

Aereopagitica: An outline of its structure and argument (keyed to the Modern Library edition of the *Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*).

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Rhetorical Structure and Arguments:

- I. *Exordium*: Creates an atmosphere congenial to the acceptance of the argument. Introduction of the person about to “speak” and his reasons for doing so (why one *should* do so in these circumstances). To paraphrase: “My speaking and your hearing,” he argues, “will bring recovery from the problem.” He notes that Parliament’s willingness to hear the argument at all already shows its readiness to redress grievances like this (this is designed to more or less shame them into listening). He follows with flattering portraiture of his immediate audience, suggesting that their being convinced by his argument will prove the flattery true. [pp. 927 to bottom of 929]
- II. *Propositio*: Presents the issue and the basic structure of the argument to be propounded in the confirmation. Begins with “here’s your opportunity to show that what I say about you is true,” goes on to lay out the basic argument, and ends with a powerful figurative description of the nature of reading. [from bottom of 929 to top of 931, “...slays an immortality rather than a life.”]
- III. *Confirmatio*: Confirmation of the proposition (in four parts). [from top of 931, “But lest I should...” to “...above all liberties” at the bottom of 960]
 - 1) Argument from history: who invented licensing. Once you’ve heard who did it, you will wish to disown their invention. The Greeks didn’t do it. The Athenians burned books of atheists and libelous books only. The Spartans hated most books and tended to drive away good writers, but they were hypocrites, anyway, because they banished good writing and yet were loose of talk. It was the Romans who first moved to censor books, and the practice came into its own with the tyranny of the Empire. Even so, men, not books were punished until the really dark days of the Empire. When Rome became Christian, the Emperors moved to censor heretical books, but only after public examination and refutation. Only at that point were they burned. It was when the Catholic Church began to take on *political* power that real licensing began. [931 to penultimate sentence in the paragraph at the top of 936, “...the properties it has.”]
 - 2) Argument from principle (structured like an argument from authority): What is the nature of reading? This functions as a sort of digression. Knowledge cannot defile a good mind, just as corrupted food cannot defile a sound constitution. God left us free in matters of the intellect to feed our

minds with no upward bound. Each finds his own “leading capacity.” Temperance is not a virtue in matters of intellectual “eating.” God does not and has not told us what we should read, he leaves us free to choose what we wish to read. We are then free to judge what we have read and act accordingly. This is because good and evil came into the world together and must be parted. One can only do this if one knows the true nature of both, and if one undergoes the spiritual and intellectual trial that comes from searching out and entertaining all possible ideas. Some say in refutation of this argument that 1) bad ideas will infect the body politic if such ideas are out there and being considered (Milton suggests this is clearly nonsense given what he’s just said about knowledge and eating. He then goes on a brief digression about how it is impossible to keep these ideas under control without severely limiting other liberties), 2) that we must not expose ourselves needlessly, and 3) that we shouldn’t waste our time with vain matters (Milton asserts that these last two arguments are also nonsense given what he’s said about the nature of good and evil, the value of trial, and the need to know and judge matters fully. [from top of 936, “But I have first to finish...” to top of 942, “...could ever yet contrive.”])

- 3) Argument from practice (*reductio ad absurdum*): Licensing does not do what it says it is designed to do (it can’t because reading bad ideas is not the source of the problem). Also licensing, in any case, doesn’t actually keep texts out of peoples’ hands. You could make it work only if you controlled everything and this is neither possible nor desirable. There are reasons God left temptations in the world. They are the guarantors of our freedom (here he introduces the figure of the “artificial Adam” and the “provoking object”). [from top of 942, “which is what I promised to deliver next...” to the middle of 946, “...whereof it bears the intention.”]
- 4) Argument from consequences (in three parts) [from middle of 946, “I lastly proceed...” to bottom of 960]:
 - a) Harm to learning and the learned, even to the common people. We got rid of the bishops, let’s not act like them. Also, punishing sects makes them stronger. [from 946 to end of middle paragraph on 952]
 - b) Harm to what truths we hold. “A man may be a heretic in the truth.” We must discover truth ourselves and not rely on custom. Licensing will make us lazy. [from bottom paragraph on 952 to “...how they will decide it there” at the top of 955]
 - c) Harm to the truths yet to be discovered/England's important position in relation to truth. The hewn body of the virgin Truth. The function of differences of opinion. England at the forefront of the biggest and most important schism of

all: the Reformation itself. The Lord's Temple, England as eagle, London as workshop of truth. [from "There is yet behind what I proposed to lay open" (start of second whole paragraph on 955) to the bottom of 960]

- IV. Peroration: Concludes and reiterates arguments, adding attacks and identifying culprits. Also adds a few limiting cases ("I mean not tolerated Popery and open superstition....," p. 963). Support for law that name of author and printer be affixed to every printed text. Return to portraiture of the audience. [bottom of 960 to the end]