

ABSTRACT

RENDER, HANNAH GRACE. No True Scotsman: John Barbour's *Bruce* and National Identity in Fourteenth-Century Scotland (Under the direction of Dr. Julie Mell).

The medieval wars between Scotland and England between 1296 and 1357 have cast a long shadow over the formation of Scottish national identity, but only became the “Wars of Independence” in later fourteenth-century retrospect, as the battles fought and won by the Scots became the basis for a burgeoning Scottish identity, and its victors were legitimized as national heroes. This patriotic myth of Scottish heroism is a romanticized fiction, created by late medieval Scottish kings, nobles, and the writers and artists they employed following the wars’ conclusion. This thesis contributes to the historical understanding of the artistic creation of national identity through the writing of literature and history in late medieval Scotland by analyzing *The Bruce*. *The Bruce* is a poetic narrative composed in octosyllabic lines by John Barbour in 1375, during the reign of Robert I’s grandson Robert II, and memorializes its eponymous hero and his followers as the saviors of this idealized Scottish realm, framing the battles they fought in as a war of “independence,” rather than the feudal disputes of Scottish and English nobility. *The Bruce* consequently was an influential source in the creation of Scottish ideas of national identity during a period of rapid and destructive political change. This thesis considers the literary motifs and developments throughout high and later medieval Europe that had political implications on identity formation. This thesis examines how Barbour’s *Bruce* was shaped by and shaped the political and cultural mentality of late medieval Scotland, as it was embedded in a wider European political and cultural milieu. I argue that Barbour’s work was informed by centuries of earlier literary explorations of nationhood and identity and highlight this intertextual history by examining the emplotment of *The Bruce* in relation to the genres of French *chansons de geste*, Scandinavian sagas, and English Robin Hood ballads. Chapter I examines the influences of the French epic

tradition within *The Bruce*. I argue that the French *chansons* of Charlemagne gave Barbour the image of an idealized feudal ruler with which to characterize Robert I, the language of noble royal bloodlines through which to glorify the Stewart monarchy, and the incendiary rhetoric of the crusading ethos with which to demonize the English as an antagonistic Other. Chapter II highlights the influences of the Scandinavian tradition of Icelandic family sagas within *The Bruce*. I argue that the saga motifs of legal assemblies and blood-feuding allowed Barbour to reframe and justify the violence destruction involved in Bruce's seizure of the Scottish throne, the brutal in-fighting amongst Scottish noble families during and after the wars, and the complicated political relationship between Scotland and Norway. Chapter III investigates the influences of popular outlaw tales, particularly those of the early Robin Hood Ballads, within *The Bruce*. I argue that the ballads' motifs of trickster tales and the inclusion of commoners helped Barbour harness the renown of William Wallace in order to memorialize James Douglas as a folk hero and to incorporate Scottish commoners in his conception of a Scottish nation. Discussing *The Bruce*'s composition in relation to these historical and literary sources, I discuss the political force of medieval literary genres and the cultural creation of a national identity that would shape Scottish politics.

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No True Scotsman: John Barbour's *Bruce* and National Identity in Fourteenth-Century Scotland

by
Hannah Grace Render

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Julie Mell
Committee Chair

Dr. Julia Rudolph

Dr. Keith Luria

DEDICATION

For Doris, who told me I should write.

BIOGRAPHY

Hannah Render grew up in Ft. Wayne, Indiana before earning her bachelor's degree in History at Salem State University in 2016. She completed her master's degree in History at North Carolina State University in 2019.

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INTRODUCTION

On September 18, 2014 Scotland held a referendum over the question of independence from Great Britain. Calls for independence first emerged in the mid-twentieth century, but this nationalist fervor was not prominent in the political scene until the Scottish National Party (SNP) won a 2011 majority in the Scottish Parliament, enabling their call for the referendum that would occur three years later. Scotland was, of course, already a sovereign nation, but the SNP and other political voices for independence argued that Scotland should also be an independent state.¹ Voters that showed up to the polls on September 18 were presented with a simple, yes or no question: “Should Scotland be an independent country?”² In a remarkably close count, 55.3% of voters answered “no” to remain in Great Britain, while 44.7% answered “yes.”³

The 1707 Union that created Great Britain would remain unbroken, but the nationalist fervor that nearly changed the course of Scotland’s history had sparked a larger conversation concerning the roots of Scottish identity. Some political commentators expressed apprehension at the beginning of 2014; that year would mark the seven-hundredth anniversary of Scotland’s victory over England at the 1314 battle of Bannockburn and some feared the date would provide fodder for “yes” voters seeking historical precedent for division between Scotland and England.⁴ As the year progressed, amidst continued accusations that organizers of the “yes” campaign had specifically chosen 2014 to foster “anti-English” sentiment, the SNP would tactfully favor more practical economic arguments. The fear of being “too political,” however, still plagued

¹ Tom Mullen, “Introduction,” in *The Scottish Independence Referendum: Constitutional and Political Implications*, eds. Aileen McHarg, Tom Mullen, Alan Page, and Neil Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2016).

² Iain McLean, Gallagher Jim, and Lodge Guy, *Scotland’s Choices: The Referendum and What Happens Afterwards, Second Edition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2014), 1.

³ Mullen, “Introduction,” in *The Scottish Independence Referendum*, 3.

⁴ Severin Carrell, “From Bannockburn to Gleneagles, Yes Campaigners Stir Scottish Nationalism: Pro-Independence Lobby Confident It Can Turn Round Public Opinion,” *The Guardian*, January 3, 2014.

Bannockburn battle reenactors gathering at Stirling that June.⁵ Following the “no” victory, scholars were still grappling with the question of national identity and the romanticization of Scotland’s medieval past. In *The Scottish Question*, James Mitchell criticized Scottish nationalists who imagined a historically sovereign Scotland reaching back to the thirteenth and fourteenth-century wars with England, the so called “Wars of Independence.”

The American War of Independence might have been called a British Civil War had the outcome been different, just as what is referred to as the American Civil War would likely be known by a very different name, perhaps another War of Independence, had it not ended in favor of the union. The idea of Scotland as a nation is equally contingent.⁶

The referendum may have brought the “Scottish Question” to the surface, but the medieval wars fought between Scotland and England had been a part of the discourse surrounding Scottish national identity long before its political structure was put to a vote. In “1320 and A’ That: The Declaration of Arbroath and the Remaking of Scottish History,” Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn investigated the uses of the “Wars of Independence” in late twentieth-century Scottish political discourse. Brotherstone and Ditchburn highlighted the popular perception of the medieval wars and the use of this history as support for various arguments for and against union with England, identifying a popular imagination of Scotland’s medieval history as a precursor for modern democratic statehood.⁷

Scotland’s medieval wars with England had been integral to Scottish national identity throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. In, *Subverting Scotland’s Past:*

⁵ Libby Brooks, “Scotland: Into the Fray: Scottish Footsoldiers Relive Their Triumph over England: The 700th Anniversary of Bannockburn Is Being Marked with a Re-Enactment. But, Says Libby Brooks, the SNP Has Reason to Stay Away,” *The Guardian*, June 28, 2014.

⁶ James Mitchell, *The Scottish Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2014), 5.

⁷ Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn, “1320 and A’ That: The Declaration of Arbroath and the Remaking of Scottish History,” in *Freedom and Authority: Scotland c.1050-1650, Historical and Historiographical Essays Presented to Grant G. Simpson*, eds. by Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn (Scotland: Tuckwell Press. 2000), 10–31.

Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-C. 1830, Colin Kidd explains the Scottish whiggism of these centuries and its failure to develop into a larger scale nationalist movement. Kidd highlights the importance of Scotland's medieval history, or rather the popular perception of medieval history, on the Scottish national identity that developed over these centuries. Of particular pride for Scottish whigs was the nation's history of military success, particularly as it was expressed in the heroic figures of William Wallace and Robert Bruce in their victories over the English during the late-middle ages. Memories of the medieval Anglo-Scottish wars were not able to support the development of a large nationalist movement because, as Kidd explains, "the negative associations of magnate anarchy and feudal oppression in the medieval era a quicksand for attempts to construct a comprehensive nationalist historiography highlighting the Scottish War of Independence."⁸ The identification of the wars and their place in Scottish identity, however, persisted into the modern day because of the popular veneration of heroes like Wallace and Bruce.⁹

The medieval Wars of Independence have clearly cast a long shadow over the formation of Scottish national identity. During these wars (1286-1357), Scots reputedly fought courageously against the encroaching imperialism of the English monarchy and, through the gallant efforts of heroes like William Wallace, Robert Bruce, and James of Douglas, established a Stewart royal dynasty that would remain in power until the rule of the Hanoverians began in 1714. This period would only become the "Wars of Independence" in the later fourteenth century, as the battles fought and won by the Scots became the basis for a burgeoning Scottish identity, and its victors

⁸ Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-c. 1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 271.

⁹ Kidd *Subverting Scotland's Past*, 271.

were legitimized as national heroes.¹⁰ Thus this patriotic myth of Scottish heroism is largely a romanticized fiction, created by late medieval Scottish kings, nobles, and the writers and artists they employed following the wars' conclusion. My goal is to contribute to the historical understanding of the artistic creation of national identity through the writing of literature and history in late medieval Scotland. In particular, this thesis will investigate various literary and cultural influences present in *The Bruce*, a classic of medieval Scottish literature widely recognized as a crucial influence on the imagined narrative of Scottish history and identity in this period.

Historical Context

The series of battles that came to be known as the Scottish Wars of Independence began with the deaths of the Scottish King Alexander III in 1286 and his young granddaughter Margaret in 1290, which left no direct heir to the Scottish throne. Six guardians, representing the “community of the realm” of Scotland, were appointed to arbitrate the “Great Cause” and select the next king. These guardians faced the complicated task of choosing amongst thirteen claimants from various Scottish and European noble families without igniting a civil war. In a move later lambasted by Scottish writers, the guardians called upon King Edward I of England to arbitrate. Edward I, seizing the opportunity to gain power, offered his assistance by making the English crown legally dominant over Scotland, thereby justifying his right to judge between the claimants. From his new position of authority, Edward I selected John Balliol for Scottish rule in 1292. By 1296, a dispute between Balliol and Edward I led to a conflict in which Balliol surrendered and Edward I took full control of Scotland. Sir Andrew Moray and Sir William Wallace led the first wave of resistance in 1297, fighting for the restoration of Balliol’s claim to the throne.¹¹ Most of

¹⁰ A.D.M. Barrell, “5. The Wars of Independence,” in *Medieval Scotland*, 92–136. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 93.

¹¹ Katie Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306-1488* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2014), 20.

the Scots nobles submitted to Edward I after the English capture of Stirling in 1304. The initial period of resistance came to an end with the gruesome execution of William Wallace in 1305.

Another Scottish campaign was not brought against English rule until Robert Bruce was declared king of Scotland by a small faction of Scots in 1306, and the Scots would not gain stable footing until the death of Edward I in 1307. In 1314, at the battle at Bannockburn, Bruce retook the strategically significant Stirling Castle, a victory which marked the turning point of the wars in favor of the Scots. Following the deposition of Edward II and succession of Edward III in 1327, Scottish forces led by Sir Thomas Randolph and Sir James Douglas crossed the border and defeated the English at Stanhope Park. Continued Scottish raids into England led to the Edinburgh-Northampton Treaty 17 March 1328, in which England acknowledged Scottish sovereignty and forfeited the English crown's claims of overlordship. A year later, when Robert I died, his son David II succeeded to the throne. This period of peace proved short lived as the Anglo-Scottish wars resumed in 1332. In 1346, at the Battle of Neville's Cross, the Scottish army suffered a humiliating defeat and the young David II was taken captive by the English. Only after eleven years of continued warfare and failed negotiations was David II returned to Scotland under the Treaty of Berwick in 1357, which marks the end of the "Wars of Independence."¹²

On his death, David II would be succeeded in 1371 by his nephew, the son of Walter Stewart and grandson of Robert I. Robert II would be the first in a long line of Stewart kings of Scotland. In 1503, the Stewart king James IV married Margaret Tudor, the daughter of Henry VII, which led to the union of crowns after Queen Elizabeth I of England's death in 1603. Consequently, James VI of Scotland also became James I of England. The Scottish state established by the Bruce and Stewart monarchs would remain intact until the 1707 Union by which

¹² Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*; Barrell, "5. The Wars of Independence," in *Medieval Scotland*.

Great Britain was created, and the borders established during the fifteenth century still define the modern Scottish nation.¹³ Both during and after the wars, the early Bruce and Stewart kings promoted Scottish sovereignty through the sponsorship of artistic works projecting an image of an independent, powerful Scottish dynasty and nation.

John Barbour's *Bruce*

The earliest surviving literature composed in the Scots language is a poetic account of King Robert I of Scotland during the Wars of Independence, *The Bruce*. *The Bruce* is a poetic narrative composed in octosyllabic lines by John Barbour in 1375, during the reign of Robert I's grandson Robert II, and memorializes its eponymous hero and his followers as the saviors of this idealized Scottish realm, framing the battles they fought in as a war of "independence," rather than the feudal disputes of Scottish and English nobility.

John Barbour (c.1320-1395), the archdeacon of Aberdeen, was employed in various positions in the Scottish government during the 1370s and wrote *The Bruce* under the patronage of an unnamed Scottish noble, most likely King Robert II himself.¹⁴ In addition to his position as archdeacon, Barbour was alternately named a clerk of audit and an auditor of the exchequer throughout the 1370s and 1380s — royal offices that paid well and put Barbour in close contact with the royal family and Scottish nobility.¹⁵ There are recorded payments made to Barbour during this period not associated with his administrative roles and therefore assumed to be for his writing of *The Bruce* and other lost works detailing the genealogy of the Stewart family.¹⁶ All of this evidence suggests that Barbour was a strong supporter of Robert II and the royal Stewart

¹³ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*; Barrell, "5. The Wars of Independence," in *Medieval Scotland*.

¹⁴ Steve Boardman and Susan Foran, "Introduction," in *Barbour's Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts*, ed. Steve Boardman and Susan Foran (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2015), 3-5.

¹⁵ Matthew McDiarmid and James Stevenson, eds. *Barbour's Bruce: A Fredome Is a Noble Thing!*, Vol 1. (Edinburgh: The Scottish Text Society 1985), 7-8.

¹⁶ Matthew McDiarmid and James Stevenson, eds. *Barbour's Bruce: A Fredome Is a Noble Thing!*, 10.

administration. In composing his poem, Barbour consciously created a history of the period that would support a new and still unstable Scottish state and memorialize its key figures — Robert I, Thomas Randolph, Robert’s brother Edward Bruce, and James of Douglas — as defenders of Scottish liberty against the tyranny of greedy English monarchs. *The Bruce* was “phenomenally popular” and widely lauded within Barbour’s lifetime.¹⁷ By the fifteenth century, *The Bruce* was broadly known and referenced in multiple Scottish texts. As Katie Stevenson explains, “*The Bruce*’s significance to the Scots, then and since, is that of a national epic, to be likened, for example, to that of Homer’s *Illiad* to the Greeks, Virgil’s *Aeneid* to the Romans, and the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi to the Iranians.”¹⁸ *The Bruce* consequently was an influential source in the creation of Scottish ideas of national identity during a period of rapid and destructive political change.

Scholarship on *The Bruce*

Identifying *The Bruce* as a major source of late medieval Scottish national identity is relatively simple. Explaining how it managed to exert so much influence on the Scottish imagination and how Barbour accomplished this feat has been the subject of extensive research by both historians and literary scholars. Scholars studying *The Bruce* and its role in mythologizing the Wars of Independence have highlighted a variety of contemporary influences, commenting on the literary conventions and “nationalist” goals of the text, most recently in the collection *Barbour’s Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts* (2015).¹⁹ Much of this discussion has been divided between the disciplines of literature and history, the first analyzing the poem’s construction and the second assessing its usability as a source for the Wars of Independence or, more recently, as a

¹⁷ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*, 185, 33.

¹⁸ Steve Boardman and Susan Foran, “Introduction,” in *Barbour’s Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts* 16; Stevenson, 33.

¹⁹ Steve Boardman and Susan Foran, eds. *Barbour’s Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts*.

source for the political and cultural context of late medieval Scotland. In contrast to this scholarship, I suggest that the very concept of a Scottish nation was still in formation. I contend that when Barbour set to work narrating the history of Robert the Bruce, James of Douglas, and Scotland's independence in *The Bruce*, he was simultaneously creating the Scottish heroes and the Scottish realm that would be remembered as an independent nation. I argue furthermore that Barbour accomplished this by internalizing and then giving voice to the vibrant multi-cultural literacy that informed how Scots conceived of themselves and the world around them.

Most of the literary discussion is dominated by Barbour's explicitly stated goal of composing a "romans" (romance).²⁰ For example, in "The Idea of Chivalry in John Barbour's *Bruce*," Bernice Kliman argued that Barbour employs the chivalric conventions of medieval romance to reconcile the harsh reality of warfare with the idealism of freedom used to justify it.²¹ Sonja Cameron made a similar argument — that Barbour's discussion of chivalric virtues is meant to mask the particularly violent military tactics used by Bruce and his knights which many contemporaries deemed dishonorable and unacceptable.²² These writers have provided useful insight into Barbour's use of romance tropes to promote national identity. Their analyses, however, do not include the many characters, events, and themes present in *The Bruce* that do not reflect, and sometimes directly contradict, the romance genre. While Bernice Kliman and Diane Watt explained some of these instances as part of Barbour's overarching "nationalist" goals, they do not address the implications of their inclusion within the genre of the narrative.²³

²⁰ "The romans now begynnys her." John Barbour, *The Bruce*. ed. and trans. A.A.M. Duncan. (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics 1997), 69 (Book I. Line 446) Hereafter cited as (I.446).

²¹ Bernice W. Kliman, "The Idea of Chivalry in John Barbour's *Bruce*," ed. Reginald O'Donnell. *Mediaeval Studies* 35. 1973, 508.

²² Sonja Cameron, "Chivalry and Warfare in Barbour's *Bruce*," in *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France: Proceedings of the 1995 Symposium*, ed. Matthew Strickland (Stamford: Paul Watkins 1998), 14-15.

²³ Diane Watt, "Nationalism in Barbour's *Bruce*," in *Parergon* vol. 12, no. 1. (1994. Project MUSE); Bernice W. Kliman, "The Significance of Barbour's Naming of Commoners," in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, vol. 11. 1973.

Other literary scholars have noted that Barbour's narrative does not conveniently fit any one literary genre, even though he claims to be telling a romance. Rather it is a blend of multiple late medieval literary influences. As Rhiannon Purdie explained in "Medieval Romance and the Generic Frictions of Barbour's Bruce," literary genres have always been continuously evolving labels, which makes assigning one label to *The Bruce* problematic.²⁴ Barbour, like other medieval authors, could be considered "shockingly careless" in labelling his work as part of any specific genre.²⁵

Considering this complexity, *The Bruce* is alternatively referred to by other historians and literary scholars as either a romance, chronicle, epic, or combination of two or more of these labels.²⁶ In *The Role of Medieval Scottish Poetry in Creating Scottish Identity*, Stefan Tomas Hall argued that Barbour's claim to be recounting history and his use of oral sources means it cannot be contained by the label of "romansys" that Barbour gives it.²⁷ Wilhelm Nicolaisen claimed that in the episodic nature of *The Bruce*, Barbour was influenced by folk poetry and the oral culture of his sources.²⁸ All of these literary analyses, whether they accept one or multiple generic labels, reject an understanding of Barbour as only a chronicler of historical fact. Rather, they assume that Barbour, as a poet, had agency in writing the poem with the use of one or many medieval generic tropes. That agency, according to these literary critics and historians, was exerted with the intention

²⁴ Rhiannon Purdie, "Medieval Romance and the Generic Frictions of Barbour's Bruce," in *Barbour's Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts*, ed. Steve Boardman and Susan Foran (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2015), 51.

²⁵ Purdie, "Medieval Romance and the Generic Frictions of Barbour's Bruce," in *Barbour's Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts*, 51.

²⁶ Purdie, "Medieval Romance and the Generic Frictions of Barbour's Bruce," in *Barbour's Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts*, 53-55.

²⁷ Stefan Thomas Hall, *The Role of Medieval Scottish Poetry in Creating Scottish Identity: "Textual Nationalism,"* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press 2006), 70-75.

²⁸ W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "Stories and Storytelling in Barbour's Bruce," in *Bryght Lanternis: Essays on the Language and Literature of Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. Derrick McClure and Michael Spiller (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press 1989) 55-66.

of pleasing a specific audience of Scottish nobility, a target audience that both directed and occasionally limited Barbour's artistic endeavor.

It is this audience and its political machinations which have been addressed more recently by historians writing about *The Bruce* in its late medieval context. In the past few decades, historians have questioned Barbour's goal within the political context of late medieval Scotland. While some historians previously attempted to explain historical "errors" in Barbour's narrative as the product of his source material, most recent analysis has centered on Barbour's assumed political motivations and his audience of Scottish nobility, many of which were direct descendants of the subjects in his poem.²⁹ Broadly approaching *The Bruce* as a poem promoting various political ideals, historians like Liam Purdon and Julian Wasserman argued that Barbour's "curiously deliberate rejection of chivalry" typical of other romances is meant to support "the social as well as political value of using a system of feudal obligation to unify a people under militant kingship" and discourage "individual gallantry."³⁰ Others have more specifically connected *The Bruce* to late medieval Scottish politics. Thea Summerfield stressed that the available source material "was adapted by Barbour in his compilation to answer the needs of a later court and a later king, Robert II."³¹ In *The Matter of Scotland: Historical Narrative in Medieval Scotland*, R. James Goldstein considered *The Bruce* within the broader historical writing of the Anglo-Scottish wars which "played a constitutive role in the development of national

²⁹ Duncan claimed that "the repetition of stories, errors, and other features requiring explanation," in *The Bruce* because they do not match the historical record were not artistic choices but errors present in the now lost source material that Barbour is assumed to have used. "Introduction," *The Bruce*. ed. and trans. A.A.M. Duncan. (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics 1997), 31.

³⁰ Liam O. Purdon and Julian N. Wasserman, "Chivalry and Feudal Obligation in Barbour's *Bruce*," in *The Rusted Hauberk: Feudal Ideals of Order and Their Decline*, ed. Liam Purdon and Cindy Vitto. (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida 1994.), 78.

³¹ Thea Summerfield, "Barbour's *Bruce*: Compilation in Retrospect," in *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses To Warfare*, ed. Corinne Saunders, Francoise Le Saux, and Neil Thomas (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2004), 122.

consciousness in medieval Scotland and constituted a distinct literary tradition.”³² Steve Boardman recently analyzed “*The Bruce* simply as a text produced in, and for, the political, diplomatic and military contexts of the 1370s.”³³ Boardman connected *The Bruce* to the goals of the Stewart monarchy and continuing disputes with England. He did not, however, consider the generic motifs present in *The Bruce* in his discussion, focusing his interpretation on the depictions of characters and events as positive or negative in relation to Barbour’s contemporaries. The analyses provided by these historians offer crucial insight, but do not fully engage with the literary conventions or literary analyses of Barbour’s work and, when considering the role of such influences, they largely confine their focus to the genre of romance and the related expectations of chivalric conduct.

In order to illuminate the role of *The Bruce* in forming the Scottish historical consciousness of the period, the poem must be understood in both its literary and political contexts — as both a piece of literature composed under a variety of medieval influences and as a narrative of history meant to fulfill a political agenda. Reading *The Bruce* in this way can bridge the divide between literary and historical inquiry and help us understand the medieval conception of nationhood as a creative and dynamic process. Therefore, this thesis intends to consider the literary motifs and developments throughout high and later medieval Europe that had political implications on identity formation. I will investigate how Barbour’s poem, beyond the obvious positive or negative portrayal of characters and events, was crafted with the creation of a Scottish identity in mind.

Despite previous misconceptions of medieval Scotland as an impoverished backwater, cut off from the rest of Europe, recent research has revealed a vibrant courtly culture in medieval Scotland. Scottish historian Katie Stevenson, for example, has placed medieval Scots in closer

³² R. James Goldstein, *The Matter of Scotland: Historical Narrative in Medieval Scotland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 1993), 6.

³³ Steve Boardman “‘Thar nobill eldrys gret bounte,’” in *Barbour’s Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts*, eds. Steve Boardman and Susan Foran (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2015), 192.

connection with their European contemporaries, documenting evidence of the numerous painters, architects, weavers, jewelers, tailors, musicians, and writers employed by Scottish royals and nobles from within Scotland and across the European continent.³⁴ Barbour was only one of the Scottish authors in contact with and influenced by the artistic culture of Europe and, “in common with other medieval European kingdoms, Scottish elites did borrow from diverse sources, many of them biblical, to furnish identities upon which later modern national identities and nationalisms would build.”³⁵ One prominent example of this intertextual culture is Scotland’s famous Declaration of Arbroath, the 1320 letter sent to Pope John XXII asserting Scottish sovereignty, which borrowed from the story of the Maccabees in characterizing Scottish resistance to English rule.³⁶ As this recent historical research has made clear, well-known literary genres and their political insinuations would have been familiar to both Barbour and the wealthy, well-educated Scottish nobility for which he was writing. Examining *The Bruce* amidst the myriad genres Barbour would have been exposed to, I attempt to re-contextualize the text in the medieval Scottish and European literary milieu. I further attempt to examine the narrative of Scottish history it presented and the resulting conception of national identity it inspired.

Medieval History Writing and National Identity

My study is informed by previous historians who, beginning with the cultural turn of the late twentieth century, have emphasized a connection between the literary creation of historical narrative and the resulting creation of national identity in the middle ages. This tradition began with *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), in which Hayden White proposed a theoretical understanding of historical writing that fundamentally

³⁴ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*, 15; Stevenson, “Elite Culture, Iconography, and Propaganda,” in *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*.

³⁵ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*, 13.

³⁶ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*, 12-13.

altered perceptions of “history” and reconstructions of the past. Rather than taking written histories as simple explanations of data, White argued that histories were constructed according to a “narrative structure” and that “the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act, in which he *prefigures* the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain ‘what was *really* happening’ in it.”³⁷ White applied this theory to the major historians of the nineteenth-century using what he called “explanation by emplotment.”³⁸ According to White, “Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind.”³⁹ Thus, recognizing the emplotment of a historical narrative allowed him to recognize the “metahistory” underpinning those histories. This conception of historical writing, as a literary construction of narrative, set a precedent for the study of both history and written histories of that history: the past and the reconstructions of that past. While White’s work focused on European historians of the nineteenth century, cultural and political historians of various ages and places have used the theoretical premise it supports — that historical writing must be viewed as a narrative, subject to contemporary literary conventions — within their own fields.

Another influential work within this tradition was Benedict Anderson’s, *Imagined Communities* (1983). Reflecting on the post-colonial revolutions in Vietnam, Cambodia, and China, along with the USSR and the many nations rejecting its dominion, Anderson posed the question of what “nation” actually meant, and where the “nationalism” that defined most modern revolutionary movements came from. Anderson traced the origin of the twentieth-century nation to the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, arguing that the idea of “nation” as it existed in the

³⁷ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1973), ix, x.

³⁸ White, *Metahistory*, 7.

³⁹ White, *Metahistory*, 7.

twentieth century was “an imagined political community” built on an idea of a shared ethnic, linguistic, and territorial past.⁴⁰ Anderson placed the origins of nation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century because he saw its roots in the period of Enlightenment thought.⁴¹ According to Anderson, “nationalist imagining” shares “a strong affinity with religious imaginings” that dominated the cultural system preceding the Enlightenment.⁴² Anderson claimed that for nation and nationalism to exist, the previous conceptions of “religious community” and “dynastic realm,” which dominated all pre-modern centuries, had to decompose.⁴³ Only with the decline of these “sacred communities, languages, and lineages” would it become “possible to ‘think’ the nation.”⁴⁴ With this framework, Anderson specifically excluded pre-eighteenth-century history from his theory. White also believed that nationalism was built on the end of a pre-modern “conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable.”⁴⁵

White and Anderson’s conception of an exclusively modern wave of national identity is first complicated by the fact that popular conceptions of medieval European history were foundational to ethnic claims of national sovereignty and nationalism in the twenty-first century.⁴⁶ Furthermore, these claims of national sovereignty based on a shared ethnic identity preceded the nineteenth century. As Patrick Geary explains in *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, even though they weren’t using the modern words for “nation,” Europeans had been identifying themselves as members of sovereign ethnicities and peoples for centuries: “while the particular way that we use them is novel, these words and their equivalents have a long history

⁴⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Edition* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁴¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11.

