

JOHN MILTON

Team: Dead Poets Society

Position: Short fine leg

Status: Free of spirit



**THINKER
IN
BOXES**

When it comes to thinking of press freedom in philosophical terms, John Milton (1608–1674) is your go-to guy. Areopagitica: A speech of Mr. John Milton for the liberty of unlicensed printing to the Parliament of England,^a was delivered in 1644, and it is the first, and perhaps the most magnificent, grand polemic ever to argue for freedom of the press.

In the speech, Milton quite literally referred to the freedom of the press. He was talking specifically about the right to publish books without prior censorship and not the more general concept of freedom of expression and the right to voice dissent that we now think of as freedom of the press, but he was making that freedom of the press argument in philosophical terms. Milton drew support for his position through reference to classical history and theology, not the political or social-functional logic that would later dominate the American debate on the topic. In doing so, Milton planted the seeds of a more general notion of freedom of expression that would eventually find a great deal of support in philosophical and theological argumentation and from those origins, the idea of more general artistic freedom arose.

Despite Milton's use of philosophical arguments and evidence, the speech itself was transparently political. Milton was unabashedly and quite obviously trying to flatter the English parliamentarians by comparing them and their country to the pinnacles of Greek and Roman civilization. He also blatantly pandered to the predominant religious factions in England with more than a little Catholic bashing. Still, despite such obvious political savvy, Milton failed. At first Parliament simply ignored him. He eventually had the last word, but by then he was too dead to care.

^a The text is available online through several sources, one of which is www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/areopagitica.