

Areopagitica (1644): 14 June 1643 Parliamentary ordinance for licensing with Stationer's Company

- I. **Exordium or Exhortation** (§ 1): "They who to states and governors of the Commonwealth direct their speech." Personal apologia, fear and hope, mark of civil society is tolerance for conflicting views, comparison of England and Rome, flattery of Parliament—or praise? Three conditions preventing flattery, impartiality and freedom from benefit, healthy variability of triennial parliament vs. arrogance of lifelong prelates, invokes Isocrates as example of elegant humanity of Greece, interest in more than local affairs, modesty prologue at 52 degrees north latitude, appeal to power of reason and prospect of repeal.
- II. **Matter or Argument** (§ 6): "If ye be thus resolved, as it were injury to think ye were not." Four propositions: 1) who are the inventors of it and would you be likened to them, 2) what is to be thought in general of reading, 3) the Order avails nothing to the suppression of literature that means to be extreme, 4) the Order will discourage learning and stop truth by hindering and cropping the discovery that might be yet further made. Books are as powerful as lives, like dragon's teeth, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book, reason is the image of God, "a good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life." No one can restore a life once gone. Likewise beware killing books. Pun: do I advocate license while opposing licensing?
- III. **Proposition I**, the pedigree of censorship (§ 8): "In Athens, where books and wits were ever busier than in any other part of Greece." Two examples of banned books, blasphemous/atheistical or libelous.. Examples. Plato recommended reading of Aristophanes, the loosest of them all. Sparta was bookless, ironically. Romans likewise cultivated martial arts. Uninquisitive. Tyranny, bad and good books equally silenced.
- IV. **Confirmation I**, (§ 13): "By this time the emperors were become Christians." Christian emperors no more severe, rejecting heretics and Gentiles only after examination, councils, rise of papacy and new era of tyranny. Bans on books, Wycliffe, Huss, Council of Trent, Spanish Inquisition, indexes. Authority extends beyond doctrine. Keys of the press given by St. Peter? *Imprimatur*. *Nihil obstat*. Remnants of catholic repression. (Heavy sarcasm.)
- V. **Proposition II**, the nature of reading (§ 19): "But some will say, what though the inventors were bad, the thing for all that may be good." Citing authorities. Early church regretted being deprived of Hellenic learning. Dionysius Alexandrinus, AD 240, "Read any books whatever come to thy hands, for thou art sufficient both to judge aright and to examine each matter," vision from God. Cites Paul. To the pure all things are pure. Eating of unclean food. Barrage of biblical texts. Private censorship vs. public. Burning of Syriac volumes of magic.
- VI. **Confirmation II**, (§ 27): "Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably." Knowing good by evil. The fall of Adam. Key paragraph, "As therefore the state of man now is." Fugitive and cloistered virtue. We are purified by trial. Spenser, better than Aquinas, depicts temperance under test in Guyon. Benefit of books promiscuously read—exposure of vice. Several types of harm: 1) infection (but don't discard baby with bathwater) 2) infection spreads a thousand other ways more seriously, 3) infection only spreads to commons with endorsement by authorities, so who licenses the licensors? Books are antidotes to infection, medicines.
- VII. **Proposition III**, misses desired targets (§ 36): "It was the task which I began with, to show that no nation, or well instituted state, if they valued books at all, did ever use this way of licensing." Plato against the poet, argues for excessive law, though his own practice impugns him. Can we succeed entirely in plugging the sources of error? Sometimes persuasion is better than law. Would virtue

lose its value in a world where all choices were legally constrained? Freedom to choose is reason. Sin will not be removed but removing the matter of sin. And we would thereby also remove the matter of virtue. God “esteems the growth and completing of one virtuous person more than the restraint of ten vicious.” The scandal sheets continue despite licensing. *Reductio ad absurdum*.

VIII. **Proposition IV**, the discouragement of learning (§ 48): “I lastly proceed from the no good it can do, to the manifest hurt it causes in being first the greatest discouragement.” Model scene of the act of writing. Discouraged by fear of censor. Retrospective censorship. All depends on censor. Travels abroad. (§ 61) Consider Galileo as prisoner of Inquisition.

IX. **Confirmation IV**, (§ 64): “That those evils of prelacy which before from five or six and twenty sees were distributively charged upon the whole people, will now light wholly upon learning.” Banished writing achieves an undeserved glamor. Individual conscience a better guide than collective authority. Active vs. passive religion.

X. **Peroration** (§ 76): “Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on.”

XI. (§ 86): “First, when a city shall be as it were besieged and blocked about, her navigable river infested, inroads and incursions round, defiance and battle oft rumored to be marching up even to her walls and suburb trenches.”

XII. **Exordium** (§ 90): “If it be desired to know the immediate cause of all this free writing and free speaking, there cannot be assigned a truer than your own mild and free and humane government.”

XIII. (§ 97): “In the meanwhile, if anyone would write and bring his helpful hand to the slow-moving reformation which we labor under, if truth have spoken to him before others, or but seemed at least to speak.”

Licensing not repealed until 1694.