

MILTON'S DISENCHANTMENT WITH THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND IN *THE HISTORY OF BRITAIN**

KOSEI ONO

From his youth, John Milton was strongly attracted to writing historical poetry which would extol the English nation and promote a sense of national identity.¹ In *At a Vacation Exercise in the College*, written in 1628 when Milton was at the age of twenty, he professed his hope to write “of kings and queens and heroes old” (l. 47).² In other early writings, he projected his plan to write an *Arthuriad*. In *Mansus*, a poem addressed to Manso who was a close friend of Tasso, Milton made, in a sense, a rival claim that he would be an English Tasso and articulated his desire to write a patriotic poem which would celebrate “the kings of my native land and Arthur” and “the great-hearted heroes of the round table” (ll. 80–4).³ In *Epitaphium Damonis* written on the untimely death of his friend Charles Diodati, he set down the birth of Arthur as one of the themes of his historical poem.⁴ And in the preface to the second book of *The Reason of Church-Government*, he emphasized the importance of a poetic history which would distinguish and celebrate the English nation. As “England hath had her noble achievements made small by the unskillful handling of monks and mechanics,” Milton contends, England needs a national historian. Taking the opportunity to plead his merits as a national poet, he shows that

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¹ For Milton's early plan to write an *Arthuriad*, see Roberta Florence Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1932), 126–9, and Nicholas von Maltzahn, *Milton's History of Britain: Republican Historiography in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 60–2, 102–3.

² Milton's poetry is quoted from *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1997).

³ The translation from Latin is by Carey.

⁴ See *Epitaphium Damonis*, ll. 162–78.

he is considering “what king or knight before the conquest might be chosen in whom to lay the pattern of a Christian hero.”⁵ When one takes account of Milton’s confessed ambition of writing an Arthurian epic in the earlier poems, it is quite natural to think that the subject of a national epic describing Britain’s heroic resistance against foreign invasion must be an Arthurian one. However, in spite of his earlier intention to write a patriotic poem celebrating the deeds of King Arthur against the Saxons, Milton actually tried to discredit Arthur in the *History of Britain*. In this paper I should like to consider why Milton abandoned his earlier plan to write an Arthuriad and to examine how he constructed the *History of Britain* according to the prophetic mode based upon Jeremiah’s model.

I

First of all, I would like to consider the notable examples of Milton’s rejection of Arthur expressed in the *History of Britain*. He rejects Arthur as historically too shadowy:

In his [Ambrosius Aurelianus] daies, saith *Nennius*, the *Saxons* prevail’d not much: against whom *Arthur*, as beeing then Chief General for the *British* Kings, made great War; but more renown’d in Songs and Romances, then in true stories.⁶

And then he dismisses monkish sources because of their unreliable historicity:

But who *Arthur* was, and whether ever any such reign’d in *Britain*, hath bin doubted heertofore, and may again with good reason. For the Monk of *Malmsbury*, and others whose credit hath sway’d most with the learned sort, we may well perceave to have known no more of this *Arthur* 500 years past, nor of his doeings, then we now living; And what they had to say, transcrib’d out of *Nennius*, a very trivial writer yet extant, which hath already bin related. Or out of a *British* Book, the same which he of *Monmouth* set forth, utterly unknown to the World, till more then 600 years after the dayes of *Arthur*, of whom (as *Sigebert* in his Chronicle confesses) all other Histories were silent,

⁵ *The Reason of Church-Government Urg’d against Prelaty*, in John Milton, *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al., 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 1: 812–15.

⁶ *The History of Britain, That Part especially now call’d England; Continu’d to the Norman Conquest*, in *Complete Prose Works*, 5: xix–457; passage cited at 156. Subsequent citations from this edition will be noted parenthetically.

both Foren and Domestic, except only that fabulous Book. Others of later time have sought to assert him by old legends and Cathedrall regests. But he who can accept of Legends for good story, may quickly swell a volume with trash, and had need be furnish'd with two only necessities, leasure, and beleif, whether it be the writer, or he that shall read (164-6).