⁴² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 10.

⁴³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 12.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 22.

⁴⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

⁴⁶ Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 7-8.

reaching back at least to the fifth century B.C.E.”⁴⁷ Thus the questionable establishment of national identity as a modern phenomenon, has not stopped scholars from examining how medieval writers “imagined” their own nations.

As historian Kathleen Davis explains, Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* is “a book that medievalists have long berated for its uniformed caricature of ‘the Middle Ages’ and its theory of the nation based on temporal exclusion.”⁴⁸ In *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*, Davis problematizes the accepted categories of “medieval” and “modern” time – categories which Anderson relies on to label “nation” as a product of the “modern” world and incompatible with medieval thought. Davis directly criticizes Anderson’s understanding of the medieval religious, temporal, and linguistic worldview, and thus his assertion that nations and national identity could not exist in the medieval period. In “National Writing in the Ninth Century: A Reminder for Postcolonial Thinking About the Nation,” Davis argues that King Alfred’s *Preface* to his Old English translation of *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* displayed “the delineation of a national language and race, deployment of an imagined national past, and the articulation of culture in terms of geographical space.”⁴⁹ Crucial to King Alfred’s national ideology in his *Preface*, Davis claims, was his writing in Old English and his assertion that more books must be translated into the vernacular because “English had the power to unify and restore to wisdom *ealle* men ‘throughout England.’”⁵⁰ Instead of favoring Latin as a sacral language inherently connected to the “truth,” Alfred presents both Latin and English as legitimate vessels of wisdom.⁵¹ Through this claim, Alfred’s use of the English language creates a

⁴⁷ Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, 41.

⁴⁸ Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 101.

⁴⁹ Davis, “National Writing in the Ninth Century,” 614.

⁵⁰ Davis, “National Writing in the Ninth Century,” 614.

⁵¹ Davis, “National Writing in the Ninth Century,” 615.

border between English writing and the Latin canon and validates the identity of the English nation as a separate community with a shared language.⁵² Furthermore, Davis's explanation here directly contradicts Anderson's claim that medieval ideology upheld specific, sacral languages (like Latin) as conveyors of "truth," thereby problematizing his assumption that national identities could only exist after such linguistic relics disappeared.⁵³

Furthermore, Colette Beaune justifies the use of "nation" to refer to medieval realms in *The Birth of an Ideology: Myths and Symbols of Nation in Late-Medieval France*. While Beaune acknowledges that the word "nation," from the Latin "natio," was seldom applied to France as a single entity before the fifteenth century.⁵⁴ However, describing the development of defined geographical boundaries and a well-organized government, Davis illuminates the roots of nation in twelfth and thirteenth-century France:

In a country such as this, where Paris by the thirteenth century had already begun to function as undisputed capital, the state most definitely preceded and supported the development of the nation... Although France remained highly diversified and fragmented, it belonged to a single political structure, to a state. As a result, national sentiment emerged within a unique set of circumstances.⁵⁵

As Beaune explains, while the specific eighteenth-century notion of "nation" may not directly apply to medieval Europe, the subjects of nations were verbed with the construction of medieval states/kingdoms.

Thus, influenced by both White and Anderson, scholars have approached the work of medieval historians -- whether in poetic meter or prose -- as narrative constructions in relation to the formation of national identity. Gabrielle Spiegel, for example, in *Romancing the Past* argued

⁵² Davis, "National Writing in the Ninth Century," 616.

⁵³ Davis, "National Writing in the Ninth Century," 617.

⁵⁴ Colette Beaune, *The Birth of an Ideology: Myths and Symbols of Nation in Late-Medieval France*. ed. Frederic L Cheyette, trans. Susan Huston (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 5.

⁵⁵ Beaune, *The Birth of an Ideology*, 6.

“that both history and prose performed critical social functions in the life of the French aristocracy, which sought to embed its ideology in history and thereby endow that ideology with the prestige and imprescriptible character that the past was able to confer in medieval society.”⁵⁶

In *England the Nation: Languages, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340*, Thorlac Turville-Petre argued that, despite preconceptions of nationalism as a modern phenomenon, writers in medieval England were aware of and consciously expressed an image of the English nation in the languages of Latin, French, and English.⁵⁷ In *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Adrian Hastings similarly argued that English national identity not only began in the middle ages, but that English national identity “while not wholly uncomparable with that of other Atlantic coastal societies, does precede every other” thus serving as a “prototype” for all other European national identities.⁵⁸ Recently, in *English Identity and Political Culture in the Fourteenth Century*, Andrea Ruddick examined the sense of national sentiment in late medieval England, with particular focus on the developing English language itself and its role in political, literary, and ecclesiastical discourse.⁵⁹

In Scottish history, *Image and Identity: The Making and Re-Making of Scotland Through the Ages* has tackled the question of Scottish identity from the tenth through the nineteenth centuries, and one essay provided an analysis of Scottish identity during the Wars of Independence, highlighting the complexities of “Scottish” identities during this period and the deliberate effort of

⁵⁶ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1993), 2.

⁵⁷ Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1996).

⁵⁸ Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997), 4.

⁵⁹ Andrea Ruddick, *English Identity and Political Culture in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2013).

the Scottish monarchy to create a narrative of unity.⁶⁰ A more recent anthology, *The Anglo-Scottish Border and the Shaping of Identity, 1300-1600*, has spoken to the developing application of historical composition and national identity in medieval Scotland.⁶¹ Furthermore, R. James Goldstein, in explicating the “war of historiography” between England and Scotland, drew upon the conception of historical narrative and history writing as a literary re-construction of the past — an entity independent from the historical past it purports to imitate.⁶² In *The Matter of Scotland*, Goldstein provided a strong argument for the connection between history writing and the formation of Scottish identity in this period, but only in relation to English influences. Furthermore, Goldstein’s examination of *The Bruce* in particular considered the formation of ideological conceptions crucial to medieval politics like “freedom” and “lordship.”

The Plan

Building upon this literary and historiographical framework, this thesis will illuminate how Barbour’s *Bruce* was shaped by and shaped the political and cultural mentality of late medieval Scotland, as it was embedded in a wider European political and cultural milieu. Following the example of Gabrielle Spiegel, I attempt “to do both history and literature.”⁶³ I will argue that Barbour’s work was informed by centuries of earlier literary explorations of nationhood and identity and highlight this intertextual history by examining the emplotment of *The Bruce* in relation to the genres of French *chansons de geste*, Scandinavian sagas, and English Robin Hood ballads. While I will argue that these literary genres and their presence in *The Bruce* were medieval expressions of a national identity, I will not use the word “nationalism,” unless quoting other

⁶⁰ Dauvit Broun, R. J. Finlay, and Michael Lynch, eds. *Image and Identity: The Making and Re-Making of Scotland Through the Ages*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd. 1998.

⁶¹ Mark Bruce and Katherine Terrell eds. *The Anglo-Scottish Border and the Shaping of Identity, 1300-1600* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2012).

⁶² Goldstein, *The Matter of Scotland*, 7, 19.

⁶³ Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, 9.

authors, to avoid conflating the widely different medieval conception of nation with that of the nineteenth century. However, based on the precedent set by scholars like Geary, Davis, and Beaune, I will still confidently argue that the development of the Scottish dynasty and cultural unity fostered by The Bruce constitutes an early sense of a collective national identity.

Chapter I examines the influences of the French epic tradition within *The Bruce*. I argue that the French *chansons* of Charlemagne gave Barbour the image of an idealized feudal ruler with which to characterize Robert I, the language of noble royal bloodlines through which to glorify the Stewart monarchy, and the incendiary rhetoric of the crusading ethos with which to demonize the English as an antagonistic Other.

Chapter II highlights the influences of the Scandinavian tradition of Icelandic family sagas within *The Bruce*. I argue that the saga motifs of legal assemblies and blood-feuding allowed Barbour to reframe and justify the violence destruction involved in Bruce's seizure of the Scottish throne, the brutal in-fighting amongst Scottish noble families during and after the wars, and the complicated political relationship between Scotland and Norway.

Chapter III investigates the influences of popular outlaw tales, particularly those of the early Robin Hood Ballads, within *The Bruce*. I argue that the ballads' motifs of trickster tales and the inclusion of commoners helped Barbour harness the renown of William Wallace in order to memorialize James Douglas as a folk hero and to incorporate Scottish commoners in his conception of a Scottish nation.

Discussing *The Bruce*'s composition in relation to these historical and literary sources, I will reveal the political force of medieval literary genres and the cultural creation of a national identity that would shape Scottish politics.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

One politically significant genre influencing Barbour was that of the medieval epic, particularly that of the high medieval French epic tradition of chansons de geste. Chansons de geste were lyrical poems written in the old French vernacular and meant to be sung by a jongleur. While chanson can be simply translated as song, geste was understood as referring either to heroic deeds or to a familial line: “Thus a chanson de geste is a song or stanzaic poem celebrating the exploits of a hero or clan.”⁶⁴ The main protagonists of the chansons were usually French nobility or royalty, and featured thematic conflicts of religious or feudal ideals.⁶⁵ These themes were directly connected to the political developments of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries during which they were written. These songs posed questions of feudal loyalty and order as real disputes between monarchs, barons, and popes defined the formation of high medieval states. It is also no coincidence that the chansons reached their peak during the European crusades, as their theme of religious conflict promoted a “crusading ethos” amongst the warrior nobility traveling to the holy land.⁶⁶ These political themes had wide appeal for aristocrats across Europe; it was even claimed that the Song of Roland was sung amongst William the Conqueror’s men before the Battle of Hastings.⁶⁷ The chansons de geste reached their height during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries but remained a popular element of medieval European literature and intellectual culture well into the later middle ages as they were translated into other languages and genres.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Catherine M. Jones, *An Introduction to the Chansons de Geste* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2014), 1-3.

⁶⁵ Jones, *An Introduction to the Chansons de Geste*, 2.

⁶⁶ Jones, *An Introduction to the Chansons de Geste*, 21.

⁶⁷ Melissa Furrow, “Chanson de Geste as Romance in England.” in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, eds. Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjevic, and Judith Weiss (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2010), 58.

⁶⁸ Jones, *An Introduction to the Chansons de Geste*, 6-7.

In the British Isles, English romances inspired by chansons about Charlemagne, his royal line, and his court (the Charlemagne cycle) were widely popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁶⁹ Romances portrayed heroic knights but, unlike the chansons, placed greater emphasis on courtly love and conduct. The shift in genre while being translated has been explained by Phillipa Hardman and Marianne Ailes as due to the fact that the chansons de geste had “no equivalent in the literary tradition of the target language [i.e. English].”⁷⁰ The political significance of the content was also translated into other European contexts. For example, Hardman and Ailes argued that the Charlemagne material of the chansons was translated into English romances because “the major themes -- matters of religion, the unity of Christendom, fear of the religious Other, and a positive exemplum of kingship” addressed the social anxieties in late medieval English culture of the unstable English monarchy and the growing power of the Turkish empire in the east.⁷¹ Similarly, Melissa Furrow has argued that chansons de geste were a popular influence on English romances because their depiction of the morally acceptable killing of Saracen antagonists helped justify the widespread killing of war with chivalrous ideals, “a recurrent cultural need from the invasion of England to the Hundred Years’ War and the Wars of the Roses.”⁷²

Barbour, who had travelled to France twice for pilgrimage and study (1365 and 1368), would have been familiar with the French genre of epic chansons de geste, and *The Bruce* can be seen as a forerunner of this fourteenth century translation of French epics into English romances.⁷³ Given the widespread popularity of heroic epics, it must also be noted that Barbour’s audience

⁶⁹ Phillipa Hardman and Marianne Ailes, *The Legend of Charlemagne in Medieval England: The Matter of France in Middle English and Anglo-Norman Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2017), 4.

⁷⁰ Hardman and Ailes, *The Legend of Charlemagne in Medieval England*, 23.

⁷¹ Hardman and Ailes, *The Legend of Charlemagne in Medieval England*, 155.

⁷² Furrow, “Chanson de Geste as Romance in England,” in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, 72.

⁷³ McDiarmid and Stevenson, eds. *Barbour’s Bruce: A Fredome Is a Noble Thing*, 1-6.

would have been familiar with the characters of the chansons and the political messages they contained.

In this chapter, I argue that Barbour used various motifs of the chansons de geste, particularly as evident in the Charlemagne cycle, to promote the dominance of the Stewart monarchy and Scottish narrative of recent events in the face of renewed conflict with England. I will be using the most famous of the chansons, the *Chanson de Roland*, as a point of comparison to illuminate the connections of *The Bruce* to the chansons in detail.

The Chanson de Roland

The major epic motifs present in Barbour's *Bruce* are exemplified through the most famous chanson of the Charlemagne cycle, the *Chanson de Roland*. The *Chanson de Roland* is presented as a retelling of a 778 battle at Roncevaux between the Franks and Saracens, in which the Franks suffered a devastating defeat.⁷⁴ In the chanson, the poet narrates the courageous deeds and tragic demise of Roland, Charlemagne's nephew, and the Frank rearguard during this battle at the hands of the Spanish Saracens and Roland's stepfather Ganelon who betrayed the Franks in order to repay Roland for insulting his honor but the tragedy is avenged. Charlemagne returns with the main body of the Franks to defeat the Saracens and Ganelon is executed for treason. The oldest remaining copy of *Chanson de Roland* is a c.1100 Oxford manuscript. This circumstance both highlights its early popularity in Britain and its dissemination throughout western Europe.⁷⁵

Feudal Honor

One of the central themes of the chansons de geste was the inherent tension of maintaining the relationships and obligations between lords and vassals. Throughout the chansons, these feudal

⁷⁴ Gerard J. Brault, *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition; I. Introduction and Commentary* (USA: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1978), 1-2.

⁷⁵ Brault, *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition; I. Introduction and Commentary*, 4.

bonds were challenged by the opposing commitments of religious devotion, family obligation, personal ambition, and the rivalry amongst lords defending their honor. Reflecting the contemporary political tensions in high medieval France, the chansons often portrayed this conflict as it occurred between monarchs and barons, extolling the value of loyalty and cautioning against the danger of treason between kings and their barons.⁷⁶

In the *Chanson de Roland*

Central to the theme of feudal obligation in *Chanson de Roland* is its portrayal of Charlemagne as the ideal king, as he simultaneously wields supreme authority, defers to his vassals for counsel and judgment, and has deep empathy for the hardships of his men.⁷⁷ For example, after receiving the proposed surrender from the Saracen messenger Blancandrin, Charlemagne summons his barons, listens to, and eventually abides by their desire to accept the homage and conversion of the Saracens, even though he does not trust the Saracen King Marsile.⁷⁸ Shortly afterwards, however, Charlemagne asserts his authority in forbidding all of the barons who initially volunteer to return the message to Saragossa, commanding that none of his favorites, Roland and the Twelve Peers, are permitted to leave his side for the task.⁷⁹ Even Ganelon, as he is plotting to betray the Franks, extols Charlemagne's virtues as a compassionate lord, claiming that "God has cast such rays of manly virtue on him/That he would rather die than abandon his barons."⁸⁰ Roland would reinforce this image of Charlemagne. Twice during the doomed battle at Roncevaux, Roland declares that "One must suffer hardships for one's lord."⁸¹ Finally, the *Chanson de Roland* also depicts the fate of troublesome vassals unwilling to submit to such a worthy monarch. As Ganelon

⁷⁶ Jones, *An Introduction to the Chansons de Geste*, 19-20

⁷⁷ Jones, *An Introduction to the Chansons de Geste*, 72-73.

⁷⁸ Gerard J. Brault, trans. *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition; II. Oxford Text and English Translation* (USA: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1978), 13-17 (lines 168-243).

⁷⁹ Brault, trans. *The Song of Roland*, 19 (262).

⁸⁰ Brault, trans. *The Song of Roland*, 35 (535-536).

⁸¹ Brault, trans. *The Song of Roland*, 65 (1010), 71 (1117).

is executed for his treason, the poet comments that he “died as befits a dirty miscreant/ Any man who betrays another must not be allowed to brag about it.”⁸²

In *The Bruce*

The motifs of just lordship, feudal loyalty, and treason exemplified by the *Chanson de Roland* are crucial to Barbour’s characterization of Robert I and his deeds. To solidify the royal claim of the Bruce line, threatened by renewed warfare in the 1330s and the legacy of recent treason, Barbour draws on the conventions that immortalized Charlemagne as a great Christian king to portray Robert I as an ideal feudal king worthy of loyalty.

The need to re-establish a rightfully ordained feudal order persuades Bruce to take the throne. In Barbour’s words Bruce “had gret pitte” for the suffering of the Scottish people under English rule, but does not declare himself king until John Comyn, another Scottish lord, begs him to. This affirms that Bruce is in fact the rightful king and has both the right and the responsibility to wage war against England. Now, when he is needed by the Scots to free them from the English, Bruce “will blythly upon me ta/ The state, for I wate that I have rycht” (will gladly upon me take the state, for I know I have the right).⁸³ Of course, Bruce is “freeing” Scotland by claiming lordship over it, but Barbour’s portrayal of Bruce as a compassionate ruler encourages his audience to ignore such a contradiction.

Fealty and lordship is also what brings together the two main protagonists of *The Bruce* -- Robert Bruce and the good Sir James Douglas. James’s father, William Douglas, had lost his fief to an English Lord Clifford and died in prison. Thus, James decides to join Bruce’s cause and regain his family’s land and honor. Upon their first meeting, Douglas explains “that he come to mak homage/Till him as till his rychtwis king,/ And at he boune wes in all thing/ To tak with him

⁸² Brault, trans. *The Song of Roland*, 243 (3973-3974).

⁸³ Barbour, 71 (I. 509-510).

the gud and ill.” (that he came to do homage to [Bruce] as his rightful king, And he was ready to take good and ill with [Bruce] in all things).⁸⁴ Douglas’s assertion that Robert I is the rightful king for whom Douglas will endure either good or ill echoes the declaration of Roland to faithfully suffer for Charlemagne before perishing at Roncevaux: “One must suffer hardships for one’s lord.”⁸⁵ Barbour’s portrayal of the relationship between Bruce and Douglas exemplifies this ideal of feudal hierarchy, with Bruce as a legitimate, worthy lord and Douglas as a loyal vassal. Douglas’s oath of fealty also highlights the contrast between the English king as a tyrannical lord, depriving vassals like William Douglas of their due and Bruce as the “rychtwis king” to whom Douglas is willing to swear his loyalty and for whom he will endure hardship. In response, Bruce accepts Douglas as his man, trusts him with “men and armys” and throughout the poem relies on Douglas above all others in his campaigns against the English.⁸⁶ According to Barbour, this close bond between Bruce and Douglas is only possible because of how fully each fulfills their feudal expectations: “For [Douglas] servyt ay lelely,/ And the tother [Bruce]... That was bath worthy wycht and wys/ Rewardyt him weile his service” (For Douglas always served loyally, and the other [Bruce] that was worthy, bold and wise rewarded him well for his service).⁸⁷

The identification of Bruce as a compassionate lord and rightful king is reinforced by scenes in which loyal women give the outnumbered and endangered Bruce her sons to become his men and aid his cause. First, a woman on Arran hosting Bruce and his men after their retreat from the Scottish mainland predicts that Bruce will successfully drive out the English and rule Scotland and therefore pledges her sons to him: “And that ye trowis this sekyrly/ My twa sonnys with you sall I/ Send to tak part of your travail,/ For I wate weill thai sall nocht fail/ to be rewardyst weill

⁸⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 87 (II. 158-161).

⁸⁵ Brault, trans. *The Song of Roland*, 65 (1010) and 71 (1117).

⁸⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 87 (II. 164).

⁸⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 87(II. 171-174).

at rycht/ Quhen ye are heyit to your mycht.” (And so you might know this for sure, I shall send my two sons with you to take part in your hardship, for I know well they shall not fail to be rewarded well when you are raised to your power).⁸⁸ Bruce, as a just lord, is worthy of their devotion and will not fail to reward their service. Second, after Bruce’s frenzied retreat from Aymer de Valence, Bruce comes alone to the house where the fleeing Scots had agreed to meet. In this case the woman, not knowing his identity, welcomes him on behalf of Bruce, who she asserts “is rycht lord off this countre” (is rightful lord of this country).⁸⁹ When she discovers that Bruce is in fact the rightful lord to whom she is speaking, she offers him her two sons as his men.

Barbour not only establishes Bruce as rightfully honorable king but as a great military leader worthy of devotion. When, after Bruce’s men had started to gain ground, the Scottish king falls seriously ill, Barbour uses the moment to comment upon the necessity of a courageous “capitane” to inspire men. According to Barbour, a leader “Off sic will is and sic bounte/ That he dar put him till assay/ His folk sall tak ensample ay/ Off his guid deid and his bounte” (Is of such will and such excellence that dares to put himself through trials, his people shall always take his good deeds and his excellence as an example).⁹⁰ By contrast, “quhen the lord that thaim suld leid/ May do nocht bot as he that war ded/ Or fra haldis his way/ Fleand, trow ye nocht than that thai/ Sall vencuyst in their hartis be” (When the lord that should lead them can do nothing as if he were dead or from his way flees, do you not believe then that they shall be defeated in their hearts?)⁹¹ Bruce, of course, is one of the former, a noble leader whose determination and character serves as an example to his following. In Barbour’s narrative, this point is proved by the fact that, during Bruce’s illness, his men were so disheartened that they retreated to take shelter and await his

⁸⁸ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 181-183 (IV. 662-667).

⁸⁹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 270-271 (VII. 254, 233-268).

⁹⁰ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 321-323 (IX. 70-73).

⁹¹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 323 (IX. 79-83).

recovery. Furthermore, upon hearing of the death of some of his men in a skirmish with the English, Bruce leads an attack while still recovering and is so successful that the earls leading the opposition fled back to England. The victory is attributed to Bruce's appearance at the fight and his valor, which inspired his men and terrified the enemy.⁹² The devotion of an outstanding feudal lord to his vassals, then, is vital for the survival of the state, as Bruce's willingness to avenge some of his fallen men even while ill is what spurs the rest of his knights to follow him into battle and defeat the enemy.

If worthy kings and loyal vassals are what hold the medieval state together in literature, then traitors like the infamous Ganelon threaten to tear it apart. Bruce must face his own Ganelon in the form of John Comyn. Before revealing that Comyn had agreed to help Bruce take the throne (setting aside his own claim through his relation to the Balliols) only to betray Bruce to Edward I by showing the English king a signed indenture confirming their allegiance, Barbour details Comyn's betrayal. Before detailing Comyn's betrayal, Barbour includes one of his many moralizing asides in which he cautions his audience to beware of treason. Barbour calls it the greatest danger to all kings and lists the examples of the fall of Troy, the poisoning of Alexander the Great, the assassination of Julius Caesar, and the death of Arthur at the hands of Mordred to show that even the most powerful of leaders and kingdoms cannot protect themselves against treason. The implication is that Bruce is not immune from treason no matter how nobly he leads.⁹³ When Bruce narrowly escapes Edward I after Comyn's betrayal and meets Comyn in the Greyfriars at Dumfries, Bruce shows Comyn a written indenture of their alliance to give him the lie and then stabs Comyn in front of the high altar.⁹⁴ Barbour is unable to fully condone such an act of sacrilege. He does, however, do his best

⁹² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 331-333 (IX.253-256).

⁹³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 73-75 (I.515-560).

⁹⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 81 (II.25-38).

to salvage Bruce's character. Barbour notes that there are numerous accounts circulating of the murder in Dumfries and that he is unsure of "quhat-sa-evyr maid the debate" (whatsoever made the debate) that led to Comyn's death.⁹⁵ He also admits that Bruce committed a serious sin by disrespecting the sacral space of the high altar and implies that the later hardships Bruce would face in his years of retreat from 1306-1308 were the result of this act.⁹⁶ Barbour's framing of the action, however, places particular emphasis on the treachery committed by Comyn that led to his death, a motif that recalls the chansons' concern with loyalty and honor. Barbour suggests that Comyn's murder was a justified act of vengeance, as opposed to an impulsive outburst. This does not fully absolve Bruce, but a murder committed for vengeance is more acceptable than a random act of violence.

Treason is most directly addressed in Barbour's account of Sir William de Soules leading a conspiracy to assassinate Bruce and put himself, Soules, on the throne in with the intent of assassinating Bruce and putting Soules on the throne in 1320. After its discovery Soules is tried for treason, imprisoned at Dumbarton, where he later dies, and his principal conspirators are executed. Among those, Barbour includes Sir David Brechin who, Barbour claims, was not directly involved in the conspiracy but is worthy of execution because he did not fulfill his duty as a loyal vassal by warning Bruce, thus endangering his king and by extension the stability of the nation.⁹⁷ Barbour's account of the Soules conspiracy, with its speedy discovery and punishment, emphasizes the certain and deserved downfall of traitors who deceive their lords.

⁹⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 81 (II.41).

⁹⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 81 (II.39-48).

⁹⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 399-701 (XIX. 1-72).

In the Chronicles

The influence of epic motifs of rightful rulership, fealty, and the justice that must be enacted upon traitors is even more prominent in Barbour's work when contemporary chronicles of the Scottish wars are taken into consideration and compared to the poetic depiction of *The Bruce*. Such comparisons are especially fruitful since, given their similar references to a now lost chronicle of Bruce's early exploits, it is accepted that Barbour, the English Sir Thomas Gray, the French Jean le Bel, and the Scottish Joannes Fordun, all either had access to or had heard a second hand account of at least one of the same primary sources.⁹⁸

The *Scalacronica*, written by the English knight Sir Thomas Gray in 1355 while captive in Edinburgh, includes his personal experiences in the Anglo-Scottish wars of the mid 1300s and those of his father, also Sir Thomas Gray, who fought in the earlier wars against Bruce through the 1320s.⁹⁹ Gray's account lacks the laudatory praise heaped upon Bruce by Barbour and his explanation for the beginning of the war is largely unembellished; he does not include supposed pity that led Bruce to claim the crown for himself nor does he describe the oaths of fealty made by his followers. As a result, Gray's account does not paint as dark a picture of Comyn's treason as Barbour does. Instead it portrays Bruce's murder as unjust. According to Gray, Bruce had his brothers, Thomas and Neil Bruce, go to Comyn and bring him to meet at the Greyfriars in Dumfries. The original plan was for Thomas and Neil to kill Comyn on the way there, but "they were received so amiably by John Comyn, that they could not bring themselves to do him any harm."¹⁰⁰ Once they arrived at Dumfries and told this to Bruce, he mocked them for their hesitancy and took on the task for himself. In Gray's narrative, Bruce tries once again to persuade Comyn to

⁹⁸ Duncan, "Introduction," *The Bruce*. ed. and trans. A.A.M. Duncan. (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics 1997), 31.

⁹⁹ Andy King, "Introduction," *Scalacronica 1272-1363* (Woodbridge: The Surtees Society 2005), xvii, xxii.

¹⁰⁰ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 51.

join him against Edward I, to which Comyn refuses out of loyalty to the English king. Bruce then stabs Comyn before the high altar and finishes the job shortly after when an injured Comyn is discovered still clinging to life.¹⁰¹ In Gray's account, Comyn's reporting of Bruce's claim to Edward I is not a dishonorable betrayal, but an act of faithful homage, and Bruce's plan to have him murdered on the road, his refusal to let Comyn's hospitality subdue his rage, and methodical slaughter of Comyn before the altar are malicious decisions made by a cruel king. Gray's condemnatory picture of Comyn's death paints a telling picture of the other circulating accounts of the event that Barbour was clearly trying to combat in appealing to the epic motif of treason and justice.

