

# Milton and Early American Politics:

## *Areopagitica*, the Making of a Nation, and the Idea of Freedom

Abstract: This study uses a two-fold method to define the parameters of Milton's influence upon early American political thought. The first relies upon careful documentation of the contents of influential founder's libraries, which reveal that many were either devotees of Milton's works or else were intimately familiar with them. The second relies upon historicist documentation of Milton's impact on early American thought more generally. Finally, this paper makes the case that Milton's conception of freedom, particularly as expressed in *Areopagitica* played a defining role in the founders' own ideologies both directly and indirectly and formed the principle rhetorical and philosophical source for much of their conception of political liberty, a conception which has largely endured into modern U.S. political culture. The basis for this line of argument is established by documenting the rhetorical evolution of Milton's thought in his own prose writings, and rhetorical similarities in the founders' own writings. This paper thus establishes that Milton's religious thought, and the legacy of the repressive systems under which it was formed, precipitated the foundation of an entrenched division between church and state in the fledgling United States.

Milton's ideas exerted a profound impact upon influential Early Americans, to whom his persona as a polymath and iconoclast made him relatable. As a thinker, his conceptions of liberty, especially the necessity of the freedom of expression in a well ordered and democratic society, helped to cement the tenets which would eventually materialize in the Bill of Rights. More importantly, however, what Milton represented to the founders was a means of rectifying two competing views on the source and justification for liberty. As a divinely imparted right, liberty was integral to the maintenance of human dignity, but, in Milton, the founders found a way to adapt their Christian morality to an at least partially secular framework. *Areopagitica*, in offering up the idea that man's reason is the foremost divinely imparted trait, invited the conclusion that the exercise of reason in determining right from wrong, necessitated that individuals be allowed to make their own determinations of moral rightness, either through interpreting and evaluating ideas individually, or, as a society. In this sense, at least, Milton's ideas were the genesis of so much of the thought which animated both *The Declaration of Independence*, and *The Constitution*, and which would, in later years, define the debates over the legitimate extent of Americans', and humanity's right to unhindered creative and ideological expression.

Since its publication in 1667, *Paradise Lost* captivated readers and theologians alike for both its lyrical and literary accomplishment, and its deft retelling of biblical events. Indeed, it is the only work of religious character to have assumed, by 1776, quasi-biblical status, the nearest competitor being Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The founding of the American republic brought with it questions of religious and politi-

cal character, and where the Bible failed to provide sufficient rhetorical flourish, Milton's epic, alongside his prose works, readily filled in the gaps. Generations of Early Americans, both the educated and the ordinary churchgoing, were reared on Milton's poem as *the* greatest epic penned in the English language. It had long since supplanted Spenser's unfinished *Faerie Queene* and was already in firm contention for consideration alongside Shakespeare as amongst the greatest works of English literature. Besides this, the poem, when taken alongside Milton's shorter poetry and his still oft reprinted prose tracts, was already being read as a republican political tract, with its allegories, now profitably mined in David Norbrook's *Writing the English Republic*, coming to the fore in American political life just as the question of the extent of the King's divine right to leadership, reared its head once more. In 1776 we receive the most dramatic example of Milton's accessibility to the word-smiths of early American revolutionary tracts. Thomas Paine, rejecting the idea of continued union between the colonies and the crown, quotes Milton's Satan, "For never can true reconciliation grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep."<sup>1</sup>

In his landmark study of Milton's legacy and impact upon early American prose and poetry, historian and literary scholar, George F. Sensabaugh notes that "Politicians applauded his stand on civil and ecclesiastical freedom, and, after his epic had become a common possession, turned his portraits of evil and of good into propagandist devices to fight party disputes of the day."<sup>2</sup> In this way, Milton lent himself, Englishman though he was, to the kind of outsider persona which the developing nation required. His iconoclastic stances distanced him from the orthodoxies of his day, even as his social station intimately tied him to them. His individualistic ideal of religious intellectualism chimed with the deistic inclinations of many influential early Americans just as his broad ranging thought endeared him to founders like Benjamin Franklin, who were of a similarly polymathic character. All of these considerations conflated such that the 19th century critic, Rufus Wilmott Griswold's oft quoted observation still rang true, 100 years later, that

---

<sup>1</sup> Two Founders, One Book, referencing *Common Sense*, Stanford University Digital Collections

<sup>2</sup> Sensabaugh 1, pg. 4

“Milton is more emphatically American than any author who has lived in the United States. He is so because in him is expressed so much of the primitive vitality of that thought from which America is born, though at present disposed to forswear her lineage in so many ways. He is the purity of Puritanism. He understood the nature of liberty, of justice – what is required for the unimpeded action of conscience – what constitutes true marriage, and the scope of manly education.”<sup>3</sup>

And herein lies the kernel of Milton’s appeal, his synergistic balance of adherent and rebel, thinker and patriot, and, most importantly, political pragmatist and poetical epicist. Sensabaugh furthers this tack, arguing that