At first glance, these examples seem to suggest that Milton attributes his disillusionment with the Arthurian material solely to the unreliable historicity of Arthur. He tries to dismiss Nennius, William of Malmesbury, and Geoffrey of Monmouth as historically preposterous.

If he was going to dismiss Arthur as fictitious, however, he should have excluded the myth of Brutus, whose historicity had equally been doubted, from his version of the nation's history. In fact, the *History of Britain* contains a lengthy account of the mythic story of Brutus; and we can find a lot of other stories featuring a combination of truth and fable. Then what caused Milton to distance himself from the Arthurian stories cannot be mere skepticism of the imaginative element of historical discourse.

In this respect, R. F. Brinkley has provided us with the most comprehensive examination of the causes for Milton's abandonment of Arthur. After pointing out that "Milton's rejection of the Arthurian legend is . . . seen to be a far more complex matter than merely a distaste for fiction," she argues that there are five reasons for his disenchantment with the Arthurian legend:

His knowledge of the barbarity of the British, his recognition that any complete poetic expression of contemporary times would necessarily cover not only the glory of the Britons but also their degradation and would leave him without a triumphant hero, his interest in the greater civilization of the Saxons and especially in the laws which had figured so largely in recent history, his repudiation of the absolutism of the Tudors and Stuarts, who had used the Arthurian legend to strengthen their rights, and his attempt to show order in the universe and a divine plan which would explain the seeming mutability in its affairs — all these combine to lead Milton away from the story of Arthur and to center his choice upon the theme of *Paradise Lost*.⁷

At least two of the five reasons listed above (his interest in the civilization of the Saxons and his repudiation of the absolutism of the Tudors and Stuarts) have closely connected political significance. According to Brin-

⁷ Brinkley, 141.

kley, a revival of interest in the Saxons and an attack on the appropriation of Arthurian legend to Tudor-Stuart absolutism both contributed to the growth of anti-absolutist sentiment and played an important part in Milton's growing skepticism about Arthur.

Recently, however, Nicholas von Maltzahn, in his book-length study of Milton's *History of Britain*, criticizes Brinkley's view and asserts, "[h]is references to the myths [of British prehistory or of Arthur] provide no precise index to his political belief. . . . Milton's eventual dislike of the legends shows his general disillusionment in the 1640s with both English history and his contemporaries."⁸ I share von Maltzahn's view that Milton's disenchantment with the Arthurian legend does not indicate his political or party commitment; but it doesn't follow from this that the rejection is non-political. When he regards Milton's skeptical response to the Arthurian story as an indication of apolitical "general disillusionment," von Maltzahn may turn the wheel around too abruptly. Milton is certainly engaged in an attempt to dissociate himself from any particular political movement, but the rejection of party politics is in itself a politico-religious gesture.

There is, of course, nothing original in this rejection of the Arthurian legend; there were many contemporaries who dismissed the Arthurian legend as part of the Tudor-Stuart royal ideology. However, at the same time, Milton rejects the alternative which is implied by the discrediting of the royal Arthurian legend.⁹ This alternative is the theory of the Norman Yoke: that is, the belief that free Anglo-Saxon institutions had been essentially democratic until they had been replaced by autocratic ones under the Normans. On the one hand, common lawyers insisted that they merely desired the restoration of ancient rights removed by the Norman Conquest; on the other, such radical political parties as the Levellers asserted the rights of descendants of the Anglo-Saxons against the Norman Yoke and longed for freedom from the Yoke, gradually associating the freedom with that of Eden before the Fall.

Milton does not commit himself to either of these theories, however. Milton does not idealize free Anglo-Saxon society nor equate Anglo-Saxon freedom before the Norman Conquest with the freedom of Eden before

⁸ Von Maltzahn, 92.