Considering his antipathy towards the Scottish king, Gray's retelling of the Soules conspiracy is far more brief. Gray notes that Bruce had Soules imprisoned at Dumbarton after "accusing him of having formed a conspiracy to bring him down, with other Scottish magnates who had submitted themselves to him as subjects, by recognizances, at which William [de Soules] had rejoiced."¹⁰² In this instance, Gray does not contradict the facts of the case presented by Barbour; he still considers Soules at fault for wanting to have himself crowned as king and portrays the affair as a quickly dealt with scandal. Gray does not, however, echo Barbour's claim that David Brechin was executed for withholding prior knowledge, merely listing him as one of the conspirators that was executed. Gray clearly has no desire to encourage loyalty to Bruce, making such detail on Brechin's execution, whether fact or fiction, unnecessary to include.

While not as antagonistic as Gray's account, the Scottish chronicler Joannes Fordun (c.1300-1385) paints a much more nuanced picture of Barbour's idealized feudal king. Fordun was connected to the church at St. Andrews and appears to have begun his *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*

¹⁰¹ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 51-53.

¹⁰² Gray, *Scalacronica*, 79.

in 1363.¹⁰³ While more favorably inclined towards Bruce and his military campaign, Fordun's does not resort to the elegiac praise of Barbour's poem. Fordun makes no mention of the scene in which Edward I supposedly offers Bruce (conflated with his grandfather, also Robert Bruce) the throne in return for becoming his vassal. Fordun does, however, include the fact that Bruce paid homage to Edward I while John Balliol was still ruling Scotland. As a result, Bruce and the other lords he had convinced to follow him deserted Balliol on the battlefield and brought about Balliol's loss to Edward I.¹⁰⁴ In Fordun's account, Bruce does not press his claim to the Scottish crown but instead betrays a Scottish king while serving an English one. Fordun however, does mention the incident in which a sickly Bruce leads his men to victory at Inverney, even if he does not include any moralizing comment upon the event.¹⁰⁵ As compared to Barbour's steadfast, Charlemagne-like king, Fordun's Bruce is a man who wavers in his allegiances and upholds his loyalty to an independent Scottish nation only when it is personally beneficial.

In his account of the Soules conspiracy, Fordun remains more generous than the English knight Gray but less laudatory than Barbour. According to Fordun, "the lord William of Sowlis and the Countess of Stratherne were convicted of the crime of high treason, by conspiring against the aforesaid king; and sentence of perpetual imprisonment was passed upon them."¹⁰⁶ But Fordun does not claim that Soules led the conspiracy because he wanted to take the throne for himself, contradicting both Barbour and Gray. In addition, Fordun does not claim Brechin's crime as one of silence; he simply lists him as one of the executed conspirators as Gray does. The fact that both Fordun and Gray lack this detail from Barbour's account implies either that the nature of this

¹⁰³ W.F. Skene, "Historical Introduction," *Johannis de Fordun Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, ed and trans by W.F. Skene (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas 1871), lxxii-lxxiii.

¹⁰⁴ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 316-317.

¹⁰⁵ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 337.

¹⁰⁶ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 341 (CXXXV).

treason was not widely noted, and likely not of interest to other chroniclers the way it was to Barbour, or that it was another piece of poetic license on Barbour's part to urge fealty. Again, Fordun's smaller emphasis on Soules and Brechin presents a more nuanced, less simplistic account of the conspiracy than Barbour's.

In Context

Barbour's poetic depiction of Bruce as an idealized feudal lord takes on greater significance when considered amongst the real political threats to the Bruce-Stewart monarchy. First, in all likelihood, the so-called "Soules conspiracy" of 1320 was actually a plot meant to restore Edward Balliol (son of the deposed Scottish king John Balliol) to the throne. While Soules may have had an indirect claim to the throne, Balliol's was clearer and a stronger threat to Bruce's reign.¹⁰⁷ By diverting the cause of the conspiracy to Soules, Barbour diverted attention from the justice of Balliol's claim to the Scottish throne to uphold Bruce as the only rightful monarch. In addition, Bruce's rule benefitted from the discovery of the conspiracy, as the lands forfeit by the traitors were given to members of Bruce's family, "including giving the lordship of Liddesdale from Soules's estate to his [Bruce's] illegitimate son."¹⁰⁸ Therefore, Barbour's simplification of the conspiracy as a greedy betrayal obfuscates the more nuanced politics of the situation through which Bruce manipulated the key players to benefit his own sovereignty and the standing of his dynasty.

Barbour's suppression of the Balliol claim here is also significant because, by the time Barbour composed *The Bruce* in 1375, the kings of Scotland following Robert I had faced continued threats to their sovereignty from the Balliols. Following Robert I's death in 1329, Edward Balliol went to Edward II in 1331 to request support for his claim to the throne and

¹⁰⁷ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*, 55.

¹⁰⁸ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*, 55.

campaign against the Bruce supporters running the state in the minority of Robert I's son, David II. With him were other nobles from England and Scotland, "disinherited" from their fiefs by Bruce's earlier victory. Edward Balliol, and the other disinherited lords, managed to retake portions of the borderlands and have himself crowned king of Scotland at Scone in 1332.¹⁰⁹ Balliol defeated Bruce-loyals in an embarrassing defeat at Halidon Hill in 1333 and, through his claim as king of Scotland, paid homage once again to English Edward III. In the following years, "more instability ensued: Balliol was again deposed by the Scots in 1334, restored again by the English in 1335, and finally deposed by Brucean loyalists in 1336."¹¹⁰ The Bruce adherents weren't able to regain substantial power until William Douglas took back Edinburgh in 1341, a victory made possible by the fact that England had turned its military focus from Scotland and to France.¹¹¹

The significance of the literary genre of *chanson de geste* in *The Bruce* takes on greater significance in this political context, in which the right of the Bruces to rule was no longer assured and the Scottish nobility which upheld it had suffered substantial losses to England. Barbour's use of tropes from the chansons to promote Bruce as an ideal ruler was an attempt to reaffirm the Bruce royal lineage. Furthermore, placing the emphasis of Bruce's claim on not only his character as a ruler but also his familial line, such a depiction would be automatically associated with the kings that followed Robert I, his son David II and his grandson Robert II, thereby strengthening their own positions as kings of Scotland beholden to the crown of England.

Robert II, presumed patron of Barbour's artistic endeavor, occupied a precarious position in relation to his neighboring kingdoms and vassals, and a poem that glorified past unwavering fealty to a Bruce monarch and displayed the examples of Comyn and Soules to any traitors

¹⁰⁹ Michael Brown, *The Wars of Scotland: 1214-1371* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2004), 232-234.

¹¹⁰ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda: Scotland 1306*, 30.

¹¹¹ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 242-243.

solidified Robert II's position as the rightful sovereign. Therefore, Barbour's allusions to the loyal barons and slaughtered traitors of the chansons de geste were a pointed warning, particularly to the English and the Balliols, who would have heard the old French songs and could contemplate the rewards of maintaining feudal order and the implications of disloyalty.

The Geste as Royal Bloodline

In the *Chanson de Roland*

Medieval chansons were traditionally categorized into cycles by family, as they often recounted the heroic deeds of a particular bloodline, most notably that of Charlemagne.¹¹² This theme is prominent in the *Chanson de Roland*, a song in the Charlemagne cycle, as it centers around Charlemagne's nephew Roland. Ganelon's treachery rests on the assumption that the loss of Roland will so devastate Charlemagne and the rest of the Franks that the Saracen king will be able to easily defeat the Christians.¹¹³

In *The Bruce*

The chanson convention of recalling the deeds of knights within the royal lineage is also a crucial part of *The Bruce*, as the narrative is conceived to memorialize the deeds of Robert Bruce and connect the heroic legacy of his exploits to his descendants. Barbour accomplishes this not only by exalting the Bruce family, but by placing Walter Stewart, Robert II's father, in places of prominence in two of the major battles of the early wars, even though Stewart was a young man at the time and likely played a very small role in Bruce's campaigns. Using the epic trope of memorializing a particular geste to celebrate the heroism of the Bruce-Stewart royal dynasty, Barbour composed *The Bruce* as a part of a larger effort by Robert II to solidify the dominance of the Stewart family by expanding their network of political, territorial, and cultural influence.

¹¹² Jones, *An Introduction to the Chansons de Geste*, 22-23.

¹¹³ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 37 (550-579).

The epic trope of memorializing royal lineage is crucial to the story of *The Bruce*, as the wars were precipitated by a dispute over who was truly the closest male relative of Alexander III. In Barbour's claim that Edward I offered Bruce the crown before giving the throne to John Balliol, Bruce rejects the offer not only because it would denigrate the throne of Scotland, but because he claims he must maintain the honor of the Bruce lineage, explaining that he would only accept the crown following legal tradition, "Or as myn eldris forouth me/ Held it in freyast reawte" (Or as my elders before my held it in freest royalty).¹¹⁴ To further strengthen the weight of this royal right, Barbour writes as if the Robert Bruce originally in dispute with John Balliol and overlooked by Edward I is the same Robert Bruce who would become Robert I. In fact, the Robert Bruce who first presented his claim to the Guardians of Scotland for the throne was Robert I's grandfather.¹¹⁵ By conflating two Robert Bruces in his poem, making the Robert Bruce who was denied the throne in 1292 the same one to claim it in 1306, Barbour simplifies what was a complex political dispute between multiple possible successors and heightens the drama of Robert I's campaign against the English.¹¹⁶ In Barbour's account, Robert Bruce loses his rightful claim to the throne because he is unwilling to trade away the independent heritage of the Sottish kings, and the proceeding suffering that he and his men endure are the heroic struggles of a wronged king seeking the recognition of his heritage, not a grandson of the original claimant making a desperate grab for power.

Barbour further champions the Bruce dynasty by elevating the positions of a young Walter Stewart (Bruce's son-in-law and father of Robert II) during two of the most notable events of the wars; the battle at Bannockburn and the siege of Berwick. First, Barbour notes the presence of Walter Stewart, "that then wes bot a beardless hyne," at the battle of Bannockburn to take back

¹¹⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 55 (I.163-164).

¹¹⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 49 (I) for discussion of the equation of Robert Bruce and Robert I, see Duncan, 49 note 67.

¹¹⁶ See genealogical chart below on page 122.

Stirling castle. (that he was then but a beardless lad).¹¹⁷ Barbour further notes that Walter was knighted at Bannockburn along with James Douglas and claims that a division of men was given to the two of them to lead, with the assumption that Douglas would take care of the young Stewart.¹¹⁸ Despite his need for supervision, Barbour remarks that, nevertheless, “I trow he sall sa manlily/ Do his devour and wirk sa weill” (I believe he shall be so manly a complete his duty and work so well) that he will not need any more supervision.¹¹⁹ Stewart is not mentioned in any of the major actions of the battle that follow, but his inclusion in the exposition ensures that his name is associated with the stunning Scottish victory.

Following the Scottish victory at Bannockburn and retaking of Stirling, Barbour further connects the Scottish triumph to his Stewart contemporaries. The Scots exchange some prominent English prisoners for Bruce’s Queen and his daughter Marjory, who had been held captive in England since 1306. Barbour notes that shortly after their return, Marjory was married to Walter Stewart and soon after gave birth to a son who was named after her father, Robert II.¹²⁰ Barbour uses this moment to connect the past Robert to the present Robert: “And in the tyme of the compiling/ Off this buik this Robert [Marjory and Walter’s son] wes king” (and in the time of writing this book [Robert II] was king) in 1375, around 46 years after the death of Robert I.¹²¹ Having established the relation of the current Robert to the past Robert, Barbour makes a far more pointed comparison: “God grant that thai that cummyn ar/ Off his[Robert I’s] ofpsring manteyme the land/ And hald the folk weill to warand/ And manteyme rycht and leawte/ Als wele as in his tyme did he” (God grant that they that come after from Robert I’s offspring maintain the land and

¹¹⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 417 (XI.224).

¹¹⁸ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 469 (XII. 417-420)

¹¹⁹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, (XI.333-336).

¹²⁰ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 517 (XIII. 704-705).

¹²¹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 517 (XIII, 709-717).

protect the people well and maintain the law faithfully as well as [Robert I] did in his time).¹²² Later, Barbour also notes that Walter Stewart was given stewardship of the crucial stronghold at Berwick and is commended for defending it from an English attempt to reclaim it.¹²³ By including a young Walter Stewart in his account of Bannockburn and Berwick, Barbour is using him to connect the victories of the past Scottish monarch to the present, to link the deeds of Robert I to Robert II and make a direct plea that Robert II, as Robert I's "ofspring" should govern lawfully and protect the people of Scotland as well as Robert I did "in his tyme."

In the Chronicles

In the *Scalacronica*, Gray does not include any reference to Barbour's tale of Edward I's shady maneuvering with Robert Bruce and John Balliol, nor does he mention Stewart's presence at Bannockburn, though he mentions that of James Douglas and Thomas Randolph.¹²⁴ Fordun's *Chronica* is similarly silent, as he does not equate Robert I with his grandfather, include a rejected offer of the crown from Edward I to Robert I, or mention Stewart at Bannockburn or Berwick.¹²⁵ The fact that both an English and a Scottish chronicler did not mention the initial meeting between Edward and Robert I adds weight to the assumption that it never occurred. In addition, their silence concerning Walter Stewart in their accounts of Robert I's military campaign implies that his presence was too insignificant to be included in their chronicles. It could also indicate that Walter Stewart's contribution was insignificant enough not to be widely known or recorded in the written source both Gray and Fordun seem to have had access to. Barbour, however, through his close relationship with the Stewart royal family and prominent nobility of the mid 1300s, would have

¹²² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 517 (XIII. 718-722).

¹²³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 627-629 (XVII.217-224) and 663 (XVII. 909-926).

¹²⁴ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 73-77.

¹²⁵ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 314-315, 339-341.

known the descendants of actual participants in those battles and his close relationship to them would predispose him to include such a detail in his account.

In Context

The motif of memorializing the exploits of a particular bloodline is crucial to note in Barbour's work because, at the time of his writing in the 1370s, Robert II was engaging in a widespread effort to increase the power and influence of the royal Stewart family. Of this complex Stewart propaganda program, Barbour's *Bruce* and his other lost works were some of the most memorable, but not the only contributions.

Throughout the 1370s, Robert II went about increasing the power of the Stewart family by giving more land and jurisdiction to his sons.¹²⁶ In general, he also consistently favored family and marriage alliances when assigning royal offices and fiefs to expand the reach of the royal administration over that of the encroaching nobles with regional control.¹²⁷ Furthermore, Robert II was making efforts to extend his own royal influence west of Edinburgh by centering his administration at Scone, which strengthened his familial links to the Gaelic-speaking and more culturally distant regions throughout the highlands and isles.¹²⁸ The efforts of the first Stewart monarch to connect his family to Bruce's legacy clearly set a precedent as, when John, Earl of Carrick, succeeded his father Robert II in 1390, he changed his name from John to Robert III. This had two effects; first, "to distance himself from the problematic reign of John Balliol" which had plunged Scotland into war, and second, "in choosing Robert as his regal assignation, Carrick also sought to harness the Brucean legacy established by his father."¹²⁹ In this context, Robert II's

¹²⁶ Barrell, *Medieval Scotland*, 141.

¹²⁷ Stephen Boardman, "Robert II (1371-1390)," in *Scottish Kingship, 1306-1542: Essays in Honour of Norman Macdougall*, eds. Michael Brown and Roland Tanner, 72-108 (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2008), 74.

¹²⁸ Boardman, "Robert II (1371-1390)," in *Scottish Kingship*, 76-77.

¹²⁹ Stevenson, *Power and Propoganda*, 35.

presumed patronage of *The Bruce*, and the epic commemoration of the royal bloodline it disseminated, can be understood as one of the Scottish king's many artistic endowments to commemorate the Stewart dynasty in conjunction with his expansionist political endeavors.¹³⁰

The Non-Christian Other

In the *Chanson de Roland*

Crucial to the crusading ethos of the chansons de geste that stirred high medieval audiences to risk their lives reclaiming the holy land is the depiction of a non-Christian other, usually Islamic Saracens, in opposition with a pious chivalry of French knights. The *Chanson de Roland* is a prominent example of this religious influence, as it reflects the “crusading zeal” of the twelfth century, when the earliest known text of the chanson was recorded, and exalts the mission of Charlemagne and the Franks as an act of pious heroism; even if the antagonists of the song are from Spain and not Jerusalem.¹³¹ The characterization of Saracens in the *Chanson de Roland* and the rest of the chansons is notoriously demonic and mischaracterizes the Islamic faith, as it “serves in part to justify Western hegemony and the notion of ‘holy war’ celebrated in so many epic works.”¹³² For example, the poet introduces the enemy king in Spain as “King Marsile, who does not love God.../He serves Mohammed and prays to Apollo,” to emphasize the antagonist as inherently evil and prone to treachery.¹³³ Later, when the Marsile's advisor Blancandrin is convincing him to deceive Charlemagne, Blancandrin urges Marsile to send their sons as hostages to secure a false alliance. Blancandrin admits that, once Charlemagne learns of the deceit he will have them decapitated but claims it is “far better that they should lose their heads/ Than that we

¹³⁰ Boardman, “Robert II (1371-1390),” in *Scottish Kingship*, 84.

¹³¹ Brault, *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition; I. Introduction and Commentary*, 9.

¹³² Jones, *An Introduction to the Chansons de Geste*, 21.

¹³³ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 3 (7-8).

should lose our lands and offices.”¹³⁴ Having established the non-Christian faith and inherent cruelty of his protagonists, the poet continuously includes small reminders of their evil character amidst the graphic description of blood and brains being spilled on the battlefield. They note that one of the kings allied with Marsile against the Franks is “steeped in the black arts,” one is a “sorcerer who was once in Hell,” and yet another comes from a land where “No sun shines there nor can wheat grow...Some say that devils reside there.”¹³⁵ Every effort is made by the poet of the *Chanson de Roland* to remind their audience that the Saracens are immoral enemies of the Christian faith and that all of the violence directed against them by the Franks should be celebrated.

In opposition to these demonic foes stand the pious Franks, whose devotion to God defines their cause as holy and ensures their victory. As Roland famously declares, preparing to lead the rearguard to their deaths against the Saracens, that “Pagans are in the wrong and Christians are in the right.”¹³⁶ Just before the battle, Archbishop Turpin also assures the rearguard that “If you die, you’ll be holy martyrs,/You’ll have seats in highest Paradise,” before granting them all absolution of their sins for the Saracens knights they are about to slaughter.¹³⁷ The archbishop would repeat this assurance later, as the tide of the battle begins to turn: “Holy Paradise awaits you,/ You will be seated with the Innocents.”¹³⁸ The Franks are further characterized as pious crusaders through the poet’s depiction of Charlemagne, who is apparently so favored by God that, along with receiving heavenly visions in his dreams, was granted a miracle, as God stops the sun to prolong the daylight so Charlemagne and his Franks could continue on their journey to avenge Roland and the Twelve Peers lost at Roncevaux.¹³⁹ The poet also claims that a powerful relic, a piece of the

¹³⁴ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 5 (44-46).

¹³⁵ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 57 (886), 87 (1391), and 63 (980-983).

¹³⁶ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 65 (1015).

¹³⁷ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 73 (1134-1135, 1124-1138).

¹³⁸ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 93 (1479-1480).

¹³⁹ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 151 (2445-2457, 2458-2459).

lance that was used to stab the crucified Christ, is mounted on the pommel of Charlemagne's sword Joyeuse.¹⁴⁰ Even the remains of the Franks Roland, Oliver, and Archbishop Turpin, are treated as relics of martyrs. Instead of being buried with the rest of the fallen Franks, their hearts are removed from their bodies, kept in a white marble casket, and sent back to France with their remains to be kept separately.¹⁴¹

In *The Bruce*

Sonja Cameron discusses this chanson motif somewhat in identifying *The Bruce* as a “crusading romance,” with the English standing in for the Saracen enemies, “As the English regime in Scotland replaces the customary heathen antagonists of crusading romances, so the fighting methods justifiably employed against the heathens are legitimate against them.”¹⁴² She does not, however, acknowledge the influence of the chansons in this enterprise, instead considering *The Bruce* in relation to the crusading chansons translated into romances that would appear only after Barbour's time, nor does she connect the need for this justification of violence to the context of Robert II's Scotland. It is important to note that by drawing on this crusading ethos, Barbour was reaching back to a far older, distinguished literary tradition of holy warfare against non-Christian enemies and that he did so not only to justify the Scottish conduct of Bruce's campaign, but in order to identify the English as enemies after a period of military losses and closer interaction between Scottish and English monarchs.

The crusading ethos of *Chanson de Roland* and the chansons, including its polarization of pious protagonists and malevolent antagonists, is key to Barbour's conception of Scottish champions and their English enemies. Even though the English knights were also Christian,

¹⁴⁰ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 153 (2501-2511).

¹⁴¹ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 181 (2964-2973).

¹⁴² Cameron, “Chivalry and Warfare in Barbour's *Bruce*,” in *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France*, 29.

Barbour appropriates the chanson vocabulary of the non-Christian Saracen and applies it to his English antagonists while exaggerating the holiness of the Scots. In doing so, Barbour elevates the Scottish cause from a dispute between nobles over land to a liberation of Scotland, which stands in for the holy land, justifying the un-chivalric violence used against their enemies. Barbour first introduces Edward I as cruel tyrant who greedily seizes the opportunity to claim Scotland. When the barons first called upon Edward I to arbitrate the Scottish succession, the English king “was then in the Haly Land/ On Saraceny's warrayand” (was then in the Holy Land waging war against the Saracens).¹⁴³ While this might serve as a positive characterization of Edward I as a crusader, Barbour claims that Edward I, after receiving the message from the Scottish barons, he immediately gave up crusading and returned to England to settle the succession.¹⁴⁴ In Barbour's depiction, Edward I is far too eager to satisfy his greed and gain lordship of Scotland, as he quickly abandons the failing crusade.

After removing Balliol from the throne, Edward I proceeded to replace Scottish office holders with Englishmen. According to Barbour, these men were “wykkyt and covetous...hawtane and dispitous” (wicked and covetous...haughty and cruel) and claims that the people of Scotland suffered under such cruel English governance, that the Englishmen would rape Scottish women, steal property, and hastily hang anyone they pleased.¹⁴⁵ Barbour continues to characterize the English lordship of Scotland in this manner, but saves his most damning condemnation of Edward I for the English king's death, as he succumbed to illness while traveling with a large military force to personally wage war against Bruce in Scotland. In Barbour's account, the sickly king discovers that he is resting in a town referred to as “Burch-in-the-sand” and realizes his death is at hand

¹⁴³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 53 (I. 139-140).

¹⁴⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 53 (I. 141-144).

¹⁴⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 55-57 (I. 195-196).

because he “wend never to thole the payne/ Of deid till I throu mekill mayn/ The burch of Jerusalem had tane” (thought I would never endure the pain of death until I had taken the burg of Jerusalem through much strength).¹⁴⁶ Thus Edward I’s death in a burg in England, not in the burg of Jerusalem, foils his plans of gaining glory in a crusade and denies him the penance such an endeavor could have brought. Barbour condemns Edward I for coveting certainty “Off that at nane may certain be” (of that which none may be certain of) and accuses Edward I of seeking the details of his future and getting such a duplicitous assurance that he would die in a burgh from a malicious spirit.¹⁴⁷ He then includes a moralizing aside on the wickedness of summoning demons that only deceive the humans who conjure them. Barbour even includes a story of the French count Ferrand’s mother using necromancy to try and determine the fate of her son in an upcoming battle, through which she was deceived.¹⁴⁸ Before Edward I’s death, Barbour claims that he managed to have some of Bruce’s men which were captured at Kildrummy hanged and drawn without mercy. Upon the demise of the English king, Barbour rails that Edward I’s rumored necromancy and this final act of cruelty are solemn stains upon his soul. How could such a man trust God to show him mercy after death, Barbour asks, if he “had na mercy” (had no mercy) in his last living moments?¹⁴⁹

While establishing the evil of the English, Barbour Christianizes the Scottish cause, turning Scotland into a holy land for which knights could receive penance when dying to reclaim it. Barbour claims that Bruce and Douglas were able to overcome the enemies that outnumbered them because “God that maist is off all mycht/ Preservyt thaim in his forsycht/ To veng the harme and the contrer/ At that fele folk and pautener/ Dyd till sympill folk and worthy/ That couth nocht help thaim self.” (God who is all powerful preserved them in his foresight to avenge the harm and the

¹⁴⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 161 (IV. 207-209).

¹⁴⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 161 (IV. 217, 219-221).

¹⁴⁸ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 163-165 (IV. 238-306).

¹⁴⁹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 167 (IV. 327-331).

opposition that many cruel people did to simple worthy folk who could not help themselves).¹⁵⁰ With this declaration, Barbour frames the rest of the battles that follow as a war in which divine providence intervened on behalf of the Scots and did so because Christian “sympill folk” were facing persecution. When the war actually begins, Bruce assures his men “That he that deis for his cuntre/ Sall herbryit intill hevyn be” (that he that dies for his country shall be sheltered in heaven).¹⁵¹ This assurance echoes the declaration made by Archbishop Turpin to the Franks fighting Saracens and an actual message preached by the Bishop of Moray in 1306.¹⁵² Barbour would continue to maintain the holiness of the Scottish cause, as he attributes the successful taking of Edinburgh castle by the Scots to a prophecy made by the Scottish St. Margaret and, before the famous battle at Bannockburn, has Bruce assuring his men that “we haf the rycht” (we have the right) to retake Scotland by massacring their English enemies and that “for the rycht ay God will fycht” (for the right God will always fight).¹⁵³

Beyond merely representing the Scottish cause as holy, Barbour directly connects his protagonists to past and present crusades. In the only direct mention of a *chanson de geste* in *The Bruce*, Barbour has Bruce recite the epic of Oliver (one of Charlemagne’s closest vassals) and Fierabras (the Saracen knight that Oliver defeats) from the Charlemagne cycle, to encourage his weary men as they make their retreat to the isles.¹⁵⁴ This allusion elevates their pathetic circumstances by connecting the Scots, fleeing after a series of defeats to take shelter in the isles, to the besieged Franks in the Fierabras *chanson* who are eventually saved by Charlemagne. This allusion also strengthens the connection of *The Bruce* to the *chansons de geste*, as Hardman and

¹⁵⁰ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 69 (I.459-464).

¹⁵¹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 99 (II. 343-344).

¹⁵² See Duncan, *The Bruce*, 98, note 344.

¹⁵³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 399 (X. 734-760) and 461 (234-235).

¹⁵⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 133-135 (III. 435-466).

Ailes note that Barbour's summary of the Fierabras story closely reflects an Anglo-Norman chanson version of the text, not the English romance version that would be produced later in the fifteenth century.¹⁵⁵

Later, Barbour connects *The Bruce* to the contemporary crusade in Spain. On his deathbed, Barbour's Bruce claims he had wanted to gain penance for the destruction of the wars by joining a crusade against God's enemies. Now, however, that he is dying and his body is unable to perform such a task, to "Fullfill that he hart gan devis/ I wald the hart war thidder sent/ Quharin consavyt wes that entent" (fulfill what the heart planned I would that the heart wherein that plan was conceived was sent to that place).¹⁵⁶ Douglas was chosen for the task and fulfills his king's last wishes, carrying Bruce's heart into battle in Spain, where he also met his end. After Douglas's death, Barbour recalls that Bruce's heart was brought back to Scotland and that Thomas Randolph, Guardian of Scotland during part of David II's minority, had it buried at Melrose, separate from Bruce's body, which was buried at Dunfermline.¹⁵⁷ With this final connection to the crusades, Bruce is commemorated in death in the exact same way the Frankish martyrs of the *Chanson de Roland* were: "The Emperor had Roland's body prepared for burial,/ Oliver too, and Archbishop Turpin./ He had them all opened before him,/ And all their hearts gathered up in a silk cloth,/ They[the hearts] are placed inside a white marble casket."¹⁵⁸ Thus, Bruce's heart is removed with reverence and carried home separately from his body just as the hearts of Roland, Oliver, and Turpin were.