“As Americans shaped their discourse according to neoclassic principles of taste, they answered warmly to the high rhetoric of *Areopagitica* and to the grand style of *Paradise Lost*. As they embraced current ideals of the Enlightenment, they instinctively read their experience in terms of Reformation theology and Renaissance views. The commonsensical stance of the era failed to weaken the hold of the old rhetoric or to replace long-established, analogical habits of mind. Augustan modes of expression might inform, but sublime passages still moved heart and soul. Ideas of perfection and progress might inspire hopes for the future, but concepts of original sin and of a hierarchical universe still satisfied needs of the spirit. Such paradoxes, far from alienating Milton in the American community, in fact drove him deeper into the general consciousness.”<sup>4</sup>

It is hardly a surprise, then, to find Milton’s ideas peppered throughout the expressions of many of early America’s greatest prose writers, who strove to balance their stated ambition of plain spoken rhetoric, with high minded idealism. It also should offer no surprise that while readily appropriated, perhaps appropriately, to the political sphere, affinity for Milton’s ideological iconoclasm remained in the

---

<sup>3</sup> Kendrick, pg. 906

<sup>4</sup> op cit, pg. 5

religious sphere as well. This delicate balance still colours American political speech, where “straight shooting” earns points, but only if expressed with the kind of political ambivalence which offends none.

Thomas Jefferson, for instance, made use of Milton’s ecclesiastical tracts in his efforts to disestablish the Church of England in Virginia.<sup>5</sup> “Dissent over contributions and freedom of worship,” headed by Jefferson’s camp, led to landmark legislation in Virginia “exempting dissenters from contributing to the Anglican Church” (passed December of 1776) and a more general “Bill for religious freedom” (passed much later in 1786).<sup>6</sup>

The impact of Milton’s prose was both widespread and pronounced. Indeed, it can be argued that the debt which the Declaration of Independence owes to John Locke, is rightly shared by Milton, if not appropriated whole cloth. It bears noting that Milton’s influence upon Locke’s thinking, though reputedly begrudged, leaves fingerprints all across the latter’s writings. Though the two were contemporaries, Locke’s writings, particularly his educational treatises conform broadly to Milton’s ideals of political culture and education, thus showing that Milton’s impact was both direct, and often degrees removed, from those expressed in the drafting of the American republic.<sup>7</sup> Before we undergo an examination of the extent to which Milton’s thoughts more generally and on freedom impacted early American writing, however, we must first establish the presence of his thought in the libraries and literary consciousness of America’s founders.

The depths of Jefferson’s admiration for Milton are most evident in his 1786 reference to Milton’s poetic gifts in his *Thoughts on English Prosody* (1786)<sup>8</sup>, though the extent of Jefferson’s admiration, or at least familiarity, with Milton was far greater. Jefferson’s library included a number of works by Milton, including several editions of *Paradise Lost*, one of which a first edition, though a later printing, copies of *Paradise Regained*, one of which as a subscription shared with contemporary, Benjamin Franklin.<sup>9</sup> Addi-

---

<sup>5</sup> Sensabaugh 3, pg. 353

<sup>6</sup> Sensabaugh 2, pg. 553

<sup>7</sup> Locke, *pg. 111*

<sup>8</sup> Sowerby, pg. 423

<sup>9</sup> op cit pg. 423-425, 432

tionally, Jefferson owned a number of works referencing, or related to, Milton, including a copy of Washington's war journals, documenting the latter's interest in John Douglas's 1750 pamphlet, *Milton Vindicated from the Charge of Plagiarism Brought Against Him by Mr. Lauder*<sup>10, 11</sup> Jefferson also owned a copy of Filmer's *Observations on Government*, which references Milton's arguments against Salmatius in the latter's *Pro Populo Anglicano*, a Latin polemic in which Milton argues in support of Cromwell's government, countering the assertions of a work by Claudis Salmasius, *Defensio regio pro Carolo*, in which he condemned the protector and his Roundheads of regicide.

To go along with his evident interest in the comparatively recent English Civil War, Jefferson also owned copies of *Eikon Basilike*<sup>12</sup> (The King's Book), a laudatory piece published in the wake of Charles I's execution, in an attempt to curtail the revolution. He also held a copy of Richard Hollingsworth's defense of the former work<sup>13</sup>, written in response to Milton's *Eikonoklastes*, a long indictment of the King's book, and what Milton deemed its fundamentally irreligious character. Taking his own collection and the ready availability of many print works through other learned members of his social group, Milton's *Eikonoklastes*, though not included in existing catalogues of Jefferson's library, is unlikely to have escaped his notice with such an extensive collection related directly to it.