⁹ Christopher Hill, "The Norman Yoke," in *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958), 56.

the Fall. Instead, he presents an "extremely unflattering"¹⁰ description of the Saxons: "The *Saxons* were now full as wicked as the *Britans* were at their arrival, brok'n with luxurie and sloth, either secular or superstitious" (259). By viewing early British life bleakly and showing his disinclination to glorify the Saxon period, he presents his version of the history of Britain as a series of lost opportunities for liberty because of national slothfulness. His rejection of the myth of Arthur and the myth of the free Anglo-Saxon society combine to give him justification for his self-presentation as prophet.

II

Before turning to this point, however, two issues deserve special consideration in order to flesh out the political implications of Milton's historical vision: first, his use of the politically charged word "yoke"; and secondly, his closing remarks for each book. Milton applies the word "yoke" not only to that imposition of tyranny by William the Conqueror but to every foreign oppressive power. In Book II, the British fought against the Romans "in detestation of servitude and the *Roman* yoke" (89); at the beginning of Book III, though the Britons took their rule into their own hands from the Romans, "they soon remitted thir heat, and shrunk more wretchedly under the burden of thir own libertie, than before under a foren yoke" (131); at the end of Book IV, criticizing the British vices which led to the conquest by the Angles and the Saxons, he concludes that "no wonder if they submitted themselves to the yoke without resistance" (256); at the beginning of Book V, the union of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms which brought about the Saxons' enslavement to the Danes is called "the *West-Saxon* yoke" (259); in Book VI, describing the death of Hardicanute, he states "that *Hardecnute* thus dead, the English rejoycing at this unexpected riddance of the Danish yoke" (372); and finally, at the end of Book VI, by William the Conqueror, "the English, while they agreed not about the choice of thir native King, were constrein'd to take the Yoke of an outlandish Conquerer" (402). The successive foreign rule by the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, the Danes, and the Normans is undifferentiated through the recurring use of the same word "yoke," and therefore, the Norman Yoke

¹⁰ Hill, 65.

loses its significance as a symbol of the impingement on ancient constitutional rights. An overpowering sense of historical recurrence and continuity has been established.

That sense of repetition is intensified by his consciously manipulated narrative pattern: he concludes each book with warnings about corruption and decline. At the end of Book II, he shows his respect for Roman virtues and concludes that “with the Empire fell also what before in this Western World was chiefly *Roman*; Learning, Valour, Eloquence, History, Civility, and eev’n Language it self, all these together, as it were, with equal pace diminishing, and decaying” (127). Book III ends with the general assessment of the Britons after the withdrawal of the Roman legions: “Wherein we have heard the many miseries and desolations, brought by divine hand on a perverse Nation” (183). Book IV ends with the description of British vices which led to the conquest by the Angles and Saxons: “thence Altars defil’d with perjuries, Cloisters violated with Adulteries, the Land polluted with blood of thir Princes, civil dissentions among the people, and finally all the same vices which *Gildas* alleg’d of old to have ruin’d the *Britans*” (256). King Edgar dies at the end of Book V and “From henceforth nothing is to be heard of but thir decline and ruin under a double Conquest [of the Danes and the Saxons]” (327–8). And the final book, which is full of humiliations and calamities, ends with the observation that this won’t be the end of miseries: “If these were the Causes of such misery and thralldom to those our Ancestors, with what better close can be concluded, then here in fit season to remember this Age in the midst of her security, to fear from like Vices without amendment the Revolution of like Calamities” (403).

In this context, “the Revolution” of course refers to its earlier meaning of returning to a starting position. It is important to recall here that at the beginning of the first book, referring to the circular nature of national progress, Milton has said that “they themselves at a certain revolutions of time, fatally decaying, and degenerating into Sloth and Ignorance” (1). Though the *History of Britain* ends with the Norman Conquest, yet it conveys a sense of the endless circularity of history. The Norman Conquest cannot be a decisive break. As David Loewenstein points out, the *History of Britain* “reinforces a sense of historical repetition.”¹¹ Milton’s

¹¹ David Loewenstein, *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm, and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 87.

description of the sad destinies of the Britons and then the Saxons emphasizes the cyclical pattern of history. He does not differentiate the Britons from the Saxons in terms of their national sins and God's heavy judgments on them. In other words, he rejects the myth of Arthur and the myth of the Norman Yoke in favor of the vision of history as a vicious pattern of decline or cycles. He finds in the past only the recurrence of national failure and punishment.

