

ANCIENT YET NEW: WILLIAM BLAKE'S *MILTON A POEM* AND THE POLITICS OF ANTIQUARIANISM

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ABSTRACT

This study explores William Blake's engagement with eighteenth-century antiquarian discourse as a means of critiquing the political and religious institutions of his era. In his shorter epic, *Milton a Poem*, Blake suggests a model for national regeneration rooted in a view of British antiquity that is marked by an original liberty based on brotherhood and forgiveness. The first chapter demonstrates that Blake presents the Druids as Satanic missionaries spreading his message of submission to his moral law, which also disguises itself as natural law. Blake depicts Satan and the Druids in this manner in order to critique eighteenth-century notions of natural and state religion. The second chapter examines Blake's particular engagement with the work of the antiquary William Stukeley. Stukeley's dual role as antiquary and Anglican clergyman reveals that antiquarianism was an important force in the contemporary political landscape. His vision of the Druids as proto-Anglicans and national religionists provides Blake with an avenue for the critique of natural and state religion he presents in *Milton*. The third chapter demonstrates how Blake uses the poetic and prophetic figure of the bard in opposition to the priestly Druids in order to provide an alternative locus for concerns of national identity and a model for social change through poetry. Communicative acts between individuals inspire the broader spread of the call to self-annihilation and the combination of individuals in brotherhood and forgiveness to join the body of Jesus.