Jefferson's interest in the period didn't end there, as he also possessed a number of books directly pertaining to Charles I<sup>14</sup>, as well as several histories and accounts of the civil war period.<sup>15</sup> Intriguingly, Jefferson also possessed a copy of Daniel Defoe's *Political History of the Devil* (1770, first printed 1726),

---

<sup>10</sup> Lauder was a notorious forger whose falsifications were brought to light by the bishop, Douglas

<sup>11</sup> op cit, pg. 218

<sup>12</sup> op cit, pg. 152

<sup>13</sup> op cit, pg. 153

<sup>14</sup> Including: *Religulae Sacrae Carolinae 1640-1648*, a collection of Charles I's works (Ibid pg. 153), *Relation Veritable de la Mort de Charles I*, also purportedly in the King's hand (Ibid pg. 152), and Richard Osborne's narrative of Charles I's imprisonment on Wight. (op cit pg. 152)

<sup>15</sup> Including Leti Gregorio, *Historio della Grande Breteagna dal Leti* (1684), *L Clarendon's History of the Rebellion*, by Edward Hyde Earl of Clarendon (1720), and Edmund Ludlow's memoirs of 1626-1672 which detail his time as Commander in Chief of the forces in Ireland and as a member of Parliament. (op cit pg. 154)

which included a lengthy discussion therein, of what Defoe perceived to be inaccuracies in Milton's portrayal of Satan, a critique which must have intrigued the young Jefferson whose stance as an avowed sympathizer with Milton's Satan, stood in sharp contrast to such criticisms, though later life would bring him around to a more conventional view of Milton's anti-hero, such as C.S. Lewis would espouse in his *Preface to Paradise Lost*.<sup>16</sup>

James Madison, too, had an affinity for Milton's writings, or at the least, *Paradise Lost*. Madison and Jefferson often exchanged books, among other items, as attested to in numerous letters.<sup>17</sup> Most intriguing, is an extant copy of an edition of *Paradise Lost* bearing Jefferson's ownership inscription and, not one, but five signatures by Madison evidently made over the course of several years, suggesting that copy exchanged hands on at least that many occasions. Jefferson's signature on the title page is evidence that he acquired the book before 1770, as after this period he began writing only his initials in his volumes, before eventually electing to bury his initials deep within the text of the books in his own "playful and idiosyncratic system."<sup>18</sup> It is suggested that the two volume set was a gift from his teacher James Maury whose school he frequented from 1758 to 1760 and whose signature may be extant in the second volume.<sup>19</sup> This sequence of events is likely, as it is around this period in his life that we begin to see references to *Paradise Lost* proliferate in his commonplace book. In any case, their shared passion is evident.

Washington, like Jefferson, had a collection which included Milton's better known works, including copies of *Paradise Lost*, and the shorter poems.<sup>20</sup> Again, like Jefferson and Madison, Washington's familiarity with Milton's thought was definitely more expansive, and the shared libraries of the founders

---

<sup>16</sup> See Hugh Jenkin's discussion of Jefferson's engagement with *Paradise Lost* in his *Jefferson (Re)Reading Milton*

<sup>17</sup> Among which that reprinted in *Debates on the Constitution Vol. 1 as The Constitution Explained and Justified: Madison to Jefferson Oct 24, 1787* pg. 192

<sup>18</sup> Stanford University Digital Collections

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Morrison, back-matter

and their associates, would have provided abundant opportunity to read Milton's prose tracts, like *Areopagitica*.

John Adams also possessed an extensive library, and a broad appreciation for Milton's thought. His son, John Quincy did as well, acquiring by inheritance and personal interest, several volumes relating to and written by Milton. As Worthington Chauncey Ford writes, "John Milton was as eminent in his day for his political writings as for his poetry, thus possessing qualities which would appeal to both of the Adams."<sup>21</sup>

"The father had the "Works" in three folio volumes, printed ostensibly at Amsterdam but really at London in 1698, a choice possession for a connoisseur of books, even if it did not contain the poems. He also had the "Treatise of the Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes," 1790, and with that he was done with Milton."<sup>22</sup>

That said, Adams' appreciation went far beyond this, as, though his personal accounts of his holdings do not list it, he must have had a copy of *Paradise Lost*, if only by the attestation of his son, who made several attempts in his early life to apprise himself of his father's enthusiasm for the work with little success. Indeed,

"John Quincy Adams admitted that before he was thirty, he could not read Milton with pleasure, even when taken with tobacco. He had the "Pro Populo anglicano Defensio," 1657, and "Artes Logicae," 1672. Of the "Poetical Works" he had two London, 1731 and 1809, and one Charlestown (Mass.), 1805, edition. Of "Paradise Lost" he had two London issues, 1788 and 1795, one Birmingham, 1760—a Baskerville—three translations into French, Paris, 1765 and 1805, and La Haye, 1767, and to add a curiosity, an English text translated from the French

---

<sup>21</sup> Adams, Adams, and Ford pg. 31-2

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

of Raymond de St. Maur and published at Edinburgh, 1765. Of “Paradise Regained” he had only the Birmingham imprint of 1760.”<sup>23</sup>