¹⁵⁵ Hardman and Ailes, *The Legend of Charlemagne in Medieval England*, 131 see note 47.

¹⁵⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 753 (XX. 188-190).

¹⁵⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 773 (XX. 601-611) and 757 (XX. 294-303).

¹⁵⁸ Brault, trans., *The Song of Roland*, 181 (213. 2962-2966).

In the Chronicles

In his account of the wars, Gray does corroborate some of Barbour's condemnation of the English. He claims that Bruce was able to re-take so much land "mostly because of the bad government of the king's ministers, who governed too harshly, for their personal profit."¹⁵⁹ He does not, however, demonize the English king or the English knights (which would have included his father) to the extent that Barbour does, and he makes no mention of fanciful rumors of necromancy. In Fordun's characterization of the English, his account of the English occupation is far more similar to Barbour's. He describes the English occupiers "ruthlessly harrying the Scots in sundry and manifold ways, by insults, stripes and slaughter, under the awful yoke of slavery."¹⁶⁰ Noting Edward I's death at "Burgh-upon-Sands," Fordun repeats his condemnation of the English king's "wickedness" and "cruelty," even though he also does not mention any necromancy.¹⁶¹ Neither of these chronicles includes Bruce's declaration of the Scottish cause as a holy one.

In addition, while these chroniclers acknowledge the journey Bruce's heart made on crusade after his death, their depiction of Bruce's pious desire to wage holy war varies. Gray only mentions the Douglas's crusade to Spain with the king's heart briefly. While discussing Archibald Douglas, Gray identifies him as the "son of James de Douglas (who died on the frontier of Grenada against the Saracens, having undertaken this pilgrimage with the heart of Robert de Bruce their king, who had had this arranged as he was dying."¹⁶²

Where he was mostly silent on the Scottish wars that occurred from 1306-1329, French chronicler Jean le Bel does mention the death of Scotland's king and the subsequent pilgrimage of his heart to Spain. Composed around 1357-1360, le Bel recounts the wars in France, England, and

¹⁵⁹ Gray, *Scanalcronica*, 71.

¹⁶⁰ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 330.

¹⁶¹ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 336.

¹⁶² Gray, *Scanalcronica*, 117.

Scotland from 1326.¹⁶³ Le Bel's account of Bruce's death and heartfelt request is strikingly similar to that of Barbour's. In le Bel's retelling, Bruce tells the assembled nobles that he had planned to fight the enemies of Christ after reclaiming Scotland but is now unable to do so because of his sickness. Le Bel even has Bruce word his request in a manner nearly identical to Barbour's narration: "Since my body cannot go and achieve what my heart so desired, I wish to send that heart in the body's place to accomplish my desire and pledge."¹⁶⁴ The resemblance between le Bel and Barbour's accounts strengthens the assumption that both were referencing the same source and may indicate that a French chronicler like le Bel was more interested in the crusading of Scottish knights than the English Gray, who also supposedly had access to the now lost chronicle of Bruce's life. On the other hand, Fordun's account of Bruce's death does not include his desire for crusade or his heart, neither in Scotland nor in Spain.¹⁶⁵ Barbour then, in ending his story with the piety of Bruce and Douglas, is intentionally concluding *The Bruce* in a manner that echoes the crusading ethos of the chansons and sacralizes the Scottish protagonists in a manner not found in contemporary chronicles.

In Context

Drawing upon the chanson crusading ethos, demonizing the English and sacralizing the Scots, Barbour composed and directed *The Bruce* to a Scottish audience that had grown uncomfortably close to and lost more land to their southern neighbors. Boardman notes that during his eleven-year long captivity in England, David II was accused of developing a close relationship with the English king Edward III and of adapting to the English culture. In fact, in the 1360s David II discussed naming Edward III's son as heir to the Scottish throne, thereby disinheriting the young

¹⁶³ Jean Le Bel . *The True Chronicles of Jean Le Bel : 1290-1360*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press 2011), 21.

¹⁶⁴ Le Bel , *The True Chronicles of Jean Le Bel* , 52.

¹⁶⁵ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 345-346.

Robert II.¹⁶⁶ David II also considered an offer from Edward II to be released from captivity if he would pay homage to the English king and restore the English lands lost to Bruce before rejecting the offer in 1351.¹⁶⁷ As a result of these threats to Scottish sovereignty, Robert II's reign featured political maneuvers that directly attacked this new closeness between Scotland and England. Robert II renewed the auld alliance with France (originally established in 1295 and renewed by Robert I in 1326) in 1371 and allied Scotland with the French Pope Clement VII during the Great Schism, while England sided with the Roman Pope Urban VI.¹⁶⁸ Robert II's attempts to gain distance from England were not unwarranted, as, by the 1370s, England had resumed occupation of many influential border territories. This encroaching English menace caused significant anxiety for the Scottish nobility, especially those barons whose land was being occupied by English lords.¹⁶⁹ Andrew Barrell noted that, "While it was important not to provoke large-scale English retaliation by attacking major strongholds... there was intermittent warfare on the border for much of the second half of Robert's [II] reign."¹⁷⁰

Written in this context, Barbour's characterization of the English as a religious Other, of Scots as crusaders, and of Scotland as a God-favored holy land in *The Bruce* is a poetic effort to reaffirm the English as an enemy amongst Scottish nobles and instill in them the hostility necessary to defend against the ongoing threat at the border of their land as if it were holy. Barbour's more direct connections of Bruce to the crusades both heightened this tension and elevated the uncertain reputation of Robert I. As Sonja Cameron noted, removing the heart from the deceased was not unheard of in late medieval Europe, and Robert I's father and grandfather has also gone on crusade.

¹⁶⁶ Boardman, "Robert II (1371-1390)," in *Scottish Kingship*, 78.

¹⁶⁷ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 251.

¹⁶⁸ Boardman, "Robert II (1371-1390)," in *Scottish Kingship*, 79.

¹⁶⁹ Barrell, *Medieval Scotland*, 142.

¹⁷⁰ Barrell, *Medieval Scotland*, 142.

Considering both his family legacy and his actions in the wars, Robert I's apparent desire to go on crusade was warranted: "He may have felt the burden of his repeated excommunications and of the killings he had both committed and authorized. Pilgrimage and crusade were accepted methods of atoning for sin... Moreover, a crusade (however personal) was guaranteed international acclaim."¹⁷¹ Therefore, the crusading ethos of the chansons de geste appears in *The Bruce* as a commemoration of past Scottish heroes as crusaders and a call to arms for contemporary Scots to follow in the footsteps of their forbearers.

Conclusion

While *The Bruce* is largely a "romansy," the influence of the chansons de geste gave Barbour the power and authority to seize the image of Robert I and mold it into that of a chivalrous king worthy of an epic elegy. Turning from the tragedy of Robert I's death to the identity of the still-living King Robert, Barbour celebrated the survival of Bruce's kingship and glorified the presence of Robert I's blood in Robert II's veins. Finally, Barbour wrote to galvanize a dejected Scottish nobility, facing a renewed threat and recovering from recent losses, to meet their enemies at the border with the devotion of a crusader. Barbour, in drawing on the literary influence of the chansons de geste, drew upon centuries of medieval concepts of Christian nationhood and chivalry, concepts through which the nobility of late medieval Scotland had been raised to comprehend their disordered world. Responding to the crisis of late medieval Scotland with this conservative ideology. Barbour's Robert I displayed the mettle of a great feudal ruler in the same moment that the chivalrous values and societal structure essential for the feudal hierarchy that he embodied were beginning to crumble in Western Europe.

¹⁷¹ Sonja Cameron, "Sir James Douglas, Spain, and the Holy Land," in *Freedom and Authority: Scotland c.1050-1650*, eds. Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn (Great Britain: Tuckwell Press 2000), 108.

The effects of Stewart propaganda, through writers like Barbour, is palpable in the lasting hostility between England and Scotland. Before the wars of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Anglo-Scottish border was far more flexible, characterized by a mixed English and Scottish aristocratic community that held business, land, and family ties in both nations.¹⁷² Following the wars and the extensive work of the Bruce-Stewart dynasty, however, the Anglo-Scottish border became a harsh dividing wall between enemies: by the mid-fifteenth century, Pope Pius II could confidently claim that “nothing pleases the Scots more than abuse of the English.”¹⁷³

Furthermore, Barbour’s use of *chanson* motifs and their cultural implications to glorify Bruce’s victory solidified the close political relationship between Scotland and France during this period. During the initial period of warfare, before Bruce’s campaign, the guardians of Scotland hastily made an alliance with king Phillip IV of France against England; it would be renewed over the following decades and became in retrospect the “Auld Alliance.”¹⁷⁴ This alliance would prove crucial in later years during periods of crisis. For example, when David II was coronated in 1331 at only the age of seven, he was harbored in France from 1334-1341 to protect the Bruce dynasty from Balliol’s English-backed incursion.¹⁷⁵ Thus cultural works like Barbour’s demonstrated the strength of a Scottish-French alliance that was forged by a mutual antagonism towards England. Barbour wrote *The Bruce* and molded Robert I into an epic hero as the Anglo-Scottish wars slowly ended and the Anglo-French wars were just beginning.

Finally, Barbour’s depiction of a Charlamagne-esque Bruce created a heroic legacy of Robert I that echoed throughout Europe. For example, a “fourteenth century Florentine Giovanni Villani recorded that he had heard of the ‘valente’ Robert Bruce and knew of the ‘great war and

¹⁷² Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 143-144.

¹⁷³ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 7.

¹⁷⁴ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 19.

¹⁷⁵ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 29-30.

battles which he fought.”¹⁷⁶ Bruce, it seems, despite the slander of English chroniclers, had entered the European imagination as a valiant warrior. The conventional canon of European literature recognized nine “worthies” from biblical, classical, and early medieval history that exemplified the chivalric values of the courtly nobility: the biblical Joshua, Judas Maccabee, King David, Hector of Troy, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, King Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godfrey de Bouillon. By the fifteenth century, however, some Scottish and European scribes were expanding that list, as a 1380s manuscript from Sweetheart Abbey, the 1438 *Buik of Alexander*, and the 1440 *Ballet of the Nine Nobles* all listed Robert I as the tenth worthy.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Giovanni Villani quoted in Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 205.

¹⁷⁷ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 204-205.

CHAPTER II

Introduction

The Bruce, and Barbour's conception of historical narrative, bears investigation with another neighboring literary tradition: the Icelandic family sagas. Scotland was closely connected with their Scandinavian neighbors for over four centuries, and Norwegian control over Scotland's isles only ended around twenty years before the Anglo-Scottish wars. A century before Barbour was compiling *The Bruce*, medieval Icelanders were shaping and memorializing their own identity and culture through the creation of sagas. The word saga stems from the Old-Norse verb *segja*, "to say, tell:" thus Norse sagas are long prose narrative stories written in Old Norse and originated in a traditionally oral culture.¹⁷⁸ The vast majority of sagas name no author and, since they were heavily influenced by previous and concurrent oral traditions, were most likely read aloud to a wide audience.¹⁷⁹

Icelandic family sagas were set during the period of early settlement of Iceland and establishment of legislative authority by Norwegians through the years of Christian conversion there, around 870 through 1030.¹⁸⁰ These sagas recall events from the late ninth through the early eleventh centuries, but were not written until the thirteenth century, most likely under the direction of prominent church and family leaders interested in preserving their ancestral histories.¹⁸¹ The Icelandic family sagas not only record the early social and political setting of medieval Iceland, but served as "an exploration of personal and social relations – of how neighbors form alliances or foster lethal feuds; of how families develop into invincible kin groups through the generations, or

¹⁷⁸ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010), 15.

¹⁷⁹ Clunies Ross, "What is an Old Norse Icelandic Saga," in *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*.

¹⁸⁰ Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing. 2004), 23.

¹⁸¹ O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, 23.

fragment under the pressures of life in Iceland.”¹⁸² The Icelandic family sagas “occupied a grey area between fact and fiction,” as they included well-documented historical events molded into a cohesive literary narrative under the craftsmanship of an unnamed author.¹⁸³ Medieval Scots would have been familiar with the histories of these Icelanders and Norwegians who populated the sagas, as they shared a close physical and cultural proximity with the Norse world. In fact, many of the naval adventures in the sagas recounted the exploits of medieval Scandinavians on the shores of Scotland.

Long before Scottish kings and lords were preoccupied with English interference, the biggest influence on and threat to sovereignty in medieval Scotland was Scandinavians raiding and settling across the British Isles. Scotland and the surrounding isles were among the long list of locales to come under Norse influence during the “Viking Age” of 800 to 1050 CE, in which seafaring Scandinavians traded and raided across the Northern Atlantic. During this Viking age, Scandinavians settled in parts of the Hebrides, the northwestern isles of Shetland and Orkney, and northeastern Scotland.¹⁸⁴ Even with the end of the Viking age, however, lands on the periphery of medieval Scotland remained within the Scandinavian world. It was not until the Treaty of Perth in 1266 that Scottish King Alexander III would gain control over the Hebrides after the death of Norwegian king Haakon IV in 1263.¹⁸⁵

Indeed, while the Scots no longer faced Scandinavians in direct battle over their domain, their royal and noble families were closely related. Norwegian royalty was also intimately involved with the crisis of succession that led to Scotland’s wars with England in the first place. Seeking to solidify the peace established in 1266, Alexander III arranged for the marriage of his daughter

¹⁸² O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, 23.

¹⁸³ Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 23.

¹⁸⁴ Barrell, *Medieval Scotland*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ Barrell, *Medieval Scotland*, 85.

Margaret to King Erik II of Norway.¹⁸⁶ Their daughter, Margaret Maid of Norway, was the legal heir to the Scottish throne after the death of Alexander III in 1286.¹⁸⁷ Eric II, however, was reluctant to send his daughter to Scotland, which appeared unstable under the leadership of the selected guardians. By 1289, complicated negotiations between the Scottish guardians, Eric II, and Edward I had led to the planned marriage between young Margaret and the English Edward I's son, the future Edward II. Erik II eventually sent the Maid of Norway to meet with Scottish and English envoys not on the Scottish mainland, but on the isle of Orkney, which was still Norwegian territory.¹⁸⁸ It was only after Margaret's death there in September 1290 that the "Great Cause" preceding the Wars of Independence began in earnest.¹⁸⁹ Furthermore, in 1292, Erik II submitted his own claim to the Scottish throne, as the father of the deceased heir Margaret, before the claims of Bruce and Balliol emerged as the strongest.¹⁹⁰ Following Erik II's loss, the Norwegians favored Bruce's claim over Balliol's. Continuing Norwegian support for Bruce is evident from the fact that Earl Magnus V of Orkney's seal appeared on the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, the famous letter sent by Robert I and his supporters to Pope John XXII seeking papal recognition of an independent Scottish realm. This is not surprising as the Earls of Orkney also owed homage to the king of Scots for their lands in Caithness.¹⁹¹

Contention between kings of Scots and Norwegians continued throughout Scotland's wars with England and following. The most common setting of contention was the northern territory of the Scottish mainland, Caithness, and these northern isles. This presented a serious dilemma for the Angus and Sinclair earls of Orkney, Scottish families who held both Orkney under the kings

¹⁸⁶ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 140.

¹⁸⁷ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 158-160.

¹⁸⁸ Barbara E. Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms: Orkney and Caithness from AD 870 to 1470*. (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2013), 308.

¹⁸⁹ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 162-165.

¹⁹⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 309.

¹⁹¹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 309-310, 317.

of Norway and Caithness under the kings of Scotland. Describing the peculiarity of the situation, Barbra Crawford explained that “this situation of double allegiance to two different kings was completely anomalous in the world of late medieval nation states when the ambitious Scottish kings regarded it as a matter of national pride that they should control the rich islands off their northern coasts.”¹⁹² Earl Magnus III of Orkney and Caithness faced the complicated nature of this dilemma during the 1260s war in the Hebrides, as he was technically subservient to both Alexander III and Hakon Hakonsson, yet could not serve them both in battle.¹⁹³ Even though the earldom of Caithness was surrendered to the Scottish crown in 1375, the year Barbour finished writing *The Bruce*, rivalry at this northern border continued beyond Barbour’s time.¹⁹⁴ Finally, the northeastern isles would not become officially part of Scotland for another century: Orkney in 1468, and the Shetlands in 1469.¹⁹⁵

Historians of medieval Scotland and Scandinavia generally agree that, despite the paucity of textual evidence, this close political relationship resulted in a close cultural relationship. As Heather O’Donoghue explained, the similarities between the old English and Norse languages indicates “a shared literary and cultural heritage.”¹⁹⁶ Christopher Fee similarly revealed this shared cultural heritage in his analysis of Scandinavian legal legacies in the British Isles.¹⁹⁷ Given such

¹⁹² Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 332.

¹⁹³ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 392.

¹⁹⁴ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 392.

¹⁹⁵ Barrell, *Medieval Scotland*, 411.

¹⁹⁶ O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, 137. It is also crucial to consider that nature of medieval oral culture that existed before and concurrent with the rise of written literature. Even though the textual evidence of Norse influence in English literature is “elusive,” the reality of medieval popular culture means “the transference of story-matter from one community to the other – especially in the centuries following the first settlements – is so likely as to be almost inevitable.” O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, 144.

¹⁹⁷ Building on previous scholarly work establishing the central importance of legal thought and institutions in medieval Scandinavia, Fee argued that such influence was evident also in the greater area of the “Scandinavian Diaspora” throughout the North Atlantic Examining place names from early medieval Iceland, Ireland, and the Scottish Isles, particularly the Isle of Man, Fee identified “the abiding importance of law as a characteristic feature of Norse society throughout the Scandinavian colonies of the Viking Age,” demonstrating “the flexibility, resilience, and adaptability of such Norse institutions.” Christopher Richard Fee, and Benjamin Hudson, “Með Lögum Skal Land Vort Byggja (With Law Shall the Land Be Built): Law as a Defining Characteristic of Norse Society in Saga

evidence of Scandinavian legal organization in the Scottish Isles, we can assume that legal thought was not the only intellectual tradition these Norse travelers introduced to Scottish culture.

A crucial part of this shared cultural and literary tradition, the Icelandic sagas, like the Icelanders themselves, were present in the medieval Scottish periphery and should contribute to analysis of the cultural and literary production there. One of the best examples of this literary influence reaching Scotland is the *Orkneyinga*, a saga detailing the history of the Norse earls of the Orkneys and their exploits in the rest of the isles and the Scottish mainland itself.¹⁹⁸ Given such a close proximity, it is highly unlikely that medieval Scots were unfamiliar with either the content or the thematic structure of the sagas.

The Icelandic family sagas are not merely part of the cultural milieu informing Scotland and Scottish history, but important as possible influence on Barbour's *Bruce* in their political and literary aims. As recountings of Icelandic families, Icelandic sagas inhabited a murky space between past and re-creation of the past that concerns literary critics and historians of medieval histories.¹⁹⁹ As narrative conceptions of history, Icelandic sagas created an image of Icelandic national identity and asserted Icelandic independence in the face of Norwegian overlordship.

First, crucial to the cultural significance of the Icelandic sagas is that they detailed the history of specific families whose ancestors had founded some of the initial settlements in Iceland and remained prominent there. Thus the subjects of these sagas were families whose ancestors were either the authors themselves or who compromised the audience.²⁰⁰ Commenting on the origin of these sagas, O'Donoghue notes that "the original literary impetus must surely be

Conflicts and Assembly Sites throughout the Scandinavian North Atlantic," in *Studies in the Medieval Atlantic*, 123–42 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2012), 123, 138.

¹⁹⁸ Joseph Anderson, ed. *The Orkneyinga Saga*, translated by Gilbert Goudie, Jon Hjaltalin, and Gilbert Goudie (Edinburgh: James Thin. 1977).

¹⁹⁹ Árman Jakobson, "Tradition and the Individual Talent: The 'Historical Figure' in the Medieval Sagas, A Case Study" in *Viator* 45 (3)2014: 101–24.

²⁰⁰ Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 90-91.

associated with the settlement of a new land, and the subsequent need – emotional and political – to inscribe in literary form a myth of origins and a set of national traditions: a textual foundation for a new nation.”²⁰¹ Furthermore, the temporal context of the composition of the Icelandic sagas points to a sense of political and cultural unrest during the thirteenth century. As explained by Robert Cook, the majority of these Icelandic sagas were written after Iceland had been brought under Norwegian rule in 1262, ending almost four centuries of independent rule.

Whether written before 1262 or after... the sagas were written partly out of a need to affirm identity, both personal and national, with the past, a time when their ancestors fled Norwegian tyranny – rather than succumb to it – and built up a new society free of monarchical rule and governed by laws and institutions that functioned with dignity, if not without bloodshed.²⁰²

As Norway exerted dominion over Iceland in the thirteenth century, Icelanders losing their grip on political independence reacted with the creation of the sagas to assert their national identity and sovereignty, priding themselves on an imagined tradition of honorable legal institutions and arbitrations.²⁰³ The noble families of late medieval Scotland, facing the threat of English rule and loss of sovereignty, thus shared the cultural and political needs of medieval Icelanders to lay a foundation for an independent national identity.

In this chapter, I explore the probability that Barbour’s construction of *The Bruce* was influenced by the tradition of Norse saga literature, particularly the tradition of Icelandic family sagas. Using *Njal’s Saga* as a point of comparison, I will explain how Barbour’s narrative displayed the saga theme of just legal arbitration and compromise to simplify the complicated disputes at the heart of the Scottish wars. I will also explain how the saga theme of blood-feuding contextualized the problematic conflict not between Scotland and England but amongst a divided

²⁰¹ O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction*, 133.

²⁰² Cook, “Introduction,” in *Njal’s Saga*, xiii.

²⁰³ Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 54.

Scottish nobility. In Barbour's time these themes justified the questionable Bruce-Stewart claim to the throne and the continuing internal conflict amongst Scottish families to both other Scots and to their Norwegian neighbors.

Njal's Saga

The most famous, and the longest, of the Icelandic family sagas is *Njal's Saga*, often called simply *Njala*.²⁰⁴ Built on written sources and oral traditions, *Njala* was composed around 1280 by an unnamed Icelander and relates the history of a group of Icelandic families in the tenth and early eleventh centuries.²⁰⁵ While a staggering number of Icelanders are referred to throughout the saga, at the heart of the narrative are the lives and tragic demise of two protagonists: Gunnar Hamundarson of Hlidarendi, known for his prowess in battle, and Njal Thorgeirsson of Bergthorshvol, renowned for his legal wisdom. Despite their mutual desire for peace amongst their neighbors, both Gunnar and Njal are swept up into feuds by the machinations of their relatives and are unable to quell the resulting violence, leading to the death of each at their homes. Like *The Bruce*, *Njala* is also a complex combination of history and authorial artistry, mixing both the recollection of historical events as from oral tradition and the desires of an author and cultural milieu to display their identity through literary endeavors.²⁰⁶ *Njala*, often referred to by literary scholars and historians as the best-crafted model of Icelandic saga literature, was also popular in the central middle ages. William Miller notes that twenty-one vellum copies survive from the years

²⁰⁴ Robert Cook, "Introduction," in *Njal's Saga*, trans. Robert Cook, vii – xxxiii (London: Penguin Books 2001). vii, viii.

²⁰⁵ Cook, "Introduction," in *Njal's Saga*.; William Ian Miller, "*Why Is Your Axe Bloody?*" *A Reading of Njal's Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2014), 1.

²⁰⁶ "It is impossible to disentangle the four components in the saga – authentic history, the inventions of oral tradition, written sources and the contribution of the thirteenth-century author – but the saga shows so many signs of careful artistry that one is inclined to believe in a master craftsman at the final stage." Cook, "Introduction," in *Njal's Saga*, xiv.

1300 to 1600, not including later print copies.²⁰⁷ It is impossible to know if Barbour was familiar with *Njala* specifically, but, given its popularity, its display of the themes central to Icelandic sagas, and the previously discussed evidence of Scottish familiarity with Norse culture, *Njala* provides a useful point of comparison for exploring the influence of saga literature on *The Bruce*.

Legal Assemblies

One of the crucial features of a unified Norse identity in both Iceland and Scandinavia more broadly was “law and its practice in local and national assemblies.”²⁰⁸ Given the social tensions at the heart of Icelandic sagas, legal assemblies frequently appear as a prominent theme. This is logical; given the role of the sagas in memorializing the development of Iceland, the narratives detailed the history of lawsuits that built the structure of Icelandic communities.²⁰⁹ The Althing, the “national parliament” held annually, often serves as the setting for major points of conflict between the various heroes, villains, and families of the sagas.²¹⁰ This and other Thing meetings throughout the sagas might serve as an opportunity for peaceful arbitration, tense adjudication, or the outbreak of violence. As discussed above, historians like Christopher Fee have demonstrated both the cultural significance of successful legal assemblies in Scandinavia and the influence of this mentality throughout the lands colonized during the Viking age, including coastal Scotland and much of the isles. Whether at a Thing or merely discussed between neighbors, the law and legal wisdom was an integral part of Icelandic identity and thus a crucial theme that permeates the Icelandic sagas.

²⁰⁷ William Ian Miller, “*Why Is Your Axe Bloody?*” *A Reading of Njal’s Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

²⁰⁸ Fee, “Með Lögum Skal Land Vort Byggja (With Law Shall the Land Be Built),” 123.

²⁰⁹ Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 90.

²¹⁰ O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction*, 24.

In *Njala*

Much of the conflict in the *Njala* is centered on killings and offenses, either to be settled by legal assemblies or violence. The Icelandic tradition of legal assemblies is emphasized in *Njala* through its detailed recounting of various Thing meetings and the characterization of its protagonists Njal and Gunnar, who consistently favor negotiation over bloodshed and embody the principal that law is crucial to maintaining peace. Cook claimed that *Njala* is preoccupied with legal procedure “more than any other family saga.”²¹¹ Even if the content is not directly concerned with the law, many crucial episodes occur at the Althing, the major legal gathering in Iceland.²¹² This motif is exemplified in one of the more famous quotes from *Njala*: “with law our land shall rise, but it will perish with lawlessness.”²¹³

Njal, the titular protagonist who proclaims the above statement, is introduced with the customary list of his parents, their relatives, where he held property, and his appearance, but the author also lauds Njal for being, “so well versed in the law that he had no equal... and whatever course he counseled turned out well.”²¹⁴ The author praises Njal for using this legal expertise to help those around him, calling him “sound of advice and well-intentioned... He was modest and noble-spirited... and he solved the problems of whoever turned to him.”²¹⁵

Gunnar, the other protagonist of the *Njala*, while not a legal expert, gains honor in his community for handling legal assemblies peacefully. For example, after a series of thefts and insults are exchanged between their two households, a feud between Gunnar and Otkel ends in bloodshed when Otkel and seven of his allies attack Gunnar and his brother Kolskegg at the Ranga

²¹¹ Cook, “Introduction,” *Njal’s Saga*, xxiii

²¹² Cook, “Introduction,” *Njal’s Saga*, xxiv

²¹³ Robert Cook, trans. *Njal’s Saga*. (London: Penguin Books 2001), 117 (Bk. 70).

²¹⁴ Cook, trans. *Njal’s Saga*, 35 (20).

²¹⁵ Cook, trans. *Njal’s Saga*, 35 (20).

River. When Gunnar and Kolskegg kill all eight attackers and are charged with homicide at the Thing, Gunnar, following the counsel of his friend Njal, chooses not to pursue a full charge of outlawry against his accusers. Such a charge would lead to “a hard-fought dispute” and possibly more violence. Instead he agrees to abide by the settlement of six chosen arbitrators.²¹⁶ Despite being known for his prowess in battle and his frustration at the current situation, Gunnar often favors peaceful settlement over more conflict: “I have always been glad to settle peacefully.”²¹⁷ Following the successful settlement, Gunnar left the Thing, “thanked men for their support and gave gifts to many and earned much honor from all this.”²¹⁸ Gunnar maintains his preference for peace through another feud comprising chapters fifty seven through sixty six, in which bad blood following a horse race leads to yet another battle in which Gunnar and his brothers kill fourteen of their attackers. Gunnar, even though he has lost his brother Hrut in the fight, once again agrees to a peaceful legal settlement at the Thing and “earned great honor from all this and everyone agreed that he had no equal in the South Quarter.”²¹⁹

The famous tragedy of the saga is also proceeded by legal drama as, after the killing of Thorgeir by Njal’s sons, the matter is brought for judgement by Flosi Thordarson at the Thing. The author spends three chapters detailing the gathering of supporters, naming of witnesses, calls for peaceful discussion, and the gathering of two hundred ounces of silver to settle the compensation allotted to the Njalssons, only for the entire settlement to fall apart when Skarphedin Njalsson calls Flosi “the sweetheart of the troll at Svinafell.”²²⁰ This case, painstakingly detailed

²¹⁶ Cook, trans. *Njal’s Saga*, 97 (56).

