchange of ideas that was born in the Enlightenment era. Jürgen Habermas is a leading voice on this phenomenon, and in his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he explains the public sphere as hitting its peak in "late-seventeenth-century Great Britain" (xvii) and defines it as "the sphere of private people come together as a public . . . to engage . . . in a debate over the general rules governing relations" (27). He also emphasizes the role of rationality, highlighting "people's public use of their reason" (27). In short, the public sphere was an arena in which people could come and reason through debates.

It has claimed to be the rise of free public discourse. But this discourse didn't last; scholars also agree that the public sphere fell shortly after its rise. Habermas explains in his book that "tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable, for . . . its function has become progressively insignificant" (4). Alan Gross suggests a reason behind this shift into insignificance: "It [is] imperative . . . that [the public sphere's] history emphasize its unfortunate turn away from rational debate" (142). Thus, as the public sphere transitioned into something governed not by rational debate but by irrationality, it became a petty and insignificant part of Enlightenment discourse.

But the discussion on free public discourse in the Enlightenment era cannot be complete without including the work of John Milton, particularly his 1644 tract to Parliament, entitled *Areopagitica*. In this pamphlet, Milton argues for "his country's liberty . . . within the context of the public realm" (Kolbrenner 58). He lauds the strength of free public discourse and damns restrictions on that discourse. In short, he "deals with the whole problem of . . . intellectual liberty" (Kendall 445). This pamphlet came at the exact time in history when the public sphere was just starting to stretch its wings in England, and scholars are adamant when they say that Milton was "highly conscious" of his historical moment when writing (Loewenstein 77). Thus, *Areopagitica* can be used as a snapshot of England's public sphere, or at least the early opinions on the sphere. But *Areopagitica*, as an optimistic and idealistic view of the public sphere, paints only half of the picture—it accounts nothing for the sphere's crumble.

So if the public sphere did indeed crumble, then *Areopagitica* is just one piece of the puzzle of Enlightenment views on the sphere. Thus, an inclusion of *other* works will yield even more fruitful historical criticism of the Enlightenment's public sphere—namely, the inclusion of Milton's great 1667 epic, *Paradise Lost*. If we view *Paradise Lost* as it often is viewed—a political allegory, representational of Milton's early-Enlightenment moment—we can see a second iteration of Milton's view of the public sphere, and this one not so optimistic. *Paradise Lost* paints a picture of a public sphere that is riddled with corruption and emotion; this is a far cry from the idealistic sphere of *Areopagitica* and shows a sphere that, far before the peak of Habermas's "late-seventeenth-century Great Britain," was already showing signs of failure. Thus, a pairing of the two works—*Areopagitica* and *Paradise Lost*—reveals a more accurate view of the Enlightenment's public sphere: a view that begins in 1644 with *Areopagitica*'s ideal discourse model, and ends in 1667 with *Paradise Lost*'s book II debate in Pandemonium. By using these two Milton works as windows

into Enlightenment sentiments, readers can see the English public's original optimism, and then its early disillusionment, with the public sphere—and therefore the nature of even the budding, early seventeenth-century public sphere as deeply flawed.

Areopagitica and the Public Sphere

In 1643, Parliament passed the Licensing Order of 1643, which instituted several pre-publication censorship regulations on England—namely licensing and registration—and provided for the lawful destruction of offensive books and imprisonment of offensive writers. Milton was outraged by this order, and in 1644, published his response to it, entitled *Areopagitica; A Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England*. On the surface, this tract is simply a staunchly anti-censorship piece. But if we read *Areopagitica* as a promotion of the newly forming public sphere, it becomes more than an anti-censorship rant; it paints a clear picture of an ideal space for discussion and participation—in other words, ideal free public discourse, or the ideal public sphere. If readers pay careful attention to both the context and content of *Areopagitica*, they can see Milton's belief in the public sphere.

First, the context of this pamphlet's inception and publication illustrates Milton's ideal of public discourse. He even calls attention to this fact in the first paragraph of *Areopagitica*: "The very attempt of this address . . . and the thought of whom it hath recourse to, hath got the power within me to a passion." ("Areopagitica"). The fact that he saw a problem, in this case, with a government-instituted restriction; the fact that he wrote something in protest of such a problem; and the fact that he believed that Parliament would view the protest with reason and make the change—all of these point to Milton's belief in England's public sphere. For that, Milton says, is the very reason he is writing: out of a belief that free public discourse would allow him to have an effect on his country: giving others "recourse." Thus, even the existence of *Areopagitica* was a testament to the optimistic view of the public sphere's freedom of discourse.