This expansive collection suggests, if not an enthusiasm, at least a tremendous regard for Milton’s works. In one entry in his diary, John Quincy reflects that

“At ten years of age I read Shakespeare’s “Tempest”, “As You Like It”, “Merry Wives of Windsor”, “Much Ado about Nothing”, and “King Lear”. With these books in a closet in my mother’s bed-chamber, there was also a small edition in two volumes, of Milton’s “Paradise Lost”, which I believe, I attempted ten times to read, and never could get through half a book. I might as well have attempted to read Homer before I had learned the Greek alphabet. I was mortified even to shedding of solitary tears, that I could not even conceive what it was that my father and mother admired so much in that book, and yet I was ashamed to ask them an explanation. I smoked and read Milton at the same time, and from the same motive—to find out what was the recondite charm in them which gave my father so much pleasure. After making myself four or five times sick with smoking, I mastered that accomplishment, and acquired a habit which, thirty years afterward, I had much difficulty in breaking off. But I did not master Milton. I was nearly thirty when I first read Paradise Lost with delight and astonishment. But of late years I have lost the relish for fiction. I see nothing with sympathy but men, women, and children of flesh and blood.”<sup>24</sup>

Even in these sparse appreciations, however, the later impact of Milton upon the minds of early Americans is as grand in scope as the ambition of his poetry, although, by J.Q. Adams’ time the earliest suggestions of Milton’s descent from the popular imagination were becoming pronounced.

Benjamin Franklin presents another case besides, in that his interest in Milton expanded markedly beyond the scope of Milton’s poetry and revolutionary prose, to encompass his prelatival tracts as well, to

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> op cit., pg. 68

an even great extent than the elder Adams'. As his library catalogue documents Franklin had a copy of John Toland's early biography, *The Life of John Milton*<sup>25</sup>, and a volume of commentary upon Samuel Johnson's *Life of Milton*<sup>26</sup>. This was appended with a copy of *Areopagitica* which Franklin possessed in another volume, a reprint with additional preface and dedicatory remarks<sup>27</sup>

Franklin also held copies of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, printed London 1645, the similarly themed *Tetrachordon*<sup>28</sup> and *Of Prelatical Episcopacy*, printed 1641<sup>29</sup>, and *Of True Religion*, dated printed 1673<sup>30</sup>. Also of Milton's prose, Franklin possessed a 1689 printing of *Pro Populo Adversus Tyrannos*<sup>31</sup>. Franklin also, like Jefferson, possessed a copy of *Milton Vindicated from the Charge of Plagiarism*, formerly bound with two other volumes of Jefferson's ownership.<sup>32</sup> To complement this volume, Franklin owned a copy of a letter from the Lauder of Milton's famous accusation, dated 1751, and addressed to the Reverend Davis, in response to and criticism of, the latter's vindication.

Of the poetry, Franklin possessed a similarly broad sampling to those of his associates, including an identical 1758 Brimingham printing of *Paradise Lost* to Jefferson's, and the accompanying printing of *Paradise Regained, Samson Agonistes, and Poems Upon Several Occasions*.<sup>33</sup> He possessed another 1713 edition of this same work, to which was appended Milton's *On Education*, which Franklin must have relished, considering its later reference alongside Locke's musings, in Franklin's *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*, published 1749. Franklin borrowed many of Milton's ideas in

---

<sup>25</sup> Wolf and Hayes, pg. 779

<sup>26</sup> op cit, pg. 134

<sup>27</sup> op cit,, pg. 559

<sup>28</sup> op cit,, pg. 561

<sup>29</sup> op cit, pg. 559-60

<sup>30</sup> op cit, pg. 560

<sup>31</sup> op cit, pg. 569

<sup>32</sup> op cit, pg. 255

<sup>33</sup> op cit, pg. 561

this capacity, admiring his proposal that “an Hour and a Half before Dinner should be allo’d for Exercise”, and Milton’s emphasis upon the value history for youths, who should

“be instructed in the Beginning End and Reasons of political Societies; that they may not in a dangerous Fit of the Commonwealth be such poor, shaken, uncertain Reeds of such a tottering Conscience as many of our great Councilors have lately shewn themselves but stedfast Pillars of the State.”<sup>34</sup>

and upon debating, as Franklin quoted Milton in saying that “they are to dive into the ground of Law and legal Justice; deliver’d first and with best Warrant by Moses; and as far as human Prudence can be trusted in those celebrated Remains of the ancient Grecian and Roman Lawgivers.”<sup>35</sup> Franklin also highlighted Milton’s preference for education which encompasses study of Natural Philosophy and the Latin authors on agriculture including Cato, Varro, and Columella.<sup>36</sup>

Franklin’s oft expressed view that service to God and expression of the self were one and the same action also came from Milton via *On Education* wherein the latter says that “The end of learning is to repair the Ruins of our first parents, by regaining to know God aright, and out of that Knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our Souls of the true Virtue.”<sup>37</sup>

So, as amply demonstrated, Milton’s presence in early Americans’ and particularly in the founders’ libraries, was marked, as was his influence upon their early writings. As the Revolutionary era plateaued and the question became not the overthrow of tyranny, but the establishment of effective democratic governance, the founders again turned to Milton’s words and ideas to frame the ideal government, and also to quantify both the value and the origin of that most sovereign of American ideals, liberty.