²¹⁷ Cook, trans. *Njal’s Saga*, 97 (56).

²¹⁸ Cook, trans. *Njal’s Saga*, 97 (56).

²¹⁹ Cook, trans. *Njal’s Saga*, 112 (66).

²²⁰ Cook, trans. *Njal’s Saga*, 210 (123).

and then derailed by petty slander, becomes only more frustrating as it adds fuel to the feud that will lead to the burning of Njal and his entire family by Flosi and his allies.

Even after the tragic burning, legal assemblies continues to dominate the saga. Chapters 141 through 144 consist entirely of the legal explanations and machinations occurring at the Althing at which Mord Valgardsson brings charges against Flosi and his party for the slaughter and burning of the Njalssons. Tensions builds as the legal experts of each group, Thorhall on the side of Mord and Eyjolf on the side of Flosi, call out specific, arbitrary flaws in the opposing arguments. After this long, tense, and exhausting back and forth, Thorhall finally loses his temper, comes to the Law Rock, and throws his spear through one of Flosi's kinsmen, sparking a battle that encompasses the entire Althing.²²¹ Only after this episode of bloodshed are all the surviving parties able to gather the next day and decide on a settlement for both the burning of the Njalssons and the slaughter of the day before.²²²

In *The Bruce*

Barbour's Robert I is too proficient a warrior to achieve the status of the wise and considerate neighbor embodied by Njal. However, Gunnar, an honorable man in his community willing to submit to legal assemblies and pay compensation despite his military prowess and painfully-earned right to vengeance, presents an admirable figure which Barbour echoes in his depiction of Bruce.

The theme of legal assemblies dominates the exposition of *The Bruce*, as a controversial arbitration of the Scottish royal succession is what leads to war with England. Following a brief introduction assuring his audience of the excitement and veracity of his poem, Barbour begins Bruce's story by detailing the complicated legal situation following the death of Scottish King

²²¹ Cook, trans. *Njal's Saga*, 270-274 (145).

²²² Cook, trans. *Njal's Saga*, 276 (145).

Alexander III. Since Alexander III had no direct heirs, the selected Guardians from the Scottish nobility assembled to choose the closest relation to the deceased king from amongst the various claimants. As Barbour tells the story, fierce debate arose concerning the two major claimants, John Balliol and Robert Bruce,²²³ and the legal intricacies of their relationships to the royal family. Those that supported Balliol's claim did so, "For he wes cummyn off the offspring/ Off hyr that eldest syster was" (For he was related to the offspring of the eldest sister).²²⁴ In opposition, those that supported Bruce "said that he thair king suld be/ That war in als ner degre/ And cummyn war of the neyst male/ And in branch collaterale" (said that he should be their king who was in just as near in degree but related to the nearest male and collateral line).²²⁵ The root of the argument, then, lay in the legal minutia of whether the closest descendant, whether by a male or female relative, should take precedent, or whether the line of a male descendant should take precedence over that of a female. Upon failing to settle this legal debate, the Scottish Guardians called upon Edward I to arbitrate – a decision which led Barbour to declare the Guardians as "Blind folk full off all foly."²²⁶ As previously discussed, this led to Edward's selection of John Balliol, subsequent removal of Balliol, and subjugation of the Scottish crown to that of England.²²⁷

In a manner similar to that of *Njala* and other sagas, the central conflict that dominates *The Bruce* is ignited by a poorly resolved legal assembly. In Barbour's narrative, the failure of the Scottish Guardians to wisely legislate the royal succession is what leads them to look elsewhere and follow guidance from a malicious outside party. Given the legal dispute at the heart of the conflict, telling Bruce's tale in the legal tradition of the Icelandic sagas brings sense to a confusing

²²³ Robert I's grandfather, who Barbour has conflated with Robert I for his narrative.

²²⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 49 (I.50-51). See genealogical chart below on page 122.

²²⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 49 (I. 53-56).

²²⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 51 (I. 91).

²²⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 49-51 (I.69-90).

situation. In the context of sagas like the *Njala*, widespread bloodshed following legal assembly is simpler for audiences to follow and lends authenticity to Bruce's bloody seizure of the throne. If what Njal says of Iceland is true, that "will law this land will rise" then portraying the Scottish wars as an effort to reaffirm Bruce's position as the lawful king foretells prosperity for the kingdom under the rule of his family line.

In the Chronicles

When compared to Barbour's focus on the law in Bruce's tale, the English knight and chronicler Sir Thomas Gray paints a contrasting picture, casting Edward I as the champion of legality. The Scottish chronicler Johannes Fordun, however, agrees with Barbour. He portrays Edward I as scheming against the legal procedure of the "Great Cause," and he adds further genealogical evidence to support Bruce's legal right to the throne.

In the *Scalacronica*, Gray goes into great detail narrating the legal process of the "Great Cause" that led to John Balliol's coronation as king. After providing a long list of all the Scottish kings ending with the death of Alexander III, Gray describes the problem of choosing a successor from the various claimants and their degree of relation to the royal line. "Because of this" Gray explains, "a great argument arose over who should be the king, everyone wishing that his friend should have been it; and because of this, by common assent, the prelates, earls and barons, and the community, sent to King Edward of England."²²⁸ Gray asserts the orderly manner by which Edward I established himself as king over Scotland to settle the issue and says that "All the magnates of Scotland recognized this sovereignty by open declaration, and all those who claimed the realm of Scotland by right, relied entirely on his judgement. They all set their seals to this, in confirmation of what had been agreed."²²⁹ Gray even describes how Edward I sent word "to all

²²⁸ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 31.

²²⁹ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 31.

the universities in Christendom” asking for the opinion of their legal experts before creating a panel of forty men to examine the case, twenty from Scotland and twenty from England.²³⁰ Only with all of this established does Gray’s account explain the argument surrounding Balliol’s and Bruce’s claims before the panel ruled in favor of Balliol.²³¹

Gray’s account of the “Great Cause” thus differs from Barbour’s. Part of this difference lies in the contrasting nature of the texts. Gray composed a historical chronicle of his times while Barbour was, of course, writing a poem, and the task of fitting all of this minutia into proper rhyme and meter would be overly complicated and unnecessary to the movement of the plot. However, their opposing depictions of the process and the motivations of the parties involved reveal deeper thematic differences. In Gray’s account, it is Edward I who seeks fair legal arbitration, as he steps in to quell the greedy chaos of Scottish claimants and even seeks the advice of legal experts before rendering a decision. This contradicts Barbour’s depiction of a malicious Edward I sowing discord and depriving Bruce (who, recall, Barbour has conflated with his grandfather, the original claimant, to heighten the drama) of his rightful place as king of Scotland.

The Scottish chronicler Fordun’s account of the “Great Cause” mirrors Barbour’s narrative in that he focuses solely on the rivalry between John of Balliol and Robert of Bruce.²³² Fordun, however, is able to provide more details about the complications surrounding the dispute:

it was a hard and knotty matter; partly because different people felt differently about those rights, and wavered a good deal; partly because they justly feared the power of the parties, which was great, and greatly to be feared; and partly because they had no superior who could, by his unbending power, carry their award into execution, or make the parties abide by their decision.²³³

²³⁰ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 31-32.

²³¹ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 32.

²³² Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 306 (LXIX).

²³³ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 306-307 (LXX).

Fordun then includes a description similar to Gray's of Edward I's selection of men to adjudicate the matter as an assize court.²³⁴ From this point on Fordun's account opposes Gray's chronicle and more closely matches Barbour's antagonist sentiments towards Edward I. Fordun claims that after hearing that the assize was likely to choose Robert de Bruce, Edward I met with some of his men in private to ask their opinion on this choice. The Bishop of Durham expressed his displeasure by asking a question, "If Robert of Bruce were king of Scotland, where would Edward, king of England be? For this Robert is of the noblest stock of all England, and, with him, the kingdom of Scotland is very strong in itself; and, in times gone by, a great deal of mischief has been wrought to the kings of England by those of Scotland."²³⁵ With this, obviously fictional, observation, Edward I then decided he must make sure the kingdom of Scotland would be held under his lordship. Edward I consequently goes first to Robert Bruce to ask if he would submit to such an arrangement. Robert Bruce, of course, is said by Fordun to have rejected any path to the throne that did not follow the legal proceedings of the assize. Edward I then took his proposal to Balliol, who accepted, after which Edward I had Balliol proclaimed king of Scotland.²³⁶ In case his obvious favoring of Bruce in this account was unclear, Fordun follows the selection of Balliol with an "abridged" aside listing the lineage of the Scottish kings beginning with King Malcom "That the right of John Balliol and Robert of Bruce...might be brought out more clearly...When this has been seen, the right of the aforesaid, who long wrangled for the throne of Scotland, will be more easily and clearly evident."²³⁷

Once again Fordun, like Gray, has the space within his chronicle to include greater detail of the "Great Cause" than Barbour does in his poem. However, while he shares some of Gray's

²³⁴ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 307-308 (LXXI).

²³⁵ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 308 (LXXII).

²³⁶ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 308-309 (LXXII).

²³⁷ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 309 (LXIII).

depiction of the legal process, his portrayal of Edward I as a greedy monarch disregarding the law for his own benefit agrees with Barbour. Fordun's casting of a malicious Edward I and a wronged Robert I also displays some creative invention within his literary endeavor, though his tools are not the same as Barbour's. Beyond simply demonizing Edward I, Fordun ends the "Great Cause" by including a detailed genealogy, contributing the weight of historical veracity to Bruce's entitlement to the throne where Barbour added poetic sentiment.

In Historical Context

The diversions that Barbour makes from the chronicles in his representation of Bruce as dedicated to lawful assemblies masked the complicated history of Bruce's claim to the throne, the years he spent switching allegiances between the Scottish revolt and the English monarchy, and the influence of the Comyns and their connection to the Balliol dynasty. In this atmosphere, Barbour's use of thematic legal drama simplifies the Bruce-Stewart path to the throne and justifies their continued role in the face of recent Balliol resistance.

Barbour's simplistic emphasis on Bruce's legal claim to the Scottish throne takes on greater significance when considered in context of the complicated history of the "Great Cause." Before Robert Bruce of Annandale and John Balliol of Galloway emerged as the main competitors, the search for Alexander III's successor included thirteen claimants.²³⁸ Furthermore, despite Barbour's presentation of both claims as equally valid, Balliol's right to the throne was the most direct through primogeniture, while Bruce's relation through closer male degree was "less straightforward."²³⁹ As discussed in the previous chapter, Barbour had already simplified this entire situation by conflating Robert I with the original claimant, his grandfather Robert Bruce of Annandale. Furthermore, Barbour's depiction of a steadfast Bruce, who was willing to abide the

²³⁸ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 18.

²³⁹ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 168.

ruling that the Balliol line had a right to the Scottish throne and do homage to Edward I, further obfuscates the waffling position of Robert I during the early years of the wars. Even though he had done homage to Edward I in 1296 after John Balliol's abdication, Bruce (Robert I) joined the Scottish resistance backing Balliol in 1298. When Balliol fled to the family estates in Picardy in 1301, the revolt took up Bruce's claim to the throne instead. Then, when it seemed possible that Balliol would return to Scotland in 1302, and Bruce's claim would not be pursued, Bruce re-submitted to Edward I.²⁴⁰ Finally, in 1305, Bruce made a secret alliance with bishop William Lamberton of St. Andrews and began gathering support for his seizure of the crown, all while displaying a façade of support for English rule.²⁴¹ By drawing on the thematic importance of law and endowing Bruce with the respect for legal authority that personified the protagonists of the Icelandic sagas, Barbour was hiding the fact that Bruce lacked a direct right to the throne and a decade of back-and-forth in which Bruce chose his allies and enemies based not on well-reasoned negotiation but personal ambition, willing to abandon whichever ally or position no longer benefitted him.

Feuding

Another recurring motif that drives much of the action within Icelandic sagas is that of feuding.²⁴² Any grievance, from a passing insult to an impulsive murder, could ignite a feud between close-knit Icelandic families and a number of options existed for dowsing the discord: "A legal case settled by the courts, arbitration (whether by a third party or directly between the two principals), or blood vengeance – these are the three possibilities."²⁴³ Thus when the many legal gatherings and arguments fail to quell violence, the families of the sagas are left to murder their

²⁴⁰ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 19-21.

²⁴¹ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 20-21.

²⁴² Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 90.

²⁴³ Cook, "Introduction," in *Njal's Saga*, xxiv.

way out of disagreements. Most often, to the interest of the reader and misfortune of the participants, Icelanders in the sagas make full use of this third option, starting gruesome feuds with their neighbors that often only end after enough casualties have occurred on either side to lead to exhaustion. Some of these feuds, however, could be ended peacefully, and, while the dramatic violence spurned by community infighting provides for entertaining action, “what is celebrated in the sagas is not the triumph of the physically strong, but the intellectual ability and goodwill of those who strive to maintain social order.”²⁴⁴

In *Njala*

William Miller, in *Why is Your Axe Bloody?*, refers to the feuds of *Njala* as demonstrating a “balanced-exchange model;” the “‘getting even’ aspect of feud ideology that required (ideally) that each hostile move that resulted in wounds or death, or an actionable insult, or even an attempt, be paid back with an equivalent return.”²⁴⁵ The protagonists Gunnar and Njal initially model the honorable method to ending feuds, through only fair killings and settling for peace with their neighbors. Their tragic deaths, however, are brought about when either they or their family members refuse to accept compromise or take the killing too far.

For example, following his killing of Thorgeir Otkelsson, Gunnar accepts the terms of the settlement; he paid compensation for the slaying and agreed to leave Iceland for at least three years. But, as he is riding away, he turns on the hillside to look down on his home and is overcome by its beauty: “Lovely is the hillside – never has it seemed so lovely to me as now, with its pale fields and mown meadows, and I will ride back home and not leave.”²⁴⁶ While Gunnar’s love of his farm at Hlidarendi is a touching and admirable sentiment amongst a saga full of hatred and bloodshed,

²⁴⁴ O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, 24.

²⁴⁵ Miller, “*Why Is Your Axe Bloody?*,” 74.

²⁴⁶ Cook, trans., *Njal’s Saga*, 123 (74).

his refusal to leave is a failure to follow an agreed upon settlement for killing a second person from the same family and, just as Njal prophesied, it leads to Gunnar's murder at his home as retribution.²⁴⁷

The most obvious example of violent feuding is the famous slaughter for which the saga is named. The burning of Njal and his family in their home at Bergthorshvol is so central to the saga that the author titles the saga the burning of Njal in the last line of the work ("And here I end the saga of Njal of the burning").²⁴⁸ This tragedy, while directly caused by the slaying of Hoskuld by the Njalssons, is ignited when Mord Valgardsson, greedy for more power, spreads false rumors of slander between Hoskuld and the Njalssons, intending to start a feud that will lead to their deaths and increase his own power by their absence.²⁴⁹ As previously discussed, Mord's plan is successful and sparks a feud that will gradually escalate from the slaying of Hoskuld to the burning of the Njalssons, from the failed first attempt at arbitration and eruption of fighting at the Thing to the slaying of almost all the men involved in the burning by Kari. This act is also particularly infamous because the burning of homes was considered a serious offense in Icelandic law. As Robert Cook points out, the option of burning was suggested for the murder of Gunnar as well but rejected as too extreme by his murderers.²⁵⁰ Ultimately, the tragedy of the saga lies in these two feuds which destroy the protagonists Gunnar and Njal, who are men dedicated to legal fairness and peace within their communities.

Njala also includes some models of peaceful resolutions. Such an example occurs early in the saga, when Gunnar and Njal are drawn into a feud between their wives when Bergthora, Njal's

²⁴⁷ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 122-129 (75-77).

²⁴⁸ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 310 (159).

²⁴⁹ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 183-189 (107-110).

²⁵⁰ Cook, "Introduction," in *Njal's Saga*, xiv.

wife, and Hallgerd, Gunnar's wife, exchange insults at a winter feast held in Njal's home.²⁵¹ The animosity quickly escalates after Hallgerd sends one of her servants to kill a servant of Bergthora's household. This sparks a retaliatory killing by one of Bergthora's servants and begins a long succession of murders between the two households that claims the lives of seven men; three from Bergthorshvol and four from Hlidarendi.²⁵² Throughout the entire series of killings, Gunnar and Njal make amends and pay each other compensation for the lost men, refusing to take up the grudges of their wives and instead maintaining their friendship ("Gunnar said that he would never turn against Njal or his sons").²⁵³ The feud reaches its peak when Njal's sons murder two men from Gunnar's household, Sigmund and Skjald, after Sigmund recited slanderous verses about them. The dispute then ends with Njal paying compensation for the murder of Skjald and Gunnar acknowledging that Sigmund's slander justified his murder.²⁵⁴ Thus, despite the violence and bloodshed prompted by their wives, "The two of them, Gunnar and Njal, said that no matter would ever arise that they would not settle by themselves. They stood by this and always remained friends."²⁵⁵

As this model for level-headed negotiation appears early in the story, another positive agreement appears at the end. After an overwhelming litany of destructive feuds and uncompromising Icelanders, the *Njala* ends with a peaceful compromise between Flosi Thordarson and Kari Solmundarson. Kari, a friend of Njal's family that escaped the burning but lost his son there, refuses to accept the settlement made at the Thing and embarks on a bloody killing spree that compromises the rest of the saga. Kari travels across Iceland, the Orkneys, and Wales, slaying

²⁵¹ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 57-58 (35).

²⁵² Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 54-78 (35-45).

²⁵³ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 63 (37).

²⁵⁴ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 78 (45).

²⁵⁵ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 78 (45).

the remaining burners in retribution for the death of his friends and his son. Flosi, despite leading the burning, accepts these slayings as justified and even defends Kari's beheading of one of the burners to a shocked Earl Sigurd in Orkney, "Kari did not do this without reason. He has not made peace with us, and he did what he had to do."²⁵⁶ After years of travelling abroad, both Flosi and Kari return to Iceland and, after crashing his ship at Inglfshofdi, Kari is taken in by Flosi at Svinafell where the two "made a full reconciliation," solidified by the marriage of Kari to Flosi's niece Hildigunn.²⁵⁷ All of these examples of both peaceful and poorly-handled feuds are crucial to the extralegal environment of social relations in the sagas and provide a productive point of comparison for the fraught internal conflicts detailed in *The Bruce*.

In *The Bruce*

The feuding of Icelanders in the sagas was also relevant to the context of Bruce's battle for kingship: "Serious feuds," as Miller says, "are more than legal and moral matters; they are also political contests over power and dominance."²⁵⁸ Thus Bruce divided the Scottish nobility in his seizure of the throne and ignited a feud between noble families that favored either the English or the Scottish monarchs. Barbour takes special care, however, to characterize Bruce as fairly accepting the hardship brought about by his actions and, when possible, quelling the feud with the level-headed benevolence befitting both a prominent Icelander and a king of Scotland.

Like the unfortunate heroes of the *Njala*, Bruce sparked a feud amongst his community with a misguided murder. After recounting John Comyn's demise, Barbour foreshadows the difficulties to follow, the years that Bruce and his small party spend losing their cohorts and fleeing through the highlands and isles, as a result of this poor decision.²⁵⁹ It is possible to interpret this

²⁵⁶ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 298 (155).

²⁵⁷ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 309-310 (159).

²⁵⁸ Miller, "Why is Your Axe Bloody?," 6.

²⁵⁹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 81 (II. 43-48).

as a result of the sacrilegious act that earned Bruce's excommunication – murdering a man in front of an altar. But, given the specific hardships that followed, Barbour's statement here more likely refers to the relatives and allies of Comyn who would oppose the new Scottish king. Bruce had earned the ire of Comyn's kin and would have to face their retaliation.

According to Barbour the first, and one of the more threatening, enemies that Bruce encounters after murdering Comyn is John of Lorn. After fleeing Aberdeen with his men to avoid the English, Bruce, supposedly, had to face the lord of Lorn, "That wes capitale ennemy/ To the king for his emys sak/ John Comyn, and thocht for to tak/ Vengeance apon cruell maner" (That was the capital enemy to Bruce for his uncle's sake, John Comyn, and thought to take vengeance in a cruel manner).²⁶⁰ The resulting battle ends with Bruce and his men retreating due to the loss of their horses and their small number, despite, per Barbour's description, a brave effort and noble fighting.²⁶¹

Barbour's emphasis on Lorn's connection to Comyn here should be considered a significant element of the narrative, since it is historically inaccurate. As Duncan explains in his commentary on the encounter, John of Lorn and his company from Argyll, in western Scotland, would have been nowhere near Bruce and his men if they indeed had just fled Aberdeen, on the eastern coast of Scotland. Therefore, Barbour's claim that Lorn "wonyt thar-by" (lived nearby) has to be "manifest exaggeration."²⁶² Second, in calling Lorn Comyn's nephew, Barbour has conflated a previous John Comyn, one of the Guardians from the 1286 arbitration, with the John Comyn who was murdered in 1306. John of Lorn would have been the nephew of the earlier John Comyn, the grandfather of the slain John Comyn. Thus, like his previous combination of the

²⁶⁰ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 113 (III. 2-5).

²⁶¹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 113-115 (III. 6-60).

²⁶² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 113 (III. 1). For Duncan's commentary see note 1 on page 112.

Robert Bruce of Annandale and Robert I, Barbour has conflated a previous John Comyn with the murdered John Comyn to make a direct connection between the murder and Lorn's attack. In his commentary, Duncan explains this as "clearly Barbour's mistake."²⁶³ Given the narrative consequences of Comyn's murder and Barbour's tendency to amalgamate men from different generations into one person, however, referring to Lorn as Comyn's nephew here is more likely intentional instead of a mere mistake in genealogy.

John of Lorn also appears later in the company of Sir Aymer de Valence's party pursuing Bruce and his men from Cumnock. This chase proves even more dire, as Bruce's party, vastly outnumbered, is forced to split first into three groups and then to scatter completely and meet safely at a specified place later. Bruce, now fleeing with only his foster-brother, is still closely pursued by John of Lorn along with his party and a hunting dog. The two are just barely able to defeat the five men sent ahead by Lorn to kill them and narrowly escape the tracking dog by wading through a stream.²⁶⁴ Before narrating this episode in dramatic detail, Bruce introduces John of Lorn by reiterating that "This Jhon off Lorne hattyt the king/ For Jhon Comyn his emys sak,/ Mycht he him other sla or tak/ He wald nocht prys his liff a stra/ Sa that he vengeance of him mycht ta." (This John of Lorn hated the king for John Comyn his uncle's sake. If he might either strike down or take Bruce he would not value his life as straw so that he might take vengeance).²⁶⁵ Thus through two episodes in which Bruce's party makes a hasty, and rather embarrassing retreat, Barbour connects the aggressive pursuit to Bruce's murder of Comyn through the link he has invented with John of Lorn. In this way these particularly shameful retreats from other Scottish Lords are placed in the context of not a war for kingship but a blood feud ignited by Comyn's murder.

²⁶³ Duncan, *The Bruce*, see note 1 on page 112.

²⁶⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 247-257 (VI. 453-674), 259 (VII. 1-29).

²⁶⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 249 (VI. 504-508).

Bruce also faces conflict as a result of this feud in one of the repeated skirmishes between himself and three attackers. In one occurrence Bruce, while hunting in Carlisle, is accosted by three men who waited in ambush “To se quhen thai vengeance mycht tak/ Off the kyng for Jhon Comyn his sak” (To see when they might take vengeance on the king for the sake of John Comyn).²⁶⁶ Bruce, of course, manages to defeat his opponents with the aid of his hunting dog.²⁶⁷ Barbour does not explain why these men would be connected to Comyn in any way and his brief mention of their desire for revenge appears as a simple explanation for their planned and failed attack. Considering his repeated motif of Bruce defeating three attackers on his own, the mention of Comyn here must also be taken as artifice on Barbour’s part.

Later, before Bruce falls ill at Inverurie, Alexander and Simon Fraser bring him news that John Comyn, the current Earl of Buchan, John Mowbray, and David Brechin were coming with a large force for the sake of John Comyn “That quhylum in Dumfres wes slayn” (That previously in Dumfries was slain).²⁶⁸ While Bruce declares he was justified in killing Comyn, he says that, if they want to attack him on Comyn’s behalf, “I sall thole a quhile and se/ On quhat wys that thai pruve thar mycht/...Syne fall eftre quhat God will send.” (I shall endure this for a while and see in what ways they prove their might...Let what falls after be what God will send).²⁶⁹ In his acceptance of this coming attack, Bruce displays the honorable acceptance of retaliatory violence as fair compensation for murder, similar to Flosi’s acceptance of Kari’s attack.

Particularly in the earlier half of the poem, Bruce must face and fight a large number of other Scots, both noble and common. Casting this Scottish bloodshed as a consequence of one rash, but understandable, murder, rather than Scottish contestation over the title king, better serves

²⁶⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 279 (VII. 429-430).

²⁶⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 281-283 (VII. 438-494).

²⁶⁸ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 319 (IX. 23).

²⁶⁹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 319 (IV. 28-32).

Barbour's portrayal of the internal conflict as an acceptable result of the feud Bruce ignited. Bruce's fellow Scots opposing him are not, in Barbour's construction, questioning his entitlement to the throne but continuing the feud started by a murder of their kinsman.

While often forced to slay his enemies, deepening the rift between himself and the allies of the Comyns, Bruce, as Barbour's exemplary king, is able to settle other disputes with his fellow Scots peaceably. Throughout later encounters, as Bruce is able to establish his position and slowly gain more control of the nation, Bruce embodies the role of an honorable Iclander. Barbour's Bruce forgives grievances and rewards reconciliation, ending cycles of violence and sowing peace amongst his peers. This is exemplified in the initial antagonism and eventual resolution between Bruce and Earl Thomas Randolph of Moray. Douglas, from his primary stalking ground of Ettick Forest, captures a number of enemy Scots and brings them to Bruce. One of the captured knights is Thomas Randolph, Bruce's nephew, who had been fighting for the English. Upon their meeting, Bruce is prepared to be reconciled with Randolph and accept his allegiance. Randolph however, responds with malice and criticizes Bruce for using ambush and stratagem to fight the English instead of engaging in outright battle. Bruce's tone quickly changes; he rebukes his nephew for speaking "sa rudly" and has him sent to prison.²⁷⁰ Shortly after, Barbour describes a second meeting with Randolph, during which "he his man hect for to be,/ And the king his ire him forgave." (Thomas swore to be Bruce's man and the king gave up his anger).²⁷¹

Bruce's reconciliation with Randolph is significant considering the latter's place in the rest of the narrative. Barbour takes a moment in that passage to describe Randolph's appearance and chivalrous conduct, assuring his audience that as the poem continues they will hear about all the

²⁷⁰Barbour, *The Bruce*, 357-359 (IX. 731-762, 755).

²⁷¹Barbour, *The Bruce*, 375 (X. 264-265).

worthy deeds for which he will earn praise.²⁷² Randolph would become a crucial leader of men under Bruce, and Douglas praises during the battle of Bannockburn for leading his men so courageously in battle against a larger force of Englishmen.²⁷³ Thomas Randolph becomes so close to Bruce that after the king's death he was made guardian of the realm. Barbour ends the poem lauding Randolph's governance, declaring that he "held in pes sua the countré/ That it wes never or his day/ Sa weill, as Ik hard auld men say" (held the country in such peace that it had never been so since his time as I heard old men say).²⁷⁴ He then laments Randolph's sudden death and closes the poem with a short prayer that the current generation might emulate their noble predecessors.²⁷⁵ His encounter with Randolph is a far cry from the murder that started Bruce's feuding and accents the kingly status that he has achieved: Bruce murdered Comyn and started a feud, but Robert I accepted Randolph, after he had compensated for slandering Bruce by being imprisoned, and gained an ally. Like Gunnar, this version of Robert I is capable of fighting his way out of feuds but would rather get along with everyone peacefully.