III

Some critics have recently emphasized Milton's "heroic paradigm"¹² and "the potency of the individual to break from history"¹³ in connection with the *History of Britain*. Milton does not, however, call the reader's attention, *pace* Blake Greenway, to "one single man's heroism in the face of invasion";¹⁴ perhaps Thomas N. Corns's remark that "Milton's *History* is almost a text without heroes" is closer to the mark.¹⁵ In the *History of Britain* Milton envisions history degeneratively and cyclically. In expressing his historical vision, he does not need the heroic splendour of an Arthurian age which cannot be reconciled with the most important lesson of British history: warnings to the present. It is the pattern of events, like the pattern that emerged from Judges, not one single man's heroism, that Milton asks his readers to see.

Then why did Milton choose a strategy which presented British history as a kind of downward spiral?¹⁶ Though not dealing with the *History of Britain*, Patrick Collinson may provide us with a clue for answering this

¹² Blake Greenway, "Milton's *History of Britain* and the One Just Man," in *Arenas of Conflict: Milton and the Unfettered Mind*, ed. Kristin Pruitt McColgan and Charles W. Durham (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1997), 66.

¹³ Wyman H. Herendeen, "Milton and Machiavelli: The Historical Revolution and Protestant Poetics," in *Milton in Italy: Contexts, Images, Contradictions*, ed. Mario A. Di Cesare (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1991), 443.

¹⁴ Greenway, 68.

¹⁵ Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton: The Prose Works* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 133. For an account of Milton's dark tone in the *History*, see Graham Parry, "Introduction" to *The History of Britain*, by John Milton (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1991), 7-48.

¹⁶ See Gary D. Hamilton, "The *History of Britain* and its Restoration Audience," in *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose*, ed. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 246.

question. In a recent article dealing with the Elizabethan forms of nationhood, he has pointed out that there were two sources of nationhood: one was the past, and the other was the religious imagination.¹⁷ History and prophecy in the Old Testament, especially the so-called Minor Prophets, “were most formative of national self-consciousness”;¹⁸ while providing a sense of national identity, the prophetic mode laments national apostasy and calls forth God’s severe judgment. In the *History of Britain* Milton issues both a lamentation and a warning. While looking back at the nation’s origin, he reinforces a sense of national identity by employing the prophetic mode.

Milton’s self-conscious positing of himself as prophet and his use of the jeremiad, which is “a prophetic lament over the apostasy of a chosen nation,” in his revolutionary tracts have recently drawn the attention of critics.¹⁹ Identifying *The Readie and Easie Way* as “an anti-utopian jeremiad,” James Holstun suggests that Milton “creates for himself the identity of a lone prophet who withdraws from his community and stands prophesying its ruin.”²⁰ Laura Lunger Knoppers argues that “Milton’s voice, vision, style, and purpose in *The Readie and Easie Way* are clarified by recognizing the tract as a jeremiad.”²¹ Though Reuben Sanchez carefully eschews the term “jeremiad” in his comparative analysis of Milton’s use of Jeremiah in *The Reason of Church-Government* and *The Readie and Easie Way*, he insists that, by linking his historical situation to that of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, Milton “fashions his self-presentation after that of Jeremiah.”²²

Corns criticizes Knoppers’s application of the term jeremiad to *The Readie and Easie Way* and points out that we must “beware the generation

¹⁷ Patrick Collinson, “Biblical Rhetoric: the English Nation and National Sentiment in the Prophetic Mode,” in *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*, ed. Clare McEachern and Debora Shuger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 16–17.

¹⁸ Collinson, 18–19.