---

<sup>34</sup> Milton and Wolfe Vol. 3 *On Education*, Para. 3, pg. 413

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Wolf and Hayes, pg. 560-1

<sup>37</sup> Milton and Wolfe Vol. 3 *On Education* pg. 573, para. 3, pg. 419, and in Wolf and Hayes, pg. 560-1

That most cardinal of American virtues, so sacrosanct to the founders that it was to become enshrined in the first amendment, was the right to the freedom of expression absent persecution. Quibbling over semantics, the freedom to express ideas and opinions with the implied constraint of any right, namely that its end is reached when it infringes upon the rights of another. In every other respect, freedom of expression and of religion were conceived of as a crucible in which the more learned ideas would necessarily win out, a construction familiar to anyone who had read *Areopagitica*, in which Milton posits that

“books were ever as freely admitted into the world as any other birth; the issue of the brain was no more stifled than the issue of the womb; no envious Juno sat cross-legged over the nativity of any man’s intellectual offspring; but if it proved a monster, who denied but that it was justly burnt, or sunk into the sea?”<sup>38</sup>

What precisely it might mean for an idea to prove itself is somewhat abstract in this sense, tethered as they are to those who espouse them, but the quasi-Darwinian model of ideological evolution does possess some legs assuming the arena of debate is level. Milton, while he doesn’t argue for the kind of absolute freedom of expression which later Americans, and most modern legal theorists would posit, his argument does function as the bulwark for those later expansions. Milton argues, in essence, for the extension of the legal precedent of the United States, to the freedom of expression, re the assumption of an idea’s legitimacy until its premise is proven fallible (guilty). This idea is Milton’s address to Prospero who, abjuring sorcery, drowned his book.<sup>39</sup>

Couched in this expression, too, is the implicit relation between an individual’s ideological expression and their human offspring. In this sense, their unjustified removal or destruction are likened to infanticide. Expanding his metaphor, Milton allows these rhetorical children to grow, saying that

---

<sup>38</sup> Milton, pg. 14

<sup>39</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 5.1.58

“Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are... as good as almost to kill a Man as kill a good book.”<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps modern theorists might find themselves troubled by Milton’s use of the word, “good” here, expressing as it does the possibility for some form of, if not objective, then certainly just valuation of a man’s ideological product. Here again, he would turn to the crucible metaphor, although theorists like Adams and later Alexis De Tocqueville, would caution about the tyranny of a majority, to smother such lofty ideas. Indeed, even in his own time, Milton would taste of the suppression of ideas he likely would have deemed “good”, at the hands of a public allied with a government unprepared to entertain them, namely those expressed in his posthumously published tractate, *De Doctrina Christiana*, with its anti-trinitarian bent, offensive both to Protestant and Catholic thinkers of the era. And yet, later in the address, Milton does broaden his scope, suggesting that it is “the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties”<sup>41</sup> which is most necessary to the establishment of a just society, this conclusion arising partly, no doubt, from his own fear that it is God only who can foresee the future of any idea and judge accordingly, a concern rooted in that same soil as Adams’ cautions. All parties come to the conclusion, however, that the playing field of ideas must, as all liberties, be uniform.

In a letter to Jefferson in 1787, Madison bemoans that “the mutability of the laws of the States is found to be a serious evil.”<sup>42</sup> This is the essential imperfection of a free market in ideological expression. Protections must be equally extended, or else the market shifts favorably to the side of the oppressor as surely as the market in ladders would to the manufacturer whose competition suffered an unfortunate fall. Jefferson concurred on the necessity of equal protection under the law, arguing that “a bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, & what no just

---

<sup>40</sup> Milton, pg. 7

<sup>41</sup> op cit, pg. 53-4

<sup>42</sup> Bailyn, vol 1. pg. 197

government should refuse or rest on inference”<sup>43</sup> That the United States would become the first country to actually implement these measures was unprecedented.

Now to interrogate the meaning of “liberty” in both its definitional and existential senses, requires first a definition, which for lack of a more original inroad, can be first undergone through a visit to the OED, yielding the following definition (of several largely similar ones). In its noun form liberty is

“Freedom from arbitrary, despotic, or autocratic control; independence, esp. from a foreign power, monarchy, or dictatorship”<sup>44</sup>

As a definition to be going on with, this suffices, though the broader implications of any freedom from bondage or servitude in a theological sense, will become apparent in the following pages. The term freedom will also be used here synonymously with liberty, as it historically has been in the writings of America’s founders. This inherent value will be taken largely as it was by Milton and by early Americans, to be self evident, and it is to be the source of these purportedly and ideally inalienable rights which will be explored here. Now, whether these inalienable rights are such because of divine will, or because of the very fabric of the societal fabric, may still, as it is to this day, be debated.