In the Chronicles

Gray's account confirms Barbour's depiction of the feud between Comyn and Bruce. He notes that Edward I sent some English barons to Scotland against Bruce "with many Scots of John Comyn's blood, who had all turned against Robert de Bruce."²⁷⁶ Gray also includes an account of Bruce facing Comyn adherents that Barbour does not. According to Gray, while fleeing through the isles, Bruce was on a boat with two men who asked if he had heard anything about Robert Bruce, since he had murdered their lord, John Comyn, and they wished that "he might die at our

²⁷² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 375 (X. 381-304).

²⁷³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 453-455 (XII. 87-129).

²⁷⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 773 (XX. 616-618).

²⁷⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 773 (XX. 619-630).

²⁷⁶ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 53.

hands.”²⁷⁷ Bruce tells them he has heard nothing of the Scottish king and quickly escapes after their arrival on shore. While this specific encounter does not end in bloodshed, Gray’s Bruce fails to compensate for his crime though battle deflects the situation.

Gray’s portrayal of Bruce, also shows no room for the level-headed ending of disputes that Barbour credits him with. According to Gray, after a knight named Piers Libaud, acting as sheriff of Edinburgh for the English, lost Edinburgh castle to Thomas Randolph, he “became Scottish,” allying himself with Bruce’s side.²⁷⁸ Bruce, however, eventually had the knight hanged and drawn on suspicion of treason: “It was said that he [Bruce] doubted him because he was too open; he believed that he had always been English at heart, and was waiting for his best chance to harm him.”²⁷⁹ In Gray’s account, Bruce disregards the peaceful submission of his enemy and, overcome by his own paranoia, resorts to unnecessary violence. Bruce’s flight from Comyn’s men and his hasty execution of a new ally evinces none of the willingness to meet his enemies nor the peaceful quelling of violence that characterizes Barbour’s Bruce, betraying both Gray’s English prejudice and Barbour’s poetic license.

Fordun also remarks on the feud between the Bruces and Comyns, even long before the murder of John Comyn in 1306. In describing the battles between king John Balliol and Edward I, Fordun says “that from the first mooting of the matter of the feud between those noble men – Bruce and Balliol...that kingdom was rent in twain. For all the Comyns and their whole abettors stood by Balliol; while the Earls of Mar and Athol...cleaved, in the firm league of kinship, to the side of Robert of Bruce.”²⁸⁰ Concerning the battle at Inverurie, however, Fordun notes that Bruce was attacked by “John Comyn and Phillip Mowbray, with a great many Scots and English,” but he does

²⁷⁷ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 57.

²⁷⁸ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 73.

²⁷⁹ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 73.

²⁸⁰ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 319 (XCIII).

not feel the need to reemphasize their hatred of him on Comyn's account as Barbour does.²⁸¹ The inclusion of the feud by both Gray and Fordun means it was clearly well-known and a significant dynamic of the Anglo-Scottish wars. While Fordun does not denigrate Bruce's conduct the way Gray does, he makes none of Barbour's effort to endow Bruce with the honorable conduct befitting an Icelandic hero, nor does he use the context of feud to reframe military encounters that might look dishonorable in war, further suggesting Barbour's artifice in this portrayal.

In Historical Context

While Barbour was writing in the 1370s, the Stewarts were beset by divisions amongst the Scottish nobility and were attempting to quell internal quarreling before it could lead to more warfare. The wars and their aftermath, understandably, built upon previous decades of division and drama, bringing cracks within the Scottish community to the surface and deepening animosity amongst the aristocracy. For example, Scottish kings were crowned by the earl of Fife in previous decades, but, in 1306, the Earl of Fife was allied with Edward I against Bruce. Instead, his aunt, Isabel the Countess of Buchan, crowned Bruce, leading to her estrangement from her husband, John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, who was also a supporter of Edward I and a kinsman of the murdered Comyn.²⁸² Even after Robert I had gained a stronger foothold in the nation, he was unable to fully unite the Scottish nobility. Division was even visible in the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath. While this letter famously declared Scottish solidarity, historians have recently noted that "there were seals appended to the Declaration of Arbroath by men who cannot possibly have been present at the abbey on that day and who it is known were at that time operating against the interests of the crown."²⁸³

²⁸¹ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 337(CXXIV).

²⁸² Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 22-24.

²⁸³ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 55.

In addition, Robert I's victory at Bannockburn in 1314, famously the point at which the Scots gained the upper hand over the English, also marks a serious point of division amongst the Scots which had repercussions decades later. After his resounding victory and retaking of Stirling Castle, Robert I held a Scottish parliament that passed the Statute of Cambuskenneth, which forbid Scottish nobles from holding fiefs on both sides of the Anglo-Scottish border. Lords who had previously held fiefs in both Scotland and England, under both kings, were now forced to choose allegiance to one kingdom. Robert I used this moment to distribute land as a reward to his major supporters, elevating the Stewarts, Douglasses and MacDonalds, while he disinherited those nobles who refused to give up their lands in England, causing a major shift in power dynamics and allegiances amongst the Anglo-Scottish nobility.²⁸⁴ In "The Treaty of Edinburgh and the Disinherited," Sonja Cameron and Alasdair Ross suggested that Robert I made provisions in the 1328 peace agreement that would allow for the restoration of some of these lands but, the later government of David II reneged on this promise.²⁸⁵ It was these, the "Disinherited" nobles, who backed Edward Balliol's campaign to retake the throne from the Bruce monarch and who would bring warfare and destruction back to the border lands for another century. "In their own eyes, these lords were not just adventurers bent on private gain. Instead, from Edward Balliol down, they were men and women seeking rights denied them by Robert's usurpation of King John's throne."²⁸⁶

Even after the defeat of the Disinherited, both David II and Robert II would face serious issues as they attempted to satisfy the lords who had gained wealth and territory in the wars against England while still asserting monarchical dominance. The over-mighty Douglas family was

²⁸⁴ Sonja Cameron and Alasdair Ross, "The Treaty of Edinburgh and the Disinherited (1328–1332)" *History* 84, no. 274 (1999), 238; Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 25.

²⁸⁵ Cameron and Ross, "The Treaty of Edinburgh and the Disinherited."

²⁸⁶ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 232.

particularly difficult to govern, as their powerful influence due to the loyal service of their predecessor, the good Sir James of Douglas, and control of the lowlands at the border meant that David II depended on their continued loyalty to defend against English advances.²⁸⁷ David II would often struggle to contain the rapacity of William Douglas in the 1340s. In one instance, “Sir William Douglas of Liddesdale...who desired the office of sheriff of Teviotdale, simply captured the incumbent sheriff, Sir Alexander Ramsay, and starved him to death in order to seize the post for himself.”²⁸⁸ Scottish kings also had to navigate a delicate relationship with the MacDonalds, who had similarly gained power in the highlands and isles through their support of Robert I. This tension was visible even in the terms of their political claims. While technically “Lords of the Isles,” the MacDonalds, or more accurately the Mac Domhnaills, were referred to in Gaelic instead as *rí Innse Gall*, Kings of the Hebrides.²⁸⁹ The MacDonalds, like the Douglasses, held significant power through their dominance over the traditionally Gaelic coast of Scotland, an area in which the Scottish kings had historically faced hostility and depended upon the loyalty of such lords. This made checking their power difficult, even when they presumed to claim the ancient title of King of the Hebrides. The MacDonalds would not adopt the Latin *dominus insularum* until the end of the fourteenth century.²⁹⁰ Robert II would face similar threats during his reign, as his succession was challenged by the Douglas, Leslie, and Lindsay families. These families, who had made substantial gains under David II, threatened Robert II in this way to ensure that they would continue to prosper under the new king.²⁹¹

²⁸⁷ Michael Brown, *The Black Douglasses: War and Lordship in Late Medieval Scotland 1300-1455* (Great Britain: Tuckwell Press 1998), 245-246.

²⁸⁸ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 30.

²⁸⁹ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 72.

²⁹⁰ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 73.

²⁹¹ Barrell, *Medieval Scotland*, 137.

Dangerous struggles for power also emerged within the Bruce-Stewart family, threatening Robert I's hard-won accord. David II maintained an infamous rivalry with his nephew Robert Stewart, who would eventually become Robert II, as the latter continuously attempted to build up power and influence at the expense of his uncle. For example, in 1342 David II, trying to maintain control over his voracious vassals, gave the border lordship to Stewart and made Douglas Earl of Atholl, each being given a title desired by the other. In open disobedience of David II, "Douglas and Stewart exchanged their lordships, increasing their regional power and openly defying king David."²⁹²

Robert II would face similar issues with two of his sons; his eldest John, Earl of Carrick, was famously at odds with his father and had Robert II declared unfit to rule so he could act as guardian of the realm in 1384.²⁹³ Another of Robert II's sons, Alexander Stewart, caused far more chaos in his quest for power. Alexander was the Earl of Buchan in the north of Scotland, another traditionally hostile region due to its Gaelic-Norse heritage and was referred to as the "Wolf of Badenoch." The Wolf of Badenoch began disrupting the highlands in the 1360s by running protection rackets and was temporarily imprisoned by David II in 1369. In 1371, however, with his father's ascension to the throne, Badenoch gained even more power when he was named as a royal lieutenant in the north, a power he would use in his feud with the bishop and earls of Moray for decades.²⁹⁴ For years after *The Bruce* was produced, the Wolf of Badenoch continued to snatch up land and power and sow further violence with hired Caterans, Gaelic mercenaries, spreading discord under his domain. His brother Robert III (formerly Earl John of Carrick) did not curb his younger brother's actions until the Wolf attacked the burghs of Elgin and Forres in Moray in 1390:

²⁹² Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 245.

²⁹³ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 34-35.

²⁹⁴ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 57.

“accompanied by a band of ‘wild and wicked’ Highlanders, he set fire to the cathedral, the manse, and much of the burgh.”²⁹⁵

These descriptions of the Scottish aristocracy reflect exactly the type of tensions that besets the Icelanders of the sagas. Clearly, the unified and resolute aristocracy present in the popular conception of the Wars of Independence hides a great deal of internal strife. If Barbour was going to write a history of the nation in which the Bruce cause is the Scottish cause, and Scots could find common identity in their mutual struggle for freedom, he had to find a way to reconcile the past civil conflict that continued into his present. Hence the feuds of the Icelandic sagas provided Barbour with a well-established and respected context in which communities were occasionally beset by violent vendettas but, under the guidance of honorable leaders committed to goodwill, could settle disputes peacefully. Casting the feuding of *The Bruce* in such a perspective spoke to a still-divided Scottish community and held up protagonists like Robert I and Thomas Randolph as examples to follow towards reconciliation.

Conclusion

While the overlapping cultural traditions of Iceland, Norway, and Scotland may not be glaringly evident, these nations on the periphery of Western Europe shared a long history of exchange, both violent and amicable, that long preceded the Anglo-Scottish wars and continued long after. Barbour, as Archdeacon of Aberdeen, an important local figure in his coastal parish and in the royal Stewart court, Barbour would have been acquainted with the history and customs of Scotland’s northern neighbors. In order to obfuscate the shaky legal standing of Robert I’s right to kingship and justify his murder of Comyn, Barbour employed the elements of legal dispute to present a wrongfully denied Robert I and present a sympathetic protagonist who could be forgiven

²⁹⁵ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 56-57, 60.

for murder. These issues were still relevant in Barbour's day because the Balliols, relatives of Comyn, had nearly retaken the throne since Robert I's victory. Additionally, Bruce's war with the English, and many of the struggles that dominated the reigns of David I and Robert II, involved fighting with and often killing other Scots. Barbour drew on the Icelandic motif of blood feuding to reframe Scots slaughtering their peers, yet supposedly fighting for a free nation, as acceptable actions carried out with honor and dignity.

The cultural connection between Scandinavia and late medieval Scotland was especially relevant to *The Bruce*, considering the continued territorial struggle between these two spheres. While Alexander III had made the western isles Scottish in his victory against Norwegian king Hakon Hakonsson, the isles of Orkney and Shetland remained Norwegian. As discussed above, King Erik II of Norway was closely involved with the early onset of the wars and the "Great Cause." While the Orkney earls no longer held Caithness after 1375, the Sinclair earls of the later fourteenth and early fifteenth century still had to endure the difficulty of dual fealty, since they did hold Scottish lands in Roslin, further south in Scotland, thus they were still subservient to both kings.²⁹⁶ In one instance during the later medieval schism, both the Roman and Avignon popes tried to appoint a bishop in Orkney: Norway had allied themselves with the Roman pope while the Scots followed the pope at Avignon, hence the contested jurisdiction. The Roman papacy eventually won out in 1391 and the Avignon choice, Robert Sinclair, kin to the earls, was sent to be bishop of Dunkheld instead.²⁹⁷ In comparison with the dramatic and romanticized Anglo-Scottish wars, the back and forth that the northern earls faced in between the realms Scotland and Norway receives far less focus. While maybe not as upfront as the wars with the English, it is

²⁹⁶ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 332.

²⁹⁷ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 341.

crucial to understand this struggle as another, more subtle, war for power in which Scottish kings had to protect their sovereignty, sometimes bowling over the Scottish nobles who got in their way.

Despite scanty textual evidence, Scots and Norwegians in the later medieval period shared a common political community and culture. This reality would have been especially apparent in the highlands, the Hebrides, and the northern isles, regions with a long tradition of Norse-Gaelic culture that would have lingered long after the lands became nominally Scottish in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. It is also important to note that these remote regions represented continuing areas of hostility, which the Scottish kings struggled to control, hence their reliance on problematic lords like the MacDonalds, the Wolf of Badenoch, the Anguses, and the Sinclairs. Consequently, if influence of the Icelandic family sagas was sensed by *The Bruce's* audience, it would help justify Bruce-Stewart monarchy to those in kingdom who were still more Norse than Scottish and to the neighboring nations of the Northern seas. A Robert I with the admirable qualities of respected Icelandic figures, promoting the spread of peace through legal process and settling feuds honorably, was a figure that both Norwegians and Scots would have recognized and respected.

CHAPTER III

Introduction

Another identifiable, but relatively unexplored, influence on *The Bruce* is that of popular outlaw tales and ballads in late medieval Britain. These feature a heroic lord, betrayed by another noble or dispossessed by an unjust king, forced to hide in the forest with a small band of loyal followers. The hero enacts extra-legal justice as an outlaw, often through a series of amusing and clever stratagems that benefit the common good, before eventually being pardoned or regaining their heritage. Barbour's depiction of James Douglas in *The Bruce* was influenced by the outlaw hero Robin Hood, turning the loyal Scottish knight into a folk hero that all strata of Scottish society could value. Barbour's depiction of Douglas includes the recurring motifs of outlaw heroes working closely with commoners, inhabiting the forest, and using clever tactics — all of which were commonly found in the Robin Hood ballads. By including these motifs, Barbour supports the oral tradition through which Douglas was known as “the Black Douglas” and implies that folk culture was a crucial to Scottish national identity.

One of the earliest outlaw tales was that of Hereward written in the mid-twelfth century. Hereward is outlawed by the English king, William I, engages in heroic exploits, and pulls-off a variety of clever tricks from the forests of Cornwall, Ireland, and Flanders with a gang of other fugitives. Eventually he receives royal pardon and reclaims his lost fief.²⁹⁸ Another early outlaw tale lauded the similarly banished and disinherited monk Eustace who forfeits his religious orders and leads a series of cunning attacks from the forest to gain revenge.²⁹⁹ Likewise, the hero Fouke le Fitz Waryn, inhabits the forests on the border between England and Wales with his loyal gang.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, “General Introduction,” in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, eds. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications. 1997), 2.

²⁹⁹ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 3.

³⁰⁰ Stephen and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 3.

Of course, the most famous of the outlaw tales are the many ballads of Robin Hood. While the earliest remaining ballads were recorded around the mid-fifteenth century, tales of Robin Hood have been referenced by medieval chroniclers for over six centuries.³⁰¹ The textual copies of the ballads did not appear until later centuries, but “there is no doubt that some were in circulation well before 1400.”³⁰² William Langland’s character Sloth in *Piers Plowman* in the 1370s was familiar with the “rymes of Robyn Hode,” and Chaucer references a “joly Robin” in his *Troilus and Criseyde*.³⁰³ Only a small number of recorded ballads survive pre-1600, the most notable of which were “Robin Hood and the Monk” (c.1465), “Robin Hood and the Potter” (c.1468), and *A Gest of Robin Hood* (c.1450).³⁰⁴ Robin Hood remained popular from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries initially in songs and plays and later flourished with the printing of broadsides and collected editions.

Given the longevity of the Robin Hood ballads, the characterization of its main players fluctuated from tale to tale. As A.J. Pollard explains, Robin Hood and his companions were stock characters who were depicted performing a number of repeating exploits before the tales were first recorded towards the beginning of the sixteenth century. As Pollard suggests, “We can look at them like episodes in a twentieth-century adventure series in ‘comics,’ on radio, in film and on television, woven around stock characters...in which the hero has various adventures, triumphing against the same set of villains in an infinitely changing set of circumstances.”³⁰⁵ As Pollard

³⁰¹ Stephen and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 1.

³⁰² A. J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (London: Routledge. 2004), 16.

³⁰³ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 1.

³⁰⁴ Stephen Knight, *Reading Robin Hood: Content, Form, and Reception in the Outlaw Myth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2015),17.

³⁰⁵ Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 3.

explains, “unlike the twentieth-century equivalent, such as Batman, the hero is something of a chameleon.”³⁰⁶

Providing any specific chronology or context for the Robin Hood ballads is difficult because they “have always been more ephemeral – songs, short plays, proverbs, and place names...have been the media that have transmitted a tradition which is, like the outlaw himself, both fugitive and flexible, hard to pin down, whether in a sheriff’s jail or under the ponderousness of canonical texts.”³⁰⁷ That which makes the context of the tales difficult to clearly define, however, is also what earned them their popularity: their malleable yet consistent critique of an ineffective, centralized, legal authority. As Knight and Ohlgren explain:

The existence of an outlaw always implies there is something wrong with the law. The idea of legal inadequacy has changed enormously over time, from the constraints imposed by abbots, foresters, sheriffs, and even kings... Whatever the perceived inadequacies of authority through the ages, the figure of Robin Hood has always been available to make them his target.³⁰⁸

Thus, while the specific contexts of these early ballads may be difficult to pin down, they “do represent clear aspects of resistance and dissidence.”³⁰⁹

Despite the modern association of Robin Hood with English tradition, the outlaw hero was well known in medieval Scotland. In his 1420 chronicle, Scottish chronicler Andrew Wynton referenced “Lital Iohun and Robert Hude” as “Waythmen war commendit gud” (outlaws who were commended as good) plying their trade in 1283.³¹⁰ Knight and Ohlgren connect Wynton’s

³⁰⁶ Pollard’s general comparison of the late medieval Robin Hood to twentieth century comic book heroes is fair. His direct comparison of Robin Hood to Batman, however, is a bit odd since the more accurate modern equivalent would be Batman’s sidekick, who is also named Robin. Considering the introduction of Robin to Detective Comics in the 1940s, a time when Errol Flynn’s cinematic depiction of Robin Hood was still well known, the appearance of the young Robin alongside Batman, wearing tunic and tights and enacting vigilante justice in the name of a common good, seems even more obvious. (Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 12).

³⁰⁷ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 1.

³⁰⁸ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 17-18.

³⁰⁹ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 8.

³¹⁰ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 24.

endorsement of Robin Hood to the politics of the Anglo-Scottish wars as “they were enemies of the English crown and its officers.”³¹¹ A later Scottish chronicler Walter Bower, in his 1440 continuation of Fordun’s work, also reported Robin Hood as a “*famosus siccarius* (well-known cut-throat)” supporting Simon de Montfort’s revolt against Henry III in 1266.³¹² Unlike Wynton, Bower is critical of “the foolish populace” who “are so inordinately fond of celebrating [Robin Hood] both in tragedies and comedies, and about whom they are delighted to hear the jesters and minstrels since above all other ballads.”³¹³

Furthermore, the Scots were not just aware of Robin Hood, but were intimately involved in the reception and reproduction of the ballads, particularly following the Anglo-Scots wars. Knight argues that fifteenth-century and sixteenth-century Scottish variations of the tales “lay behind major changes in the tradition of the allegedly English hero.”³¹⁴ Commenting on Wynton’s description of Little John and Robin Hood, Knight notes that

there appears to be an implicit comparison between these admirable outlaws and William Wallace, the Scottish nationalist social bandit... the clear implication is that Little John and Robin Hood are opponents of the English authorities under Edward I, and so have interests in common with similar figures from the north: the concept of an outlaw from a Scottish viewpoint entails a political and nationalist identity for the figure.³¹⁵

Commenting further on the similarities between Wallace and the early Robin Hood, Knight noted that the composition of *The Wallace* by “Blind Harry” in 1470 is contemporary with the recording of *Robin Hood and the Monk* and *Robin Hood and the Potter*. Contradicting the assessment of previous scholars “(almost all of them English)” who assumed that Robin Hood motifs in Scotland “were borrowed in colonial style into the Wallace narrative,” Knight argued

³¹¹ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 24.

³¹² Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 25.

³¹³ Translation by A. I. Jones, quoted in Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 26.

³¹⁴ Knight, *Reading Robin Hood*, 36.

³¹⁵ Knight, *Reading Robin Hood*, 42.

instead that “It is conceivable that Rabbie Hood [Scottish for Robin Hood] may in fact in some important sense instigate Robin Hood.”³¹⁶ This was tied, Knight explains, to the more urgent political context of late medieval Scotland, which more strongly connected the outlaw tale, as embodied by “Rabbie Hood” and William Wallace, to national identity, an element that did not exist in the early English Robin Hood material.³¹⁷ Therefore, given their political context as a critique of unjust rule and the close connection between the tales and the Scottish wars, the late medieval tales of Robin Hood provide an important context for Barbour’s writing in *The Bruce*.

Scholars have analyzed the role of commoners and the place of oral culture in *The Bruce*, but have not discussed in detail the possible influence of outlaw tales. Stefan Thomas Hall attempted to explain Barbour’s unusual inclusion of the peasantry by claiming it was a natural result of Barbour’s dependency on oral sources for his narrative, assuming that both the speaker and content of the stories included the peasantry, but this claim lacks substantial evidence.³¹⁸ Bernice W. Kliman argued that “[Barbour] names commoners and gives them, as well as nobles, important actions because his theme is national freedom, and because nationalism, by definition, involves the participation of all classes.”³¹⁹ John McNamara also suggested that Barbour attempted to promote a specific narrative of Scottish history and identity by including elements from oral culture “thereby appropriating its authority and appeal for a wide popular audience.”³²⁰ Similarly, Diane Watt argued that, as the peasantry was gaining a larger role in the political ideology of late medieval Scotland and as Barbour’s nationalist ideology naturally depended on the support and

³¹⁶ Knight, *Reading Robin Hood*, 48.

³¹⁷ Knight, *Reading Robin Hood*, 50.

³¹⁸ Stefan Thomas Hall, *The Role of Medieval Scottish Poetry in Creating Scottish Identity: “Textual Nationalism,”* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press 2006), 81-84.

³¹⁹ Bernice W. Kliman, “The Significance of Barbour’s Naming of Commoners,” in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, vol. 11. 1973, 113.

³²⁰ John McNamara, “‘Tradition’ and Literature in the Medieval Period,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literatures*, eds. Sarah Dunnigan and Suzanne Gilbert, 42–50 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2013). 43.

sacrifice of the common people, Barbour considered both the nobility and the peasantry as a part of his audience and carefully crafted his writing to appeal to both of those groups.³²¹ In these scholars' opinion, Barbour's goal to promote a Scottish national identity included both the consent and participation of a Scottish peasantry who made up his audience.

While such an assertion may seem obvious, the presence of popular culture and the proximity of *The Bruce* to the Robin Hood ballads is easy to miss. Many interpretations of *The Bruce* focus narrowly on its titular character, Robert Bruce, a man whose legacy is inseparable from Scottish nobility and kingship, and label *The Bruce* as either romance or epic. Rhiannon Purdie, in her explanation of Barbour's use of romance conventions, claimed that Barbour's comparison of Bruce to traditional romance heroes whenever he accomplishes unchivalrous victories is meant to "[divert] the audience's attention from parallels they might otherwise draw between the outlawed Bruce and folk heroes such as Robin Hood."³²² According to Purdie, "However attractive Robin Hood might be, he is an anti-authoritarian figure and this is manifestly not what Barbour wants here."³²³ Barbour may have intentionally separated Bruce's image from the folk ballad tradition that would have made his deeds seem undignified for a king. But, considering the well-noted importance of the common folk in Barbour's work and in the growing formation of an inclusive, "national" identity, he seems to instead include the influence of folk ballad in his portrayal of other Scottish figures within the narrative.

³²¹ Diane Watt cites three factors that suggest Barbour intended *The Bruce* to reach an audience of both nobility and peasantry: the increasing political power of the commons in late medieval Scotland, Barbour's writing of *The Bruce* in the Scots vernacular language, and Barbour's frequent use of eyewitness accounts taken from the oral culture instead of written sources (Diane Watt, "Nationalism in Barbour's *Bruce*," in *Parergon* vol. 12, no. 1. (1994. Project MUSE), 103).

³²² Purdie, "Medieval Romance and the Generic Frictions of Barbour's *Bruce*," in *Barbour's Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts*, 68.

³²³ Purdie, "Medieval Romance and the Generic Frictions of Barbour's *Bruce*," in *Barbour's Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts*, 68-69.

Of all the heroes and villains of Barbour's work, Sir James Douglas, otherwise known as the Black Douglas, is the most closely related to the tales of Robin Hood. In depicting James Douglas as an outlaw protagonist, Barbour created a Scottish folk hero to compliment the kingly image of Robert I and continue the legacy of William Wallace. Understanding James Douglas in the context of the outlaw ballads expands our understanding of the national identity presented in *The Bruce* as one meant to encompass not just the nobility, but the wider Scottish populace.

The Black Douglas

James Douglas was a young Scottish noble who, after his father was captured and imprisoned by the English King Edward I in the 1290s, lost the feudal lands and title he had originally stood to inherit. To reclaim his fief, Douglas joined the military campaign of Robert Bruce in 1307, eventually regaining his family lands and earning a widespread reputation as a skilled knight for his role in Bruce's victory.³²⁴ Douglas would continue to support the newly independent Scottish state, mercilessly defending the Scottish border and leading incursions into English territory. Douglas is also known for one final act on behalf of Robert I. Bruce expressed regret as he was dying that he was never able to fight in a crusade and achieve penance for the sins he committed during the war against England. To achieve a remission of these sins after his death, Bruce requested that his heart be cut out and that Douglas carry it with him into battle against enemies of the Christian faith. Douglas obliged his dying king and carried Bruce's heart with him in a battle against Islamic forces in Spain in 1330, during which he was killed. His death in combat solidified his fame throughout western Europe, as he was martyred in what many considered a crusade while performing one final act of loyalty to his deceased king.³²⁵

³²⁴ Michael Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 14-27.

³²⁵ Michael Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 27

The Bruce opens by introducing Douglas alongside Bruce as the protagonists of the poem. Barbour declares that his story of brave men who faced extreme peril will include both Robert I “And gud Schir James off Douglas/ that in his tyme sa worthy was/ That off hys price and his bounte/ In ser landis renownyt wes he” (And good Sir James of Douglas, who was so worthy in his time that he was renowned in other lands for all of his admirable qualities).³²⁶ Most of the discussion surrounding Douglas has attempted to explain his prominence in a poem dedicated to the deeds of Robert I, which scholars attribute to either his embodiment of late medieval chivalry or the political power of Douglas family during the 1370s. While Douglas does portray many elements of late medieval chivalry crucial to romance, his characterization and actions in *The Bruce* cannot be fully linked to chivalric notions of honorable warfare amongst the nobility. Douglas’s characteristic unchivalrous deeds can instead be traced back to the outlaw ballad motifs that Barbour wove into his narrative.³²⁷

Robin Hood and the Potter

Robin Hood and the Potter (c.1468) is the second earliest surviving Robin Hood ballad and demonstrates many of the motifs typical to the early tales.³²⁸ The ballad consists of three “fitts”

³²⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 47 (I. 29-32).