¹⁹ See James Holstun, *A Rational Millennium: Puritan Utopias of Seventeenth-Century England and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 246–65; Laura Lunger Knoppers, “Milton’s *The Readie and Easie Way* and the English Jeremiad,” in *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton’s Prose*, ed. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 213–25; and Reuben Sanchez, “From Polemic to Prophecy: Milton’s Use of Jeremiah in *The Reason of Church Government* and *The Readie and Easie Way*,” in *Milton Studies* 30, ed. Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993): 27–44. The definition is from Knoppers, 213.

²⁰ Holstun, 260.

²¹ Knoppers, 213.

²² Sanchez, 29.

of redundant genre categories.”²³ Though we may feel its affinity in mood with *The Readie and Easie Way* when we read the *History of Britain*, especially the famous Digression in Book III, we must also be cautious not to read both works as parallel, contemporary texts.²⁴ And yet, even those who try to avoid the use of the word “jeremiad” do find conscious echoes of Jeremiah in the *History of Britain*.²⁵ In the *History of Britain*, Milton fashions his self-presentation after that of Jeremiah, providing a parallel between his own historical situation and that in which the Old Testament prophet lived; he presents his own pessimistic vision seeing himself as a prophetic

²³ Thomas N. Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue: English Political Literature 1640–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 284: “only intermittently does Milton slip into the jeremiad mode, and the term’s usefulness is disputable.” David Norbrook, although he refers to Corns’s remarks approvingly (“Corns . . . corrects overemphasis on the text as Jeremiad”), admits that “Milton imagines himself as the prophet Jeremiah with none to cry to but trees and stones” (David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627–1660* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 414–15). On the use of Jeremiah in prophetic sermons, see Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 6: “‘Englands Warning by Israel’: Paul’s Cross Prophecy” and Mary Morrissey, “Elect nations and prophetic preaching: *types* and *examples* in the Paul’s Cross Jeremiad,” in *The English Sermon Revised: Religion, Literature and History 1600–1750*, ed. Lori Anne Ferrell and Peter McCullough (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 43–58. On the use of jeremiad in the world of Restoration politics, see Margery Kingsley, “Interpreting Providence: The Politics of Jeremiad in Restoration Polemic,” in *Wonders, Marvels, and Monsters in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Peter G. Platt (New Ark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 251–67.

²⁴ For different datings of the *History*, see von Maltzahn, *Milton’s History of Britain*, chapter 2; Austin Woolrych, “Dating Milton’s *History of Britain*,” *The Historical Journal*, 36, 4 (1993): 929–43; and Nicholas von Maltzahn, “Dating the Digression in Milton’s *History of Britain*,” *The Historical Journal*, 36, 4 (1993): 945–56.

²⁵ In this context, it is interesting to find out that, in the manuscript of the Digression, Milton insists “nor less inforcing, whosoever shall write thir storie, to revive those antient complaints of Gildas as deservedly on these lately as on those his times” which does not appear in the 1681 *Character*. Gildas’s *De Excidio Britanniae* might be the chief source of Milton’s use of the idiom of Jeremiah. Also interestingly enough, von Maltzahn begins his chapter dealing with Milton’s use of Gildas, saying “Gildas deeply impressed Milton with the fervour of his jeremiad” and calls *De Excidio* “Gildas’s jeremiad,” “the ancient British jeremiad” (*Milton’s History of Britain*, 118, 123, and 132). In fact, von Maltzahn, after pointing out that Milton chose to tell “a darker truth” to redound to both God’s and Britain’s glory, recognizes the jeremiad mode as a distinctive feature of his history: “his [Milton’s] jeremiad distinguishes his historiography” (*Milton’s History of Britain*, 69). Graham Parry also calls Gildas’s *De Excidio* a jeremiad and points out their congeniality in “Milton’s *History of Britain* and the 17th-Century Antiquarian Scene,” *Prose Studies* 19, 3 (1996): 242. We should also take notice of the distinction between American and European jeremiads: “In contrast to early American jeremiad, . . . Milton promises little beyond the stern consequences of corruption” (*Milton’s History of Britain*, 119). See also Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 6–10, 23.