The impact of Milton’s thinking and the legacy of the Cromwell era on American literary and pamphleteering culture are pronounced. The structure of the debates over the composition and ratification of the Constitution, were much in line with the vision laid out in *Areopagitica*. From the Federalist papers, to the Anti-federalist papers, and countless other publicly issued pamphlets and circulated speeches, the debates continued the trend to which Milton had contributed in his own time, although in the emerging United States, what had been the literary underground of the 1660s and 70s, was conducted fully in the public eye, inviting even those not of an intellectual or political caste, to be privy to the debate surrounding their country’s inception.

---

<sup>43</sup> op cit, pg. 211

<sup>44</sup> "liberty, n.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 28 March 2016.

So much of Milton's political writing concerns the question of heads of state and government, and their just and allotted roles. Living under three Kings and a Protector, Milton had more experience than many with the various temperaments of rulers both divine and, though popularly installed, absolute.

A popular reading of *Paradise Lost*, is to read it as, at least in part, an allegory for the political upheaval of the Cromwell era, a mode of inquiry most notably utilized in David Norbrook's *Writing the English Republic*. In this view, Milton's God stands in for Cromwell, assuming both the romantic promise, and chaotic reality, of his reign. In *Paradise Lost*, God, through his son, foretells a moment when his reign over both man and angels shall come to an end, when a new world is founded "New heaven and earth, wherein the just shall dwell."<sup>45</sup> He promises that

"Then thou thy regal sceptre shalt lay by  
 For regal sceptre then no more shall need,  
 God shall be all in all. But all ye gods,  
 Adore him, who to compass all this dies.  
 Adore the son and honour him as me. (PL III.339-43)

It is a romantic view to take when studying the history of despotism or government more generally. It is easy also to read Milton's prose through the lens of Cromwell as the Son, with Charles I, late beheaded, as the abdicating God, though this reading would ignore the willing nature of God's promise here. Indeed, the tangle of Milton's personal conception of God and the Son, is difficult to parse solely from the poetry, and even from *De Doctrina*, but, that something of Milton's personal politics infiltrated his magnum opus, seems a foregone conclusion however one chooses to read his God. It suffices to say that Milton's relationship to monarchs and despots, the former he was quick to urge the beheading of, and the latter he willingly collaborated with, lent him a unique perspective on the question of a representative government. What seems most pronounced in Milton's views however, if his attacks on Charles I in *Eikonoklastes* are any indication, is the primacy he places upon the sincerity of leaders' Christian convictions.

---

<sup>45</sup> PL III.335

Charles I, for the crime of cribbing prayers from Sidney's *Arcadia*, if it was, indeed, he who wrote *Eikon Basilike*, represented a great evil whereas Cromwell, at least for the duration of his reign, remained in Milton's good graces. For Milton, the appellation of divinely appointed leader had to be earned, rather than inherited or proclaimed.

Early Americans held a preternatural distaste for monarchs, and yet, in many cases, a commensurate readiness to either in truth, or de-facto, enthrone George Washington by 1783. For the next decade, debate over the capacity of a President or similar figure was undergone both privately, and in the press. In *Federalist LXIX*, written by Alexander Hamilton in 1788, he defended the capacity of a President on the grounds of the obvious limitations to his authority, over those of the King of Great Britain. On the subject of the President's right to return a bill for ratification to the Congress, Hamilton cites that fact of a King's absolute veto over any parliamentary action whatsoever, making the case that though the King by that point had become largely subservient to the Parliament,

“The disuse of that power for a considerable time past, does not affect the reality of its existence; and is to be ascribed wholly to the crown's having found the means of substituting influence to authority, or the art of gaining a majority in one or the other of the two houses, to the necessity of exerting a prerogative which could seldom be exerted without hazarding some degree of national agitation.”<sup>46</sup>

Essentially, the mere fact that a leader has a lawfully enshrined capacity to negate the will of the people de-legitimizes the representative aspect of democratic government. The role, as conceived by Hamilton, and as Cromwell's role must have seemed to Milton, was to serve as head of government in instances of gridlock and as head of state in matters of foreign policy, but always and necessarily with a direct responsibility to report to the legislature, a constraint permanently enshrined in the Constitution.

