

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

Though abundant in both his poetry and prose, John Milton's use of poetic figure takes a more indirect role in works such as *Areopagitica*. He intersperses his writing with poetic elements, but always uses them in an attempt to prove his point. In this piece, ironically 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 dominate his poetry, namely imagery and extended metaphors. Within his prose, Milton has more freedom to employ extended metaphors; therefore, a few can be found in *Areopagitica*, his most prominent being the Egyptian Osiris and Truth myth. He also strategically places short poetic images within his argument, such as the figure of the sun and planets and that of sea warfare. Though these elements fuel the same argument, upon closer reading one can see that often some of his arguments counteract one another. Poetic imagery and mythological allusions allow Milton strengthen his argument to Parliament for uncensored publishing through his plea that truth cannot be found if the paths to it are maimed or blocked.

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," these deceivers being those who wished to censor writing and the Master being Jesus, Son of God. He compares these hated people 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 is making the point that those who believe in censorship have “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 either.

If one delves deeper into the myth of Osiris’s death, it is found, in both versions of the myth, that “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. While this is true, Milton argues that “the sad friends of Truth imitate[e] 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 the most vital piece of Osiris did not stop her from “recovering the pieces of the body of Osiris one by one” and creating Osiris worship places all through Egypt by burying the pieces (Benderitter). Milton argues that people should not stop searching for remnants of Truth even though the most vital piece will be missing until the Second Coming, just like Isis did not stop searching. Her search for the pieces of Osiris resulted in places of Osiris worship 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. This image appeals well to Milton's audience due to the time at which he writes. The study of the planets, the sun, and the stars was a novelty and new discoveries were being made daily, and a reference to the celestial bodies would spark greater attention. The advancements being made in the astronomical study helps support Milton's appeal for advancement in the discovery of less-known Truths – good things were coming out of astronomy, so why not out of literature as well?

“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 which they already possess, but if they do not look to the source of Truth, they will be left with nothing. This image works well with the previous allusion to the myth of Osiris. Truth originates with the Master, Jesus Son of God, “and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on” (955). Similarly, the sun is the origin of light for all of the planets and something essential to life 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 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 make progress in society. Likewise, the Truth that had been given already was not there to be the end of the search for more knowledge. It was

meant to be used to find more Truth in less-likely places – in Milton’s mind, in less-likely books, ones that would not pass the censorship order in place at the time. Because his image of the sun and planets alludes to a common topic of the age as well as compliments his previous Egyptian myth, Milton successfully builds the strength of his argument of these poetic figures.

Returning to the previous page, 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 be successful with his audience because England is an island greatly reliant on trade by sea. If all waterways in the country were blocked, the country would be doomed when their 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 large claim here, one important enough to catch the attention of Parliament. The leaders of a country do not want their homeland to fall in any manner, 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 towns, especially when 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.

Though the images presented here work well with one another and support Milton's point that resources and opportunities to seek truth must be made use of and cannot under the order of censorship, some of his images rest at odds with one another. 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 used images of classical myth in order to appeal to the intellects of the time. In universities, mythology was still greatly emphasized and so the men to whom he was addressing would 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. He knew references to either could gain him support and therefore decided to employ both. However, mythology and religion tend to be at odds with one another no matter, even if they are working to prove the same point against censorship.

Milton's poetic figure in these three instances in *Areopagitica* strongly support his belief that truth cannot be advanced, or even found, if the paths to it are blocked by censorship. Isis continued on the worship of her husband by ruthlessly searching for all of his body parts; the sun provides society light with which to further their discoveries; and countries will lose all if their 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 give him a strong basis on which to place his demand. His references almost always have another underlying message that one must search more deeply for, but still continue to strengthen his message. While images involving religion or classical mythology do not necessarily agree, they allow Milton to appeal to both intellects and the religious without alienating either. Without his images and metaphors, Milton's point would have been greatly

weakened and he would have lost his ability to appeal to as many different types of people as he did with the poetic figures included.