A second testament to discourse is in the content of the pamphlet, and it once again highlights his optimistic belief in the public sphere. In the epigraph, Milton quotes Euripides to lay out in simple terms the theme of his piece. In short, he praises the ability to "speak free" ("Areopagitica"). Then, Milton specifically outlines the ideal structure of the public sphere: "when complaints

are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed” (“Areopagitica; A Speech” 33), and it is within this ideal structure that he says England resides—no doubt because of the rise of the public sphere as a means of sharing, considering, and resolving complaints. Indeed, scholars recognize Milton’s zeal as faith in the Enlightenment ideals: “Milton realized, especially after his first, excited foray into pamphleteering, that the [Enlightenment] was a revolution of words. . . . *Areopagitica*, with its sense of the vitalistic power of texts, confirms and defends the power of words” (Loewenstein 82). Thus, we can see Milton’s belief in the Enlightenment’s “revolution”: that the public sphere had created an even footing through words, where a free exchange of ideas could take place and contribute to the betterment of society.

In the content of *Areopagitica*, Milton also highlights another key component to free discourse: that of reason. Later in his work, Milton explains the origin of man’s reason: “For those actions which enter into a man . . . God uses not to captivate under a perpetual childhood of prescription, but trusts him with the gift of reason to be his own chooser” (“Areopagitica”). Milton uses the word *gift* to stress the beneficial nature of reason, but he does more than that by associating the idea of reason with God himself. By saying that God “trusts [man] with . . . reason,” it is clear that Milton believes firmly that reason is of God, and therefore is key to a good life on earth; it is an important part in the process of “[man’s] actions.” Thus, Milton wants readers to understand the structure of decision-making: first comes reason, then comes action. And when we integrate this idea into Milton’s ideal structure of the public sphere (share, consider, resolve), we can see that reason would have an important role in every stage. People must use their reason when presenting their ideas, when listening to others’ ideas, and when implementing solutions. In this model, man must use his reason at each step to “be his own chooser.” This idea—that reason should inform all actions—became a fundamental component in the Enlightenment, and specifically in the public sphere; scholars consistently extol reason as the driving force behind the public sphere (Habermas 27; Gross 142). And clearly, for Milton, reason is an essential component—if not the essential component—in his ideal public sphere.

When we take a step back and look at this image as a whole, the painting of the public sphere that Milton paints in *Areopagitica* is optimistic and idealistic. This idealism shows that the public, or at least the educated thinkers like Milton, saw this sphere as a promising development—full of the potential to recognize faults in society and work to reach reasonable, informed consensus.

He sees a sphere championed by free public discourse and reason. It is a public sphere in which he believes that one man's well-reasoned pamphlet can make a significant change.

Paradise Lost and the Public Sphere

Milton publishes *Areopagitica*, and twenty-three years pass. He has time to watch the public sphere unfold, has time to watch the coffee shops fill up, and has time to write. Then, in 1667, he publishes arguably his greatest work, *Paradise Lost*—a twelve-book epic poem that has been praised by critics since its publication. Viewing this work through the filter of the public sphere adds a new layer to previous criticism and can shed a completely different light on the Enlightenment's public sphere. The end of book I finds Satan raising a building, called Pandemonium, for a “great consult” (I.798). Milton describes the building as being “like a Temple,” with “pillars overlaid/With Golden Architrave,” and a “Roof [of] fretted Gold” (I.713–717). So lavish is Pandemonium that neither “Babylon / Nor great Alcairo” can rival its beauty. Once Pandemonium is finished, Satan summons all of his demons for a discussion of their plans. Then, “hundreds and . . . thousands” of demons pour into the building (I.761). Book II opens with all of the demons inside Pandemonium, preparing to participate in the “solemn council” by presenting their plans (I.755). Finally, Milton can really dive into his discussion of the public sphere.