Ben Franklin took a similar view in writing to the *Federal Gazette* based in Philadelphia, under the Pseudonym “K”, saying that “if an angel from Heaven was to bring down a Constitution form'd there

---

<sup>46</sup> Bailyn Vol. 2, pg. 339

for our Use, it would nevertheless meet with violent Opposition.”<sup>47</sup> He draws a lengthy analogy to Moses who “personally deliver’d to that chosen Servant, in the presence of the whole Nation, a Constitution and Code of Laws for their Observance; accompanied and sanction’d with Promises of great Rewards, and Threats of severe Punishments, as the Consequence of their Obedience or Disobedience.”<sup>48</sup> He goes on to describe an early battle in Church leadership when Corah, ambitious to inherit Moses’ priesthood, was offended when the honor was conferred upon Aaron instead, and argued that this was “by the Authority of Moses only, *without the Consent of the People*” [italics Franklin’s].<sup>49</sup> Franklin sardonically notes that Corah added the accusation that Moses had “by various Artifices, fraudulently obtain’d the Government, and depriv’d the People of their Liberties; and of conspiring with Aaron to perpetuate the Tyranny in their Family.”<sup>50</sup> In constructing his argument, however, Franklin draws a presupposition with which Milton would undoubtedly have been sympathetic, that Moses’ government was quite obviously in accordance with divine will. Of the Israelites’ disquiet, Franklin says that

“On the whole, it appears, that the Israelites were a People jealous of their newly-acquired Liberty, which Jealousy was in itself no Fault; but when they suffer’d it to be work’d upon by artful Men, pretending Public Good, with nothing really in view but private Interest, they were led to oppose the Establishment of the *New Constitution*, whereby they brought upon themselves much Inconvenience and Misfortune.”<sup>51</sup>

Absent any such obvious guidance in the new United States, Franklin seems to argue that what was necessary was to enshrine those essential freedoms and to trust to “*Providence*”, that any document of such

---

<sup>47</sup> Bailyn Vol. 1, pg. 401

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> op cit, pg. 402

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> op cit, pg. 404

import as the new constitution would never have passed without the tacit or active acceptance of “that omnipotent, omnipresent, and beneficent Ruler”.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, Franklin’s biblically sourced sanguinity was not shared by all of his contemporaries. One poem, published three months earlier in the *State Gazette of South Carolina*, entitled *On the New Constitution*, lamented that

In five short years of Freedom weary grown  
 We quit our plain republics for a throne;  
*Congress* and *President* full proof shall bring,  
 A mere disguise for Parliament and King”<sup>53</sup>

These anxieties were little quieted by Hamilton’s assurances that “The executive authority, with few exceptions, is to be vested in a single magistrate”, further elaborating that “if in this particular there be a resemblance to the King of Great Britain, there is not less a resemblance to the Grand Signior to the Khan of Tartary, to the man of the seven mountains, or to the Governor of New York.”<sup>54</sup> What seemed most to unsettle those skeptics both within and without the Convention, was the question of the duration with which power would be held. Early on in the debates over the constitution, Jefferson wrote to Hamilton that “experience shews that the only way to prevent disorder is to render them [executives and their elections] uninteresting by frequent changes.” In this view, there is a necessity to voter fatigue which circumvents the formation of cults of personality around individual politicians and underscores the banal and dutiful aspects of governance. In this way, a government of the people and divorced from the world of grandstanding, could be made and perpetuated. Jefferson notes that

---

<sup>52</sup> op cit, pg. 404-405

<sup>53</sup> op cit, pg. 107 Lines, 11-14

<sup>54</sup> op cit, pg. 338

“incapacity to be elected a second time would have been the only effectual preventative [for tyranny]. The power of removing him every fourth year by the vote of the people is a power which will not be exercised. The King of Poland is removable every day by the Diet, yet he is never removed.”<sup>55</sup>

In effect, what Jefferson here criticizes is the Newtonian tendency of those occupying positions of power to remain in those positions unless acted upon by some profound external force, like a constitutional provision or a public beheading. This makes the precedent set by Washington, and emended to the constitution in the wake of FDR’s third term, all the more unusual in the history of politics.

Jefferson would later question, in a letter to William Stephens Smith, “what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? [...] The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants? It is its natural manure.”<sup>56</sup>

Yet always, in discussions of the probable executive, the question remained whether he would be solely answerable to the people, or, in some way, divinely appointed, as Franklin intimates, for what in a deistic world view could come to be that was not, in some way, in accordance with the divine will? The paternalistic imperative of the position was always at the fore of its consideration however, as was the question of just what would constitute good leadership in that capacity. Washington was the natural choice, having already shepherded the country through a war, and his election was considered more or less commensurate with adoption of the the proposed constitution<sup>57</sup>. Mention could be made that the essential formality of his election shadowed the proceedings in much the same way in which contemporary media discussion of candidates for political office, particularly the presidency, has a tendency to enshrine certain candidates, particularly those with strong establishment ties or name recognition, prematurely.