figure along Jeremiah's lines. In particular, Milton might bear the Book of Jeremiah chapters 27–28 in mind when he presents British history as one of successive subjugation to foreign powers:

In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah came this word unto Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, Thus saith the Lord to me; Make thee bonds and yokes, and put them upon thy neck. . . . And it shall come to pass, *that* the nation and kingdom which will not serve the same Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, and that will not put their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation will I punish, saith the Lord, with the sword, and with the famine, and with the pestilence, until I have consumed them by his hand. . . . But the nations that bring their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him, those will I let remain still in their own land, saith the Lord; and they shall till it, and dwell therein. . . .

Then the word of the Lord came unto Jeremiah *the prophet*, after that Hananiah the prophet had broken the yoke from off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, saying, Go and tell Hananiah, saying, Thus saith the Lord; Thou hast broken the yokes of wood; but thou shalt make for them yokes of iron. For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; I have put a yoke of iron upon the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they shall serve him: and I have given him the beasts of the field also.²⁶

In this passage, Jeremiah wore a yoke round his neck to symbolize his message that Judah should submit to Babylon. Contrary to his claim that “Britain has heroically thrown off the yoke of tyranny” in the *Defensio Secunda*, Milton in the *History of Britain* has shown his awareness of the difficulties in throwing off the yoke of tyranny. The following passage from Collinson is relevant here: “the invocation and construction of the nation in the prophetic mode ignored in the generality of much of its rhetoric all social and political distinctions, investing an entire and undifferentiated people — England — with a shared moral and religious responsibility.”²⁷ Without paying allegiance to any one party, Milton regards all the regimes of England as undifferentiatedly sinful and creates for himself the identity of a lamenting prophet — his chosen form of self-presentation.

²⁶ *The Bible: Authorized King James Version, with Apocrypha*, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 859–61.

²⁷ Collinson, 26.

IV

Milton's *History of Britain* was first published in 1670; Restoration readers read the book not to learn about historical events, but for its unique presentation of the facts interpreted by one of the most influential republican propagandists of the day. In order to demonstrate the moral and economic superiority of a republic over a monarchy, English republicans have often tried to justify republican settlement within a providential framework. The urge for territorial expansion fitted both republican and religious trends in English politics; and the fusion of religious and secular arguments was evident in Milton's thought even in his prophetic *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* published in 1660. England was to be, according to Milton's reading of Machiavelli's republican typology in his *Discorsi*, "a commonwealth for expansion"; and this expansive republic should have been prosperous as a sign of England's special status as God's chosen nation. By a blend of religious and republican rhetoric, in this pamphlet, Milton has reinterpreted Machiavelli's expansive republic in terms of God's elect and associated republicanism with England's national interest: the imperial aspiration was sanctioned by God, and the English republic would achieve territorial expansion because of its special status as God's chosen nation. This republican national cause, however, is now lost; then, England's providential role as the vehicle of divine mission has been virtually eliminated.²⁸

Therefore, Milton's harsh criticism of British/English corruption and degeneration in the *History of Britain*, written well before the Restoration, has become ever more relevant in the context of the 1670s. Instead of giving hope for the future, Milton's castigating language links his readers with the backsliding Israelites and himself with an Old Testament prophet. Rather than celebrating heroic resistance to foreign invasion, Milton chose the idiom of Jeremiah; he was not able to promise hope that the regenerate few would bring salvation to the nation. Milton felt that the English, like the Israelites, bore the responsibility for the nation's loss of liberty and he did not need the inspired figure of King Arthur for the moral lesson. But

²⁸ On the failure of the English republic, see, for example, David Armitage, "John Milton: poet against empire," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 206–25.

by rejecting Arthur and by distancing himself from the controversy surrounding the appropriation of the Arthurian legend, Milton was now entitled to take on an authority comparable to the biblical prophet. Rather than a reflection of “general disillusionment,” his cyclical vision of history as expressed in the *History of Britain* is part of his careful self-presentation as a prophet.

Naruto University of Education

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