³²⁷ According to Anne McKim, Barbour’s portrayal of Douglas is that of “an ideal knight,” carrying much of Barbour’s focus on chivalry in the poem. (Anne M. McKim, “James Douglas and Barbour’s Ideal of Knighthood,” in *Forum for Modern Language Studies: Knighthood in Medieval Literature* vol. 17, no. 2. 1981, 179). James Goldstein and Thea Summerfield claimed that Barbour’s inclusion of Douglas was a response to the rising prominence of the Douglas family during Barbour’s time, requiring their acknowledgement in such a political work. (James R. Goldstein, “I Will My Proces Hald’: Making Sense of Scottish Lives and the Desire for History in Barbour,” in *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt and Janet Hadley Williams. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2006). (Thea Summerfield, “Barbour’s *Bruce*: Compilation in Retrospect,” in *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses To Warfare*, ed. Corinne Saunders, Francoise Le Saux, and Neil Thomas. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2004, 12). These arguments establish an important foundation for understanding Douglas’s place within *The Bruce* but leave room for a deeper discussion concerning the decidedly unchivalric acts that Douglas often committed in his military exploits. A.A.M. Duncan admitted that “In the Douglas episodes there is, perhaps, a greater willingness to retail the brutality of war.” (A.A.M. Duncan, “Introduction,” *The Bruce*. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics 1997, 11.) More recently, Steve Boardman noted that Douglas is often “presented as the leader of an essentially peasant militia.” (Steve Boardman, “‘Thar nobill eldrys gret bounte,’” in *Barbour’s Bruce and Its Cultural Contexts*, ed. Steve Boardman and Susan Foran. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 2015, 210).

³²⁸ Knight and Ohlgren, eds. “Robin Hood and the Potter,” in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 57–79. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications. 1997), 57.

which divide the story into three sections. In the first fitt, Robin challenges a potter passing through the forest to a fight when the potter refuses to pay a toll. Robin loses the battle, much to the amusement of Little John and Robin's other men who have witnessed the embarrassing scene. Robin convinces the Potter to trade clothes and agrees to sell the Potter's wares in nearby Nottingham.

In the second fitt, Robin, disguised as the Potter, quickly disposes of the inventory by selling the pots at far less than they are valued. When only five pots are left, the disguised Robin gives them free of charge to the sheriff's wife, who then invites Robin over for dinner. Soon an archery contest arises amongst the sheriff's men, one which Robin easily wins. When asked about his skill, Robin, still in disguise, claims that he was taught to shoot by Robin Hood. The Sheriff, who has thus far failed to capture the outlaw, asks the Potter to show him where the outlaw is hiding. Robin agrees and leads the sheriff into the forest in the third fitt. The sheriff, of course, discovers he has been deceived when Robin calls Little John and the rest of his men who promptly take everything that the sheriff has brought with him and demand he give his wife a white palfrey. The furious Sheriff returns to Nottingham and explains the trickery to his wife who breaks into laughter and says Robin has now been paid for all the pots she received. The ballad ends with a scene of Robin and the Potter in the forest, the latter of whom admits the pots were worth quite a bit of money; Robin agrees to give the Potter ten pounds and promises him that he is always welcome in the forest with the outlaw and his men.³²⁹

³²⁹ *Robin Hood and The Potter* is a short tale, unlike *The Bruce*. Historians usually consider *A Gest of Robin Hood* the most complete narrative of these early tales, providing a background which the later versions of the tale would seek to emulate (Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 6). The *Gest*, however, is uncharacteristic of the other, shorter, tales which feature a varying repetition of places, faces, and themes. Therefore, its brief composition and inclusion of the characteristic Robin Hood tropes, make *Robin Hood and The Potter* a more accurate example of the ballads that may have been known in Scotland and a valuable point of comparison for *The Bruce*.

Cunning Conduct

One of the tropes typical of Robin Hood and his band of followers is the crafty nature of their exploits. As outlaws banished from society, Robin Hood and his men are often described as inhabiting the liminal, uncivilized space of the forest, whether in Sherwood or elsewhere.³³⁰ From the forest, Robin Hood carries out various clever schemes to amuse the audience and humiliate his enemies.³³¹ While these traits mark Robin Hood as an outlaw, the benevolent motivation behind his banishment and criminal activity make him a hero of the common folk; thus the clever tactics he employed became those of folk heroes in general.

In *Robin Hood and The Potter*

Central to the title and plot is Robin's cunning stratagem, in which Robin asks the Potter to "Geffe me they clothing, and thow schalt/ hafe myne" so he can go to Nottingham and trick the Sheriff.³³² While in disguise, Robin pulls another stunt, one that would be repeated throughout the songs, plays, and films of later centuries — he wins an archery contest while disguised, astounding bystanders when he never misses the mark and "cleffed the preke on thre."³³³ When asked by the Sheriff how a potter could be so proficient an archer, the trick becomes even more amusing when the costumed Robin explains he has a good bow "the gaffe me Robyn Hode."³³⁴ Robin amplifies the ruse when he leads the Sheriff to his men, steals all of his possessions, and sends him back to Nottingham in shame. Despite the deceit involved in this ploy, Robin's ruse proves his clever mind, which he uses to outwit the Sheriff, a stock figure of established authority. Thus Robin's

³³⁰ Pollard, "A Greenwood Far Away," in *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge: Taylor & Francis 2004).

³³¹ Pollard, "Texts and Context," in *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge: Taylor & Francis 2004), 4; A.J. Pollard, "Crime, Violence and the Law," in *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge: Taylor & Francis 2004), 96.

³³² Knight and Ohlgren, "Robin Hood and the Potter," in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 65.

³³³ Glossed by Knight and Ohlgren, "Robin Hood and the Potter," 68, as "cleft the peg into three pieces."

³³⁴ Glossed by Knight and Ohlgren, "Robin Hood and the Potter," 69, as "Robin Hood gave me."

cunning highlights the failure of the legal establishment by displaying the ineptitude of the Sheriff, even forcing him to make a gift to his own wife, characterizing him as a folk hero.

In *The Bruce*

While usually less whimsical in tone, Douglas is also characterized as a folk figure by his exploits. For example, when he defeats the English on Douglas lands, Douglas planned the attack for Palm Sunday during mass at St. Bride's Kirk, because he knew those gathered "had na dreid of ill" (had no dread of any ill befalling them).³³⁵ Douglas, with the aid of Tom Dicson and a small crew of local peasants, easily defeat the unsuspecting English in the kirk and proceed to the castle. There they kill or imprison the remaining English soldiers, after which they feast on the food that had been laid out for those dwelling in the castle for their return from mass in the kirk.³³⁶ In a similar manner, Douglas's attack on Roxburgh castle is carried out the night of Shrove Tuesday. After using ropes ladders, made with the aid of local man Simon of Ledhouse's, Douglas and his men interrupt the holiday celebration taking place in the hall "And thai but pite gain thaim sla" (and slayed those present without pity).³³⁷ Douglas and his men then spent all night at battle in the castle, which they were able to take from the English by the next morning.³³⁸ In both of these events, Douglas intentionally uses the expected peace of religious holidays to gain the upper hand over his unsuspecting enemies.

In a later attack on the English occupying Douglasdale, following the Palm Sunday triumph, Douglas gains his second victory there by means of another cunning stratagem. Douglas and his men fill sacks full of grass; fourteen of his men carry them on horseback past the castle to

³³⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 207 (V. 313).

³³⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 209 (V. 350-390).

³³⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 385 (X. 456).

³³⁸ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 385 (X. 443-486).

appear as if they were taking provisions to sell at Lanark fair nearby.³³⁹ The English captain standing watch at the castle, falling for this ruse, sends his soldiers to steal what they believe are provisions from the travelers. Douglas and his men emerge from the forest to encircle and trap the English, the men stripping off their disguises while Douglas approaches from the rear, and ambush the soldiers, all of whom are killed.³⁴⁰ Douglas's party is then easily able to seize and plunder the castle, demolishing as much as he is able.³⁴¹ In addition to his use of a clever ruse, Douglas is punishing a greedy figure of authority, the English captain who wants to steal provisions, similar to Robin Hood's punishment of the sheriff.

Douglas also employed a clever ruse to approach Roxburgh castle at night on Shrove Tuesday. Douglas and his men concealed their armor with cloaks and approached the castle walking on their hands and feet. The English soldiers standing guard on the wall above noticed the approaching figures and assumed they were oxen that have broken free. Concealing themselves in this manner, Douglas and his men reach the castle walls that they will then scale with rope ladder made by a local man, Simon of Ledhouse, and enter the castle to wreak havoc.³⁴² Douglas's taking of Roxburgh in this manner was so successful that Barbour claims it inspired Earl Thomas Randolph of Moray to use a ruse in taking the castle at Edinburgh.³⁴³ Even if some of Bruce's other leaders occasionally use similar tactics, it is Douglas whose reputation is associated with cunning and who is credited with the inspiration for other such schemes.

Douglas also managed to employ one of his many ruses in the more direct standoff between Scottish and English forces in northern England. Following a failed truce with the English King,

³³⁹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 313 (VIII. 442-448).

³⁴⁰ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 315 (VIII. 449-487).

³⁴¹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 317 (VIII. 499-511).

³⁴² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 381 (X. 380-403).

³⁴³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 387 (X. 511-529).

Bruce sent some of his lords to lead attacks on the English border. Moray and Douglas were sent to Weardale in northern England, where they reached prolonged deadlock with English soldiers.³⁴⁴ After days of fruitless combat, Douglas led a small party around the English camp one night to attack from an unexpected direction. He directed half of his men to cut down the tents of the sleeping soldiers and the other half to “stab doune with speris sturdely” (stab down with their spears to quickly kill their enemies).³⁴⁵ In this manner, Douglas and his men killed the sleeping soldiers until enough of them began to wake and arm themselves, after which the Scots fled.³⁴⁶

Douglas is further characterized as a folk figure as he frequently occupies the liminal space of the forest. After his second victory at Douglasdale, Barbour notes that Douglas “syne till the Forest held his way/ Quhar he had mony ane hard assay/ And mony fayr ponyt of wer befell” (went into the forest, where he had many a hard trial and many fair points of war befall).³⁴⁷ Barbour then claims that “Quha couth thaim all rehers or tell/ He suld say that his name suld be/ Lestand into full gret renounce” (who could recount all of the stories about Douglas’s feats in the forest should say that his name would endure into full great renown).³⁴⁸ Douglas spent a great deal of time in the Forest of Etrick while Bruce and his other knights fought orderly battles elsewhere; “And it throu hardiment and slycht/ Occupyit all magre the mycht/ Off his fell fayis” (through his boldness and cunning he occupied the forest despite the hostility and power of his enemies).³⁴⁹ In this way Douglas, even though he also aids Bruce in achieving many of his famous victories in open battle, is more frequently associated with the more shadowy space of the forest and the cunning victories and retreats he made there. Such cunning conduct, while clearly successful against the English and

³⁴⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 711 (XIX. 229-251).

³⁴⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 727 (XIX. 549).

³⁴⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 727-729 (XIX. 535-586).

³⁴⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 317 (VIII. 515-517).

³⁴⁸ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 317 (VIII. 518-520).

³⁴⁹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 355 (IX. 679-681).

fodder for amusing tales, contradicted the chivalrous ideals of knighthood were supposed to govern noble conduct on the battlefield. For Barbour to include this in a poem praising Douglas implies that the young Scottish lord was not meant to be read as a gallant hero of the romances, but as a folk hero.

Bruce also on occasion uses some unconventionally vicious tactics and stratagems in battle. These instances, however, are rare and always framed as chivalrous by Barbour, who makes no such justifications for Douglas's actions. The most notable example is during an attack by the English outside Galloway during which Bruce, positioning himself in a narrow passage next to a ford, manages to kill fourteen attackers on his own until the bodies had piled up so high that no more enemies could reach him.³⁵⁰ Barbour manages to frame this slaughter as chivalrous, first by comparing Bruce to the hero Tydeus of Thebes, and then through a lengthy commentary on the nature of valor and wisdom, in which he argues they must both be employed by knights in battle.³⁵¹ Regardless of Bruce's occasional slip from the honorable practices of a romance protagonist, he is always depicted as a chivalrous leader while Douglas fills the role of folk figure.

In the Chronicles

Barbour's portrayal of Douglas in these stories, as a crafty hero willing to use any means necessary to gain victory over his enemies is only sometimes echoed by other chroniclers of the Scottish wars. These chroniclers, interested in narrating deeds of chivalry, were far less enamored by Douglas's sly strategies.

In the English *Scalacronica*, Thomas Gray condemns Douglas's conduct as dishonorable. Gray succinctly lists Douglas's activities, but bestows no admiration on them: Gray only mentions

³⁵⁰ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 231-233 (VI. 116-180).

³⁵¹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 233-239 (VI. 181-286, 323-374).

briefly that Roxburgh was seized by “James de Douglas... on the night of Shrove Tuesday.”³⁵² The date on which nearby castles fell is not mentioned, meaning that Douglas’s victory on this night was notable to the English chronicler, either because the holiday made it easy to remember or because the time of the attack on a holy day was unconventional. Gray would also comment on one of Douglas’s many exploits in the forest, noting the killing of the English Earl of Arundel who had been appointed by the English king as commander at the Scottish March. Gray notes that the Earl of Arundel “was defeated at Lintalee in Jedburgh forest by James de Douglas.”³⁵³ He further claims that Douglas “seized Berwick from the hands of the English by the treasonous connivance of one of the townsmen, Piers de Spalding.”³⁵⁴ The scheme by which Douglas defeated the English is mentioned in passing and the “connivance” by which he takes Berwick is not, as Barbour would have portrayed it, a clever ruse, but “treasonous.”

Gray also briefly refers to the conflict in Weardale, saying that those present “accomplished nothing by the way of feats of arms, save the Scots under James de Douglas, who attacked the army one night at one end of the camp, killed a great part of the commoners from the counties, and departed without loss.”³⁵⁵ Even though here Douglas’s exploit becomes a “feat of arms” that was lessened in significance as he was only killing commoners, Gray is clearly familiar with Douglas as a shady Scottish figure known for collaborating with peasants in seizing Berwick and formulating crafty plots against his enemies.

Even the Scottish chronicler Fordun, favorably disposed to Douglas, includes even less on Douglas than Gray does, despite his usually more detailed retelling of Scottish exploits in the wars

³⁵² Sir Thomas Gray, *Scalacronica 1272-1363*, ed. and trans. Andy King. (Woodbridge: The Surtees Society 2005), 71-73.

³⁵³ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 77.

³⁵⁴ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 79.

³⁵⁵ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 99.

and closer proximity to the locations and sources of the events. Fordun's first mention of Douglas does not occur until the taking of Roxburgh castle, and it is extremely brief: "On Fasten's Eve, in the year 1313, Roxburgh Castle was happily taken by the Lord James of Douglas, and, on the 14th of March, Edinburgh Castle, by the Lord Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray; and their foes were overcome."³⁵⁶ Fordun has similarly noted the day of the victory as Shrove Tuesday but, beside that minor point, his reference to Douglas is entirely unremarkable and thrown into the same sentence as Randolph's taking of Edinburgh. This brief note is the only mention Fordun makes of Douglas's cunning in battle; he does not even include the taking of Douglasdale and only mentions the raid in Weardale when explaining the Scottish retreat.

In France, Douglas would also appear in *The True Chronicles of Jean le Bel*. Le Bel, predecessor to the famous French chronicler Froissart, wrote extensively about the wars in England and France from 1290-1360, partially based on personal experience, and partially on the same prose chronicler of Robert I's life mentioned by Gray and Fordun, implying all three had access to the same written source.³⁵⁷ In le Bel's retelling of the nighttime ambush at Weardale, Douglas, "who was most valiant, courageous and daring" circled the army around midnight with a company of two hundred men "and boldly burst into the English host crying: 'Douglas! Douglas! You're all going to die, my English masters!'" before proceeding with his slaughter.³⁵⁸ The French Le Bel was more willing to praise the exploits of the Scots, given the alliance between their nations and their mutual antagonism towards England. Still, his commendation of Douglas here is for his "valiant,

³⁵⁶ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, (CXXX), 39.

³⁵⁷ Nigel Bryant, "Introduction," *The True Chronicles of Jean Le Bel : 1290-1360*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press 2011).

³⁵⁸ Jean Le Bel, *The True Chronicles of Jean Le Bel : 1290-1360*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press 2011), 47.

courageous, and daring” prowess in battle, all characteristic of a chivalrous knight, not a cunning folk hero

It is Douglas’s death in Spain, fighting an Islamic army while carrying Bruce’s heart that was cited most by chronicle writers and even modern historians. It served as evidence of his identity as a truly loyal knight. Gray provides a short aside concerning Douglas’s death in his chronicling of events years later that concerned Douglas’s son.³⁵⁹ Gray’s commentary on the subject is short but, considering his other, even more brief mentions of Douglas, the amount of detail provided about his journey and the heart he carried signifies that the incident held more meaning for Gray than Douglas’s cunning victories. Fordun’s account of Douglas in Spain is the longest excerpt he gives to the young Scottish lord, describing Douglas’s alliance with the king of Spain, his daring in battle as he is accompanied by only a small force, and the righteous slaughter of many Saracens, all before “James himself ended his days there in bliss, while he and his were struggling for Christ’s sake.”³⁶⁰ Fordun makes no mention, however, of Bruce bestowing the custody of his heart on Douglas following his death or how Douglas carried Bruce’s heart into battle.³⁶¹ Fordun simply ends his account of Douglas with the remark that “This James was, in his day, a brave hammerer of the English; and the Lord bestowed so much grace upon him in his life, that he everywhere triumphed over the English. Finally, le Bel dedicates two chapters to Bruce’s death and Douglas’s pilgrimage, during which he blames the Spanish army for Douglas’s death and calls their hesitance to join such a courageous knight in battle shameful.³⁶² Barbour, of course, also includes this final heroic exploit in his poem, closely mirroring the account of the other chroniclers. In Barbour’s narrative, Douglas left Scotland with a company of knights bound for

³⁵⁹ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 117.

³⁶⁰ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, (CXXXIV) 345-346.

³⁶¹ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, (CXXXIV) 346.

³⁶² Le Bel, *The True Chronicles of Jean Le Bel*, 52-54.

Spain, carrying Bruce's embalmed heart in a silver case hung around his neck.³⁶³ Douglas then dies in battle attempting to aid another knight overwhelmed by Islamic soldiers. Upon his martyrdom, both Bruce's heart and Douglas's bones are taken back to Scotland and the poem ends shortly afterward.³⁶⁴

What catches the chroniclers' attention most, and presumably their audiences, is the good Sir James of Douglas, faithful knight and martyr, not the crafty Douglas who used ingenious plots to overcome his better equipped enemies. It is not surprising, then, that Douglas's heroic death is what these writers chose to focus on. However, even Douglas's most knightly act may not be as chivalrous as it appears. Sonja Cameron noted that carrying the king's heart, an act later lauded as pious, was in reality an act done with blatant disregard for canon law. For the papal bull of Boniface VIII condemned the desecration of dead bodies, and Douglas was in fact excommunicated for removing and carrying Bruce's heart and not forgiven until a year after his martyrdom.³⁶⁵ Even in this famous feat of chivalrous devotion then, the Douglas who displays unashamed contempt for holy mores and who will use unconventional methods to achieve his ends is glossed over by chroniclers. The stories told by these authors required martyred knights to please their wealthy audiences, not folk heroes. While Barbour does not include Douglas's excommunication, he made no effort to hide Douglas's other transgressions of chivalrous conduct. Instead, Barbour, crafting a national legacy meant to inspire the both the Scottish nobility and peasantry, presents Douglas as both a gallant martyr and a folk hero, letting one man embody both the chivalric culture of the nobility and the folk culture of the peasantry.

³⁶³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 759 (XX. 309-318).

³⁶⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 771 (XX. 579-591).

³⁶⁵ Sonja Cameron, "Sir James Douglas, Spain, and the Holy Land," in *Freedom and Authority: Scotland c.1050-1650*, eds. Terry Brotherstone and David Ditchburn (Great Britain: Tuckwell Press 2000), 110.

In Historical Context

Douglas's depiction as a benevolent outlaw within Barbour's romance is important to note because, in crediting Douglas with the exploits of a folk hero, Barbour was not just appropriating the political implications and influence of the Robin Hood tales, but the legacy of another folk hero, William Wallace. As I touched upon in the introduction, Wallace famously led the first stages of Scottish rebellion in 1297 and reportedly represented the popular will of the Scottish peasantry. The imposition of Englishmen in local positions created fear, even if it was unfounded: "By spring 1297 many Scots of middle rank saw English rule as a direct threat to their security and safety."³⁶⁶ This strata of fearful common folk would follow Wallace and join the popular uprisings against the English that year. Wallace used Selkirk forest, as would James Douglas, as "his stronghold and recruiting ground in 1297," which the Scottish guardians would continue to do use as such in 1299.³⁶⁷

While Wallace would become the most recognizable figure leading this early movement, he was not alone. Aiding Wallace in his initial revolt was William Douglas, "a turbulent lord" whose land holdings at the border meant he was closely involved with the growing resistance there.³⁶⁸ Michael Brown noted that "William Douglas, nicknamed *le Hardi*, the bold, managed to antagonise both English and Scottish kings in the early 1290s...His neighbors and overlords found William equally hard to deal with."³⁶⁹ William Douglas was in fact imprisoned and forgiven by Edward I twice before his final capture in 1297, during which "Edward allowed such an unrepentant enemy to rot in prison."³⁷⁰ William Douglas was dispossessed and eventually died in

³⁶⁶ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 181, 182.

³⁶⁷ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 190.

³⁶⁸ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 182.

³⁶⁹ Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 13.

³⁷⁰ Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 15.

prison, leaving the burden of reclaiming the family title to his young son, James.³⁷¹ Hence James of Douglas, joining Bruce's cause for freedom, lurking in the forest, and using clever antics to defeat the English, was not just avenging the disinheritance and death of his father, he was carrying on the legacy of his father's ally, folk hero William Wallace.

As historians like Kliman, Watt, and McNamara have all noted, Barbour's conception of national identity encompassed the wider populace of Scotland. Including a folk hero in his poem could capture this non-noble audience advantageously tie popular dissent against English rule from Wallace onto the Bruce-Stewart dynasty. Wallace's grisly execution in 1305 made it difficult to include him and the popular support he inspired in a tale about Robert I.³⁷² Douglas, the son of Wallace's ally, took his place by being framed as a popular folk hero.

Commoners and Oral Culture

Crucial to the understanding of Robin Hood and his place in the social strata is his designation as a yeoman, by most of the ballads, often a yeoman of the forest. As Pollard explains, when these ballads were being written down in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, this label could refer to either a forester under the authority of a royal or noble household, or the growing social status of craftsmen and artisans that lay in between "noble" and "common."³⁷³ Even this first context, that of the late medieval forester, was connected to the second, as foresters generally "belonged to the world of the gentle as well as the commoner."³⁷⁴ So, as a yeoman, a multifaceted occupation and social position, Robin Hood inhabits a space in-between and is therefore familiar to both the aristocracy and peasantry.³⁷⁵ Given this context, historians and critics share a "general

³⁷¹ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 182-183.

³⁷² Brown, *The Black Douglases*, 197.

³⁷³ Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 30-56.

³⁷⁴ Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood*, 49.

³⁷⁵ A.J. Pollard, "Yeomanry," in *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (Abingdon: Routledge: Taylor & Francis 2004), 55-56.

agreement that the audience was not single, that it represented the social mobility of the late Middle Ages, and the myth was diffused across a wide variety of social groupings who were alive to the dangers of increasingly central authority, whether over town, village, or forest.”³⁷⁶ In addition to the inclusion of the peasantry and nobility, the Robin Hood tales also rested on late medieval oral culture. According to Knight, given their earlier status as “rymes,” ballads, and tales, the late medieval populace was reciting, listening to, and reading Robin Hood stories: “The Robin Hood materials are most unusual in that they appear, from the very beginning, to be both oral and literary, and maintain that complexity to the present, with varying intensities of an instrumental and context-driven kind.”³⁷⁷

In *Robin Hood and the Potter*

Concerning Robin Hood’s status in society, the ballad explicitly introduces its hero as a yeoman: “Roben Hod was the yemans name,/ That was boyt corteys and fre.”³⁷⁸ Robin Hood the yeoman first proves his goodwill during his encounter with the Potter. After winning his fight with Robin Hood, the Potter proclaims it “leytell cortesey” to hinder “pore yeman” like himself in his travels, to which Robin admits the Potter is right and that he speaks “god yemenrey.”³⁷⁹ As Knight noted, this statement and the final line of the ballad, that God might “safe all god yeomanry,” is ambiguous, as it is unclear what “good yeomanry” means.³⁸⁰ Given the previously mentioned liminality of the yeoman status, however, this repeated phrase seems to be lauding the values of both explicitly employed yeomans and the rising craftsman stratum, such as the Potter, and to be referring to the same middling sphere of late medieval society.

³⁷⁶ Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, 8.

³⁷⁷ Knight, *Reading Robin Hood*, 16-25, 16.

³⁷⁸ Glossed by Knight and Ohlgren, “Robin Hood and the Potter,” 62 as “both courteous and generous.”

³⁷⁹ Knight and Ohlgren, “Robin Hood and the Potter,” 65.

³⁸⁰ Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 55.

In *The Bruce*

Barbour portrays Douglas as a folk hero and aligns him with the peasant culture of late medieval Scotland by establishing a close connection between Douglas and commoners. Barbour uses Douglas's loss of his lands and title to place him in an ambiguous space below his fellow knights and frequently depicts him discussing the plight of and collaborating with peasants. This depiction of Douglas directly contrasts with that of Bruce, who often faces the direct hostility of commoners. Barbour's characterization of Douglas as close to commoners adds to his image as a folk figure and supports Barbour's depiction of the war as a battle fought for freedom for the people of Scotland from English rule.

Throughout the early battles, Douglas often voiced concern for the peasantry and considered how the war was affecting those outside the nobles fighting it. After Bruce's party has made one of their many retreats and fled to the Isle of Arran, Douglas bristles at the time taken to stop and rest, arguing that "The pure folk off thy countre/ Ar chargit apoun gret maner/ Of us that idill lye her" (the poor folk of Bruce's country are greatly burdened by Bruce's army lying idyll).³⁸¹ This is not the usual complaint of a knight, that of a desire for conquest and victory, but concern for the toll of extended warfare on the community. After this initial period of retreat and exile, Douglas asks Bruce's permission to return to his land, still under the lordship of Clifford. Douglas explains that he wants to see "How that thai do in my countre/ And how my men demanyt ar" (how the people of his lands are being treated by their English lords).³⁸² Through Barbour's portrayal, Douglas, the unjustly disinherited noble who spent his formative years closely interacting with people below his status, shows great empathy for the suffering of Scottish commoners and his deeds in battle are framed as concern for their well-being.

³⁸¹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 167 (IV.343-345).

³⁸² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 203 (V.228-229).

While Bruce also expresses concern for his people, his relation to the peasantry is only sympathetic. Unlike Douglas, before beginning war with England he is not facing any real hardship. Barbour claims that Bruce witnessed the adversity of his people under English rule and “had gret pittè” (had great pity) for them but did not experience real oppression himself until engaging in war with England.³⁸³ This kind of sympathy is fitting for a worthy king, but Bruce’s experience is not nearly as trying as that of Douglas, making him unable to relate to the peasantry on the same level, but instead only able to comment on their suffering from above.