---

<sup>55</sup> Bailyn Vol 1, pg. 211

<sup>56</sup> op cit, pg. 310

<sup>57</sup> Hamilton’s 1787 Conjectures on the New Constitution, op cit, pg. 10

The question of the exact extent of executive powers also arose, partially answered by Hamilton in *Federalist LXIX*, however, in 1787, Madison, in a letter to Jefferson, offers the simple guideline that the ideal extent to the President's powers will be to "leave to the States every power which might be most beneficially administered by them."<sup>58</sup> Prompting Jefferson's rebuttal about the importance of frequent turnover of executive power, Madison makes the argument that "The prospect of necessary degradation, would discourage the most dignified characters from aspiring to the office, would take away the principle motive to the faithful discharge of its duties."<sup>59</sup> He goes on to suggest that "a firmer defense of the constitutional rights of the department, would render the officer more indifferent to the importance of a place which he would soon be obliged to quit for ever, and more ready to yield to the incroachments of the Legislature of which he might again be a member."<sup>60</sup> The requisite counter argument would, of course, be that deference to the legislature was the precise object of most of the founders, including Jefferson and Hamilton, with the idea that while executive action would, in places, be necessary, the principle means of retaining the people's liberty would lie in the maintenance of a puissant legislature.

Which brings to mind the contemporaneous debate over the structure of the proposed United States legislature. As Richard VanDerBeets argues

"Milton figures implicitly in the dispute between Franklin and John Adams at the Constitutional Convention over the bicameral system of legislature. Franklin believed that sovereign power ought somehow to be vested in the people and one of his strongest objections to the bicameral legislature was that wealth and privilege enjoyed a disproportionate influence in one of the houses. Adams favored the bicameral system (he had written that system into the constitution of Massachusetts and consequently found himself hostile to Milton's proposal in *The Ready and Easy Way* for a perpetual senate of wise and good men."<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> op cit, pg. 194

<sup>59</sup> op cit, pg. 195

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> VanDerBeets, pg. 2

Life terms were quickly dismissed from debate, however in both chambers, the capacity for continual re-election of state and local level federal representatives was determined to be prudent, according with Milton's arguments.

Naturally, any figure of Milton's prominence in early American religion and literature, was likely as not to play a role in defining the ideas of the founders, but the extent to which *Areopagitica* alone prefigured so much of their ideological makeup, is remarkable. In a real way, Milton's protestant ethic defined the separation of Church and state in a fledgling Protestant nation and paved the way for many of the ideological freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights and American jurisprudence more broadly. For this reason, alone, it is important to read Milton not only as a great poet or prose essayist, but as a philosopher and theologian whose sensibilities truly did prove him "more emphatically American than any author who has lived in the United States."<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Kendrick, pg. 906

## Works Cited

- Adams, John Quincy, Henry Adams, and Worthington Chauncey Ford. *A Catalogue of the Books of John Quincy Adams Deposited in the Boston Athenæum, with Notes on Books, Adams Seals and Book-plates*. Boston: Athenæum, 1938. Print.
- Bailyn, Bernard. *The Debate on the Constitution: Federalist and Antifederalist Speeches, Articles, and Letters during the Struggle over Ratification*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1993. Print.
- Fowler, Alastair, and John Barnard. *Milton: "Paradise Lost"*. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Higher Education, 1998. Print.
- Jenkins, Hugh. "Jefferson (Re)Reading Milton." *Milton Quarterly* 32.1 (1998): 32-38. Web.
- Kendrick, Christopher. "Un-American Milton: Milton's Reputation and Reception in the Early United States." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77.3 (2008): 903-22. Web.
- Locke, John. *Some Thoughts concerning Education: Including Of the Conduct of the Understanding*. Ed. John William Adamson. Mineola, NY: Dover Pub., 2007. Print.
- Milton, John, and Don Marion Wolfe. *Complete Prose Works*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1953. Print.
- Milton, John. "SPEECH." *Areopagitica: Text*. Dartmouth, n.d. Web. 05 May 2016. <[https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading\\_room/areopagitica/text.shtml](https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/areopagitica/text.shtml)>.
- Morrison, Jeffrey H. *The Political Philosophy of George Washington*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009. Print.
- Sensabaugh, G. F. *Milton in Early America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1964. Print.
- Sensabaugh, George F. "Jefferson's Use of Milton in the Ecclesiastical Controversies of 1776." *American Literature* 26.4 (1955): 552-59. Web.
- Sensabaugh, George F. "Milton in Early American Schools." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 19.4 (1956): 353-83. Web.
- Shakespeare, William, Jonathan Bate, and Eric Rasmussen. *Complete Works: The RSC Shakespeare*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007. Print.

Sowerby, Emily Millicent., and Thomas Jefferson. Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson. Compiled with Annotations by E. Millicent Sowerby. 5 Vol. Washington: n.p., 1952. Print.

Stanford University Digital Collections. "Two Founders, One Book." *Site Home Page*. Stanford, n.d. Web. 05 May 2016. <<https://lib.stanford.edu/american-enlightenment/two-founders-one-book>>.

Vanderbeets, Richard. "Milton In Early America: The Example of Benjamin Franklin." *Milton Quarterly* 6.3 (1972): 33-36. Web.

Wolf, Edwin, and Kevin J. Hayes. *The Library of Benjamin Franklin*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society/Library of Philadelphia, 2006. Print.