This scene already creates an environment that is a far cry from the accessible, even humble, Enlightenment-era coffeehouses. Whereas in reality, coffeehouses were a single-penny investment, Milton paints Pandemonium as a palace of wealth. This stark contrast brings to light one of Milton's great tools: inversion, or a reversal of the normal order. In the case of book II, this reversal is clear: what is about to transpire is a debate, *but it is in hell*. This setting is far from what readers would expect—in fact, they would expect free public discourse to be carried out in a place like heaven. Milton uses inversion as a powerful tool throughout the epic. But while readers can interpret this inversion to show the opposite of what is happening in their own world, scholars like Neil Graves ask us to look at it differently: “In his daring epic Milton . . . aligns paradoxically incongruous characters. The effect is so uncomfortable that most critics have ignored or dismissed the resulting implications . . . and have thereby failed to perceive Milton's subtle criticism” (174). In short, Graves

is describing Milton's ability to invert readers' expectations and thereby show shocking parallels between the two things he is comparing. Thus, the effect of Milton's "paradoxical" alignment in the epic is to highlight the striking similarities between two seemingly disparate ideas: for instance, the idea of what is happening in hell, and the idea of what is happening in reality. This inversion, then, can inform our reading of *Paradise Lost's* debate scene and can allow us to view the epic not as a depiction of just what is happening in hell, but as a depiction of Milton's opinions of the real public sphere, years after *Areopagitica*. Because before, in *Areopagitica*, Milton was trumpeting the cause of the exchange of ideas—in book II of *Paradise Lost* he is playing a different tune.

On the surface, it is easy to identify similarities between the debate scene in *Paradise Lost* and the debate structure Milton puts forth in *Areopagitica*. For instance, the idea of *discourse* is still present in the work. Satan opens the discussion with the command: "We now debate. Who can advise may speak" (II.42). What follows in book II is the account of this debate. Four demons offer solutions: Moloch demands war (II.51–105), Belial recommends inaction (II.119–225), Mammon asks for peace (II.229–283), and Beëlzebub suggests infiltrating Earth (II.310–378). It appears that discussion happens, that the demons weigh out each possibility, and that they decide on the best solution. Even the trappings of democracy are present in the scene: "With full assent / They vote" (II.388–89). With these superficial details, we could argue that Milton is still depicting an ideal public sphere, and that he believes that free open discourse is alive and well during his contemporary moment.

But as the demons press on in their speeches, it is very clear that book II's public sphere discourse is flawed in two major ways. First, there's the issue of reason and rationality, and we can see this issue with each demon that presents a plan. Satan is the first to speak; but before he begins, Milton describes his emotional state as thus:

Satan exalted sat, by merit raised
To that bad eminence; and from despair
Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires
Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue
Vain War in Heav'n, and by success untaught
His proud imaginations thus displayed. (II.5–10)

In this excerpt, we see Satan relying on a wide array of passionate emotions: "despair," being "beyond hope," "insatia[bility]," having "proud imaginations"—all in four lines. Satan is allowing these emotions to cloud his reason, and thus

color his speech. Perhaps even more important is Milton's use of the word *beyond*: Satan is "*beyond hope*" and "aspires / *Beyond* thus high." The word *beyond* is a word of extremity, connoting the idea of pushing something further. In this language of extremity, where is the "gift of reason" that Milton talked about in *Areopagitica*? Satan's speech isn't borne of reasoned information and rationality—it springs out of his "despair" and shows him losing his grip on that rationality.

This lack of reason can be seen in several other demons as well: especially Moloc and Belial. When Moloc speaks "for open War" (II.51), Milton says, "His look denounced / Desperate revenge" (II.106–107). Rather than describing Moloc as wanting simply to act, Milton uses the word *revenge*—a passionate word. And he pairs with that passion a word of impulse: *desperate*. Desperation does not produce rationality; it is, by nature, an emotion of rashness and extremity. Therefore, Moloc, too, is allowing his rage to overtake his reason. And alongside Moloc comes Belial. Milton again indicates a lack of reason when he describes Belial's speech as "words clothed in reason's garb" (II.226). This line is perhaps the clearest critique Milton gives of the debate—that while those speaking have every semblance of reason about them, it is nothing but a façade. Thus, when applied to the public sphere, we see Milton's view, and it is not an optimistic one: that participators in the public sphere's discussions are not relying on "public use of their reason," as Habermas put it. They instead are relying on a public use of their *passion*. When passion, not reason, is behind every argument, public discourse becomes less of a venue for discussion and more of an arena for shouting. Therefore, this lack of reason is disrupting the very core of the public sphere's free public discourse.