Douglas does not just talk about the peasantry and their needs but frequently includes them in his military campaigns, closely collaborating with them in a manner unlike the formal military service required by kings like Bruce during open battle. After returning to the Scottish mainland, Douglas is granted permission by Bruce to return to his lands and ascertain the well-being of his people. Upon reaching Douglasdale, Douglas and his men are sheltered by a local man called Tom Dickson. Dickson then had the people of the area gather secretly in his home and swear loyalty to Douglas before helping him plan a revolt against the English soldiers holding the nearby castle.³⁸⁴ With the aid of Dickson and his assembled crew, Douglas attacks and defeats the English soldiers there on Palm Sunday, briefly retaking the castle, as recounted above.³⁸⁵ Douglas continued to work closely with commoners on his many independent military campaigns. In one instance, while the bulk of Bruce’s men are in Edinburgh, Douglas and a small party were tasked with taking the castle in Roxburgh. According to Barbour, Douglas had a local man named Simon of Ledhouse make rope ladders with which they scaled the castle walls the night of Shrove Tuesday.³⁸⁶ After

³⁸³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 69 (I.477-480).

³⁸⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 205 (V.271-308).

³⁸⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 207 (V.335-384).

³⁸⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 379-383 (X.357-372, 403-442).

successfully taking the castle, Douglas sent Simon of Ledhouse to Bruce, where he was generously rewarded for his aid.³⁸⁷

Bruce's interaction with the Scottish peasantry, by contrast, is the less amiable, occasionally even hostile, contact of a distant king. Thea Summerfield claimed that Bruce himself personified an Outlaw hero, given his justified rebellion, his close companionship with his men, and his initial reliance on common folk.³⁸⁸ But the reliance on common folk, as Summerfield herself admits, is a bit of a stretch. And to the extent that outlaw tropes applied to Bruce, it is only in the first part of the poem. Recalling "Bruce and his men being sheltered by the peasantry on Rathlin in the isles," Summerfield acknowledges that in the face of Bruce's knights fully armed for war, the people "may have had little choice."³⁸⁹

After the Scottish retreat at Methven, Barbour notes that Bruce dared not go to the open country because the commoners despised him and would rather have the peace of English rule than the strife that Bruce and his army brought.³⁹⁰ Barbour tries to soften this rejection of Bruce, claiming it was often the case that common people will only be loyal to those who can protect them, which Bruce is not yet able to do.³⁹¹ Bruce would encounter similar opposition later while hiding in the isles, when he sent a spy to the mainland to see if it was safe for them to return. Cuthbert, Bruce's spy, finds that in Scotland the peasants hated Bruce, that "Baith hey and law the land wes then/ All occupyit with Inglishmen/ That dispytyt atour all thing/ Robert the Bruce the douchty king" (both high and low the land was occupied with Englishmen that despised Bruce the valiant king more than anything else).³⁹² Barbour claims this hatred of Bruce by the peasantry was

³⁸⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 387 (X.495-498).

³⁸⁸ Summerfield, "Barbour's *Bruce*: Compilation in Retrospect," 121.

³⁸⁹ See note 53 in Summerfield, "Barbour's *Bruce*: Compilation in Retrospect," 121.

³⁹⁰ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 107 (II. 499-502).

³⁹¹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 107 (II. 504-510).

³⁹² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 179 (IV. 594-597).

out of fear, and that they would regret their animosity after Bruce's victory, but his reassurance here is not enough to remedy the clear rift between Bruce and the common people.³⁹³ As mentioned above, when Bruce does return to Scotland from the isles, he is careful to avoid the peasantry and instead stays with an unnamed woman "That wes till him in ner degré" (who was related to him) and therefore another noble.³⁹⁴

Douglas, in his collaboration with the common people, never experiences this kind of hostility, even though he too brings the chaos and destruction of war that Barbour cites to absolve Bruce of the people's hatred. Without the consent and support of Scottish peasants received by Douglas, Bruce's problematic relationship with his people would be the only major relationship between the Scottish nobility and peasantry present in the poem. If, as Barbour argues, the people of Scotland were suffering under English authority and Bruce's hostile takeover was justified by the independence and welfare it brought to the entire nation, the retelling of the war in *The Bruce* requires the presence of common people supporting the Scottish cause. Douglas then, in his close working relationship with peasants, provides a crucial contrast to Bruce and supports Barbour's framing of the war as one of liberation from tyranny.

Moreover, Barbour's account also presents Douglas as part of the oral culture that spread outlaw tales and lauded folk heroes like Robin Hood and William Wallace. After Douglas's nighttime ambush, the battle at Weardale eventually reached an impasse that the Scots were at a loss for how to gain more ground. Douglas rejects Moray's suggestion to challenge the English in open battle and instead offers another, less chivalrous option. He proposes that they trick their enemy "As Ik herd tell this othyr yer/ That a fox did with a fyscher" (as I heard tell years ago that

³⁹³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 179 (IV. 588-593).

³⁹⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 197 (V.134).

a fox did with a fisherman).³⁹⁵ Douglas then recounts a folk tale in which a fox, caught stealing a salmon in the fisherman's hut, is stopped from escaping by the fisherman standing in the only entrance to the hut with a sword. The clever fox then grabbed a mantle lying nearby and dragged it into the fire with his teeth, escaping while the fisherman ran to save his only mantle burning in the fire.³⁹⁶ Using this story to strategize a retreat, Douglas explains, "We ar the fox and thai the fyscher."³⁹⁷ The following day, the Scots packed up their supplies and prepared to leave without being noticed by the English. That night, they lit fires and made noises to convince the English they were engaged in revelry. While the fires were still burning, the Scots, clever foxes, made their retreat, while the English army, cast as the unfortunate fisherman, would not notice their absence until morning, when they were too far gone to be caught.³⁹⁸

Rhiannon Purdie referenced Barbour's use of the fox story in his retelling of Douglas's exploits, claiming that the mention of a "trickster fox" is so contrary to chivalric norms of romance that Barbour must be directly critiquing chivalric values; "there is no attempt to call upon romance here, and no point."³⁹⁹ Douglas's association with a folk tale here is significant, as is noted by Purdie, because it directly contrasts with the recitation of famous romance and epic poems elsewhere in *The Bruce*. The most notable instance of this is when Bruce recounted the story of Fierabras, a Saracen knight honorably defeated by one of Charlemagne's knights, from the Matter of France, as his party painstakingly crossed a loch in pairs on a boat that would only carry three men at a time.^{400 401} Bruce's storytelling elevates the pathetic cause of a retreating army to that of a band of heroes persevering in the face of adversity and associates their deeds with the dignified

³⁹⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 731-733 (XIX. 651-652).

³⁹⁶ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 733 (XIX. 654-687).

³⁹⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 733 (XIX. 690).

³⁹⁸ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 737 (XIX. 721-770).

³⁹⁹ Purdie, "Medieval Romance and the Generic Frictions of Barbour's *Bruce*," 73.

⁴⁰⁰ See footnote, *The Bruce*. ed. and trans. A.A.M. Duncan. (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics 1997), 133-135.

⁴⁰¹ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 133 (III. 421-443).

genre of medieval epic. Douglas's storytelling, on the other hand, casts the Scottish army as a crew of wily foxes and places their exploits in the realm of folklore.

Douglas himself becomes a figure of folk culture, the "Black Douglas," in *The Bruce*. The deeds that earned him this epithet were anything but chivalrous. Following his first victory in Douglasdale, Douglas steals valuables and supplies and sets out to destroy the provisions he cannot carry, thereby preventing their use by returning English soldiers.⁴⁰² After dumping all the extra perishables in the castle wine cellar, Douglas also disposes of the English prisoners there, beheading them amongst the scattered foodstuffs. "A foul melle thar gane he mak,/ For meile and malt and blud and wyne,/ Rane all togidder in a mellyne,/ That was unseemly for to se" (He made a foul mixture there, for meal, malt, blood, and wine all ran together in a concoction that was unseemly to see).⁴⁰³ Barbour then explained that "Tharfor the men off that countré/ For sua fele thar mellyt were/ Callit it 'the Douglas lardner'" (therefore the men of that country, for so many things there were mixed, called it "the Douglas larder").⁴⁰⁴ Douglas's deeds in the forest also earned him a notorious reputation. Barbour recounts that as a result of his exploits defending the Scottish border along the marches of England the people there feared him as a devil from hell.⁴⁰⁵ Barbour further elaborates "That he sa gretly dred wes than/ That quhen wivys wald childer ban/ Thai wald rycht with ane angry face/ Betech thaim to the blak Douglas" (that he was so greatly feared that when wives were scolding their children they would, with an angry face, consign them to the black Douglas).⁴⁰⁶ It is the ominous figure named here, the Black Douglas, that Barbour claims haunted the English soldiers at Weardale before they fall victim to Douglas's ambush.

⁴⁰² Barbour, *The Bruce*, 211 (V. 392-400).

⁴⁰³ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 211 (V. 404-407).

⁴⁰⁴ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 211 (V. 408-410).

⁴⁰⁵ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 579 (XV. 553-557).

⁴⁰⁶ Translation by Duncan, Barbour, *The Bruce*, 579 (XV. 559-562).

According to Barbour, an English soldier there that night admitted “a gret growing me tais/ for I dred sar for the blak Douglas” (that he felt a growing sense of foreboding, for he feared the Black Douglas).⁴⁰⁷ Of course, it is at this moment that Douglas appears, responding to his declaration of dread that “Thou sall haiff caus” to fear, before he attacks the terrified Englishman.⁴⁰⁸

In the Chronicles

It is with this specific element of Barbour’s work, the oral tradition describing Douglas as a folk figure, that the other narratives differ most widely from Barbour in their depiction of Douglas. In the *Scalacronica*, Gray claims that during the fighting at the Scottish and English border a number of English earls and lords came with a force of a thousand men to reinforce the march but, when “James de Douglas came before them, four leagues away, burning and devastating the country in plain view of them all... none of them were willing to make a move.”⁴⁰⁹ Gray attributes this failure of the English nobles to their own lack of valor and ingenuity; he does not specify what, or who, caused their courage to fail and it is impossible to know if the image of the Black Douglas haunted these men the way Barbour claims he did elsewhere.⁴¹⁰ Gray also briefly notes the Scottish retreat at Weardale without referencing any folk tales or admitting that the English forces were deceived.⁴¹¹ After some commentary on the overall strength and perseverance of Scottish knights, le Bel names the Earl of Moray and Douglas as the “two very fine captains” who commanded the Scottish armies as Bruce’s health declined. He also claims that Douglas “was considered the boldest and most daring knight in either kingdom,” not a devil who inspired fear in the hearts of soldiers and countryfolk.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁷ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 727 (XIX. 559-560).

⁴⁰⁸ Barbour, *The Bruce*, 727 (XIX. 562).

⁴⁰⁹ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 97

⁴¹⁰ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 97.

⁴¹¹ Gray, *Scalacronica*, 99.

⁴¹² Le Bel, *The True Chronicles of Jean Le Bel*, 40.

Concerning the harrying of Weardale, Fordun's account of Douglas's exploits similarly lacks any mention of "The Black Douglas" terrorizing men, the folk tale of the fox, or his clever trick for escape. Instead, he merely states that Douglas and Moray invaded Weardale and, after an eight day period of back and forth battles, "the Scots, like wary warriors, sought an opportunity of saving themselves; and, having struck down in death many of the foe, and taken a great many English and Hainaulters, they returned home safe and sound, by a round-about road, by night."⁴¹³ Rather than praising Douglas's fearsome reputation or embellishing the encounter with the telling of a folk tale, as Barbour does, Fordun apparently thought it necessary to justify the Scots' retreat, emphasizing their previous success and that they were "wary warriors" in need of rest.

In le Bel's account of the Weardale retreat, two Scottish trumpeters remain behind the fleeing army and inform the English host that they have been fooled. He does note that the trumpeters were placed under guard and that watch was kept throughout the morning, "in case of trickery."⁴¹⁴ It seems that, in this instance, the French le Bel is more willing to admit to Douglas's cunning deceit of the English, as opposed to English chroniclers like Gray, but he also does not mention the "Black Douglas."

In Historical Context

Douglas's proximity to the common folk in Barbour's narrative speaks to the previously mentioned prominence, and menace, of the Douglas family in the fourteenth century. The Black Douglas would lend his title to his descendants, which they would proudly claim as the family rose to prominence in the following centuries, becoming one of "the most powerful and certainly the most notorious of the great aristocratic families of late medieval Scotland."⁴¹⁵ They would indeed

⁴¹³ Fordun, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, 344(CXL).

⁴¹⁴ Le Bel, *The True Chronicles of Jean Le Bel*, 48-49.

⁴¹⁵ Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 1.

become so lofty that Earl William of Douglas managed to get himself personally stabbed and killed by the Scottish King James II in 1452.⁴¹⁶ Despite their political ambition, historians have acknowledged the Douglas family as “central to the development of Scotland in the later middle ages... bound up with the emergence of Scotland as an independent nation.”⁴¹⁷ All of this power and claim to authority rested on the legacy of good Sir James, the first of his line to be known as a “Black Douglas.” As Michael Brown has argued, “it was on the efforts of Douglas lords in the cause of Robert Bruce and his heirs,” that established the Douglasses as both “dangerous foes” and “defenders of kingdom and community.”⁴¹⁸ The depiction of the first Black Douglas as a folk hero was crucial because the power of the Douglas lords “rested on the rule, or misrule, of the family over its tenants and neighbors, a dominance maintained by fear and force and only ended by a bloody conflict with their own lord, the king of Scots.”⁴¹⁹ If, as Barbour’s account implies, the first Black Douglas was a defender of the commons, then the unchecked power of the later Douglasses could be explained not as a failure of the Bruce-Stewart monarchy to assert dominance, but the result of popular support. Therefore, by depicting Douglas as an outlaw hero, Barbour was both acknowledging the influence of the later Douglasses and maneuvering that influence to work in favor of the monarchy.

Presenting Douglas as a popular hero with the support of common folk was also crucial because the people of Scotland in the later fourteenth century may have held more, if still limited, power than the preceding decades. And, since the wars had negatively affected the lives of many common Scots, Barbour would have had to earn their support for his depiction of the wars and the shared national identity he was creating. As Jillings explained, “the realities of war ensured that

⁴¹⁶ Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 1.

⁴¹⁷ Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 1.

⁴¹⁸ Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 2.

⁴¹⁹ Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 1.

much valuable land was laid waste, especially in the Borders, due to marauding forces and the employment of scorched-earth tactics.”⁴²⁰ Scottish locales outside the direct path of the wars also suffered economically in the early fourteenth century, as England had been one of Scotland’s main trading partners before the wars and the naval routes which ships took to trade with France and the Low Countries were subject to attack by the English.⁴²¹ Added to the devastation were the famines that struck all of Europe in 1315 and 1317, with later famines recorded in Scotland in 1321 and throughout the 1330s.⁴²² This would culminate in the loss incurred by the arrival of the plague in the middle of the century. If Barbour was going to include the Scottish population in his conception of the nation, all of this destruction had to be justified as a part of Robert I’s struggle for their freedom from the English. Douglas, apparently known within the oral culture, presented a figure whom both nobles and common folk could recognize as a hero that wrought destruction with the purpose of defending their liberties.

Conclusion

Through the recurring motifs of interaction with the peasantry, habitation of the forest, and the use of cunning, Barbour characterizes James of Douglas as a folk hero reminiscent of Robin Hood and William Wallace. These tropes are reflected and reinforced by the language used by Douglas to describe his actions and by contemporaries who refer to him as the “Black Douglas,” a title that references both his black hair and the malevolent nature of his deeds. Through Barbour’s retelling, James of Douglas becomes not only a chivalrous vassal but the Black Douglas, a Scottish folk figure. This portrayal of the Black Douglas offers a contrast to the more chivalrous figure of Robert Bruce. Robert I’s reputation as a chivalrous king was clearly significant for the 1370s

⁴²⁰ Karen. Jillings, *Scotland’s Black Death: The Foul Death of the English* (Gloucestershire: Tempus 2003), 71.

⁴²¹ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 163.

⁴²² Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 164-165.

community of Scottish nobles, but it would have been less relevant for the common people who also made up the Scottish nation. If Barbour's Bruce was a hero for the Scots nobility, then his Black Douglas was a hero for the rest of the Scottish population. Thus, the inclusion of the Black Douglas suggests that the cultural values of those outside the nobility were an influential piece in forming a wider conception of history, national identity, and the justification of political power.

The fame of both the good Sir James de Douglas and the Black Douglas persisted through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The legacy of the Douglas lords would be built on their ties to the Scottish crown and their connection to the local communities within their domain, both established through James's actions in the wars and popularized through his memorialization in *The Bruce*. Douglas's influence on his family legacy was even visible in the family coat of arms, which bore Bruce's "bludy hert" after his death in Spain in 1330.⁴²³ In both the narrative of Barbour's poem and in the narrative of Scottish history it portrayed, Douglas carries the heart of Scotland's king, and, by extension, the heart of the Scottish nation. It is the inclusion of the Black Douglas and the peasant culture he represents that makes *The Bruce* a truly Scottish tale, and not just another romance borrowing from the renowned French literary tradition. This does not minimize the importance of *The Bruce* as a romance, but adds a more nuanced understanding of its composition and its consequences. The romantic elements of *The Bruce* and Robert I legitimized the Scottish cause for a broad, European audience of nobility, and the Black Douglas and the peasant culture he represented legitimized *The Bruce* as a work of Scottish identity.

⁴²³Brown, *The Black Douglasses*, 27.

CONCLUSION

The Wars of Independence waged by Bruce and later Guardians of Scotland against England and the Disinherited had a calamitous impact on Scottish society. In the 1360s, the border territories in particular were still recovering from the destruction of the recent wars with Edward III.⁴²⁴ Added to this destruction was the devastation of the plague that ravaged Scotland in the 1340s. As Brown noted, “such massive mortality probably added to the confusion of displaced and migrant people” caused by continued confrontations on the border.⁴²⁵ Contemplating why Barbour’s *Bruce* made an impact on the Scottish national consciousness, it is vital to consider this context — that Barbour’s poem was penned for a Scotland ravaged by political, societal, and demographic chaos, yet clinging to its sovereignty as a nation. Barbour then, attempting to shape the identity of a nation to support Scottish sovereignty, used the power of literary sentiment.

In the first chapter I argued that the political images and ideals communicated through the chanson genre and its laudation of a traditional feudal hierarchy functioned in *The Bruce* to promote loyalty to the Stewart monarchy. In addition, the understanding of *geste* as both deeds and a family history highlighted the relation of the Stewart monarchs to the Bruce dynasty and added Bruce’s military prowess to their own prestige. Finally, Barbour employed the popular crusading ethos of the chansons to elevate the Scottish cause and denigrate the English as an evil Other, encouraging antagonism towards their southern neighbors during a time of renewed warfare.

In the second chapter I argued that the Icelandic family saga and its focus on feud, compromise, and just legal assemblies simplified the complicated disputes at the heart of the Scottish wars and vindicated Robert I’s seizure of the throne. Through the use of tropes from the

⁴²⁴ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 316.

⁴²⁵ Brown, *The Wars of Scotland*, 318.

Icelandic family sagas, *The Bruce* countered other narratives whose detailed description of the “Great Cause” contradicted the story that justified Bruce’s campaign of ambition and bloodshed. In addition, the Icelandic motif of blood-feuding contextualized the problematic conflict not between Scotland and England, but amongst a divided Scottish community of noble families. This combated accounts which described Robert I’s campaign as causing division and accused Robert I of failing to handle the consequences. By reframing internal Scottish conflicts Barbour also encouraged diplomatic reconciliation between the Scottish nobility and the royal family in favor of the Stewart monarchy.

In the third chapter I argued that, while Barbour used the motifs of romances, sagas, and chansons, to characterize Robert Bruce as chivalrous, he drew on the motifs of outlaw ballads to characterize James Douglas as a Scottish folk hero who challenged the injustice of English rule. This differed from the accounts of English, Scottish, and French chroniclers, who either passed over or only briefly recounted Douglas’s cunning maneuvers on Scottish soil, while devoting attention to Douglas’s more chivalrous and famous exploit, battling Islamic armies in Spain. Considering all of this in the context of Barbour’s time, the characterization of Douglas as a folk hero connected him to the folk hero of the early wars, William Wallace, thereby transferring Wallace’s renown and connection with the will of Scotland’s people in the 1290s to Douglas in the early 1300s and the Bruce-Stewart cause by extension. Moreover, the presence of commoners, who were central to the plot and theme of the Robin Hood ballads, were also central to Barbour’s characterization of Douglas. Barbour, illuminating the praise of Douglas and his deeds outside the ranks of Bruce’s knights and within the oral culture of Scotland, contrasted the accounts of other chroniclers who either did not include Douglas’s place in popular culture or identified him as a source of fear for English people and knights alike. This was significant for Barbour given his

attempt to compose a national narrative which responded to the events of recent decades that had left the Scottish populace with more power and influence in Scottish society.

Memorializing a past war to address a contemporary war and politics, Barbour contributed to a long tradition of literature and warfare in western Europe: “Reading about war in times of war forms another kind of redaction of war into words: the words of one war are transposed onto the experience of another, shaping its experience and representation anew.”⁴²⁶ Thus the wars of the early 1300s provided perspective for the conflicts of the 1370s, and the solidarity fostered through poetry that transcended a generation became the foundation for a growing national identity in Scotland. Considering the widespread influence of his work, Barbour successfully accomplished his goal. The Scotsman Walter Bower, for example, writing his Latin chronicle of the Scotland in the 1440s, declined to include a narrative of Robert I’s deeds, claiming they were so numerous that their inclusion would bore the reader. Instead, he recommends another source: “I therefore refer the reader who wants to be fed an account of his [Robert I’s] admirable integrity and achievements in war to the book on Bruce which Barbour has compiled in beautiful prose in our native tongue.”⁴²⁷ Commemoration of Robert I is still prominent in modern Scotland, as abbeys, castles, and universities continue to commission statues of the heroic king.⁴²⁸ The contemporary politics of Bruce and the Wars of Independence, however, just like the politics of Barbour’s time, are more complex. Moreover, the politics of Bruce’s legacy, as they did in Barbour’s time, continue to extend beyond the boundaries of Scotland.

⁴²⁶ Stephanie Downes and Andrew Lynch, “‘In Form of War:’ War and Emotional Formation in European History,” in *Writing War in Britain and France, 1370-1854*, eds. Stephanie Downes, Andrew Lynch, and Katrina O’Loughlin, 1–22 (London: Routledge, 2019), 5.

⁴²⁷ Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon: In Latin and English*, edited and translated by D.E.R. Watt, vol. 7 (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press 1987), 51.

⁴²⁸ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 17.

In an article from *The Guardian* in 2008, Scottish historian Katie Steven and other experts responded to a statement made by United States senator John McCain. McCain, who was then a hopeful presidential candidate, claimed his family was descended from Robert Bruce. Echoing the criticism of other historians, Stevenson declared the notion a “wonderful fiction.”⁴²⁹ Stevenson’s statement ignited a shocking amount of backlash: “In 2008 I was the victim of a group (I have been unable to discover the appropriate collective noun) of US Republican internet trolls and a campaign of e-bullying for daring to suggest...that John McCain’s claims to descend from Robert Bruce were little more than propaganda.”⁴³⁰ Internet trolling is a recent phenomenon, but Stevenson connected the modern popularity of Robert Bruce to his reputation in the 1370s:

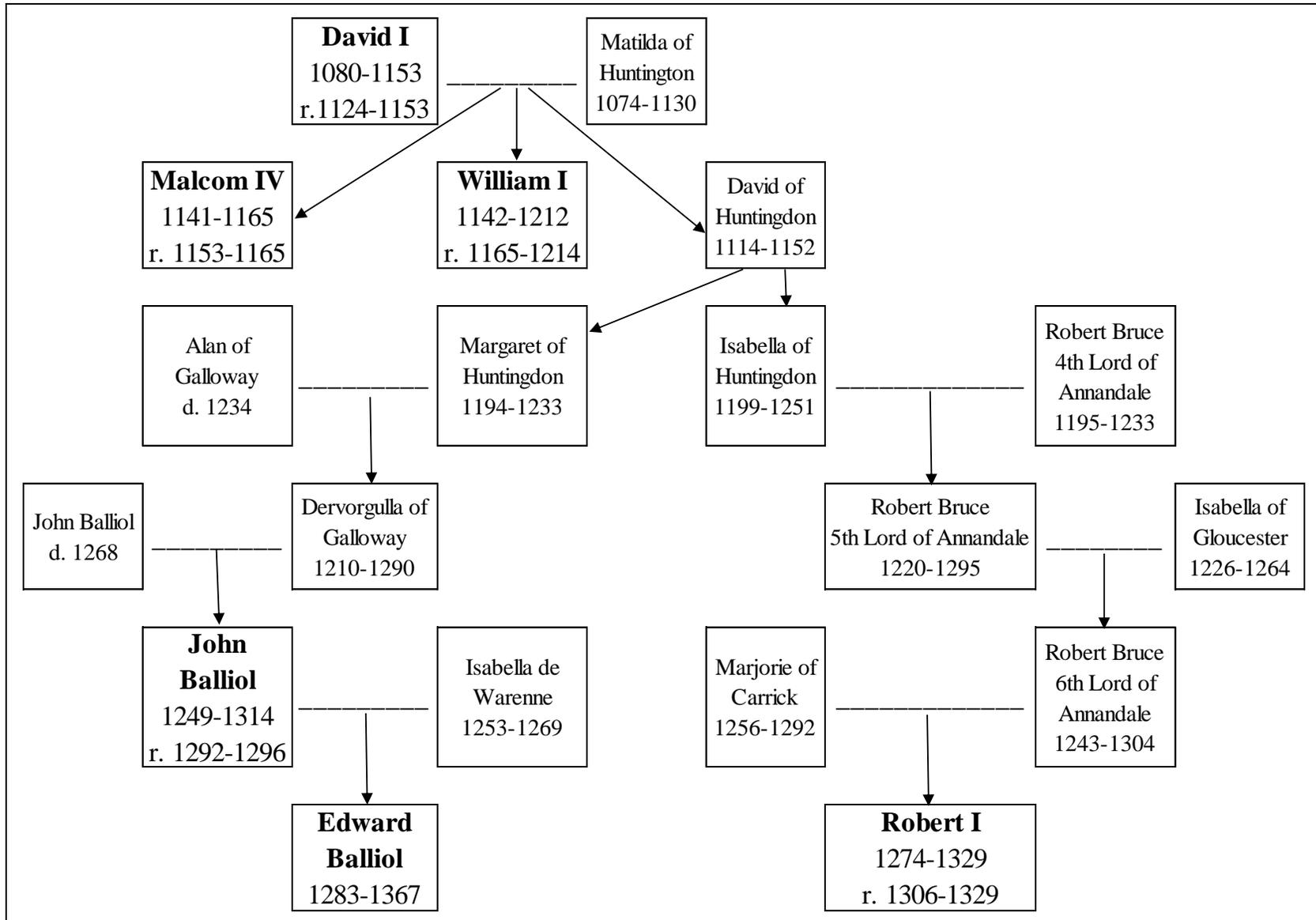
The evidence for the cachet of Robert Bruce in North American culture (incidentally, Robert Bruce was also the inspiration for the first name of Batman’s alter ego Bruce Wayne) and its use in modern political mythmaking would not have been unfamiliar to the elites of the late middle ages. The keen desire for powerful individuals to claim descent from Bruce has a long history, and it was an active process that took place immediately after his death in 1329.⁴³¹

Barbour’s image of Robert Bruce and his generation, which evoked a strong emotional response in medieval Europe, continues to provoke passionate responses in modern politics. *The Bruce*, and the amalgamation of literary genres it contains, speaks to the larger questions of how historical narratives are consciously constructed within specific cultural contexts for specific audiences and how these narratives retain their power of influence long after the people and cultures that created them have perished.

⁴²⁹ Paul Lewis, “John McCain, Veteran War Hero: Yes. But a Descendant of Robert the Bruce? Baloney.” *The Guardian*, March 21, 2008.

⁴³⁰ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 16.

⁴³¹ Stevenson, *Power and Propaganda*, 16.



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