But as the scene stretches on, Milton brings up more issues with the public sphere than simply its reliance on passion, rather than reason; his second critique has to do with the very foundations of free speech. It starts when Beëlzebub rises to present his plan to the awaiting audience—because unbeknownst to the listeners, Beëlzebub's plan was actually prepared by Satan: "Thus Beëlzebub / Pleased his devilish Counsel, first devised / By Satan" (II.378–380). Beëlzebub speaks about traveling to the Earth and tempting man, all under the guise of presenting this plan as his own invention, while Satan looks innocently on—appearing not as a tyrannical leader, but as a democratic guide. Finally, when the plan is delivered, Satan leads another show of democracy: "With full assent / They vote" (II.388–89). And, of course, the demons vote in favor of Satan's plan, presented from Beëlzebub's lips. Satan then begins to speak, praising the

demons for their great implementation of reasonable democracy: “Well have ye judged,” he says, “well ended long debate” (II.390). But there was no debate; Satan had engineered the meeting to seem democratic, but he knew the outcome all along. He knew his plan was going to be the choice. Everything was completely predetermined. And this bleak lack of democracy brings the question: how, in this public sphere, can *Areopagitica*’s free speech even exist? When the ideal public sphere is based on “when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed,” how can this perversion of that structure even be called free public discourse? The fact is this: it is *not* true public discourse. The picture that Milton paints in *Paradise Lost* is a harsh commentary on the nature of free speech in the public sphere: the sphere is dominated by one central figure that claims to be using the free public discourse model, but is truly just a tyrant. And perhaps the most crushing aspect of the model in *Paradise Lost* is the fact that the audience has no idea; the demons believe they are involved in the decision-making process of their world, when really their discussion was just wasted breath. Whether Milton intends Satan to represent Parliament (who, after *Areopagitica* was published, rejected Milton’s plea to repeal the Licensing Order of 1643), a despotic ruler, or a controlling dogma, this final piece shows Milton’s cynicism: that free speech, in his Enlightenment-era moment, is an illusion.

Looking at the public sphere now through the lens of *Paradise Lost*, we can see the whole picture. What started out as hopeful idealism in *Areopagitica* turned into disillusionment in *Paradise Lost*. Whereas before, we could only see the “intellectual liberty” (Kendall 445) of the public sphere, now we see “the unfortunate turn” (Gross 142) into irrationality and futility. Thus, Milton’s critique shows a public sphere marred by passionate zealotry and pre-determinism; *Paradise Lost* is evidence that the writers and philosophers, in just twenty-odd years of the early Enlightenment, were not as impressed with the function of the public sphere as they had been in the beginning. It had already begun to show its flaws, even before its peak.

Conclusion: John Milton and a Glimmer of Hope

The pairing of *Areopagitica* and *Paradise Lost* gives readers a more accurate window into the Enlightenment, and by using these, we can chronicle

something of the rise and early fall of the public sphere. *Paradise Lost* leaves a cynical view of public discourse because while critics like Habermas argue that the public sphere hit its peak in the eighteenth century, Milton's picture depicts a failure in as early as 1667. And what's more, we are even left with a bleak outlook on free speech in general. We see a world in which people may *think* they are voicing their opinions to an eager audience, when in fact the entire conversation is rigged.

But is there a glimmer of hope? I argue that there is. Because while Milton's *Paradise Lost* depicts a public sphere in complete disarray, there is one thing that may hint that Milton had not given up: the fact that he wrote the epic poem in the first place. If he still saw value in presenting a critique of his historical moment, perhaps that shows he still thought that the exchange of ideas had value. Perhaps, instead of a complete failure, Milton thought that there was still a chance that the world could be changed. So while coupling the works may provide the most accurate representation of the Enlightenment's historical moment, perhaps the coffeehouses were not as hopeless as *Paradise Lost* makes them out to be. It could still be that sitting in a coffeehouse in London—with its clinking glasses, rustling pages, and burbling conversation—yielded some fruitful interaction after all.

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