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John Barbour's Bruce: Poetry, History, and Propaganda

Five years after the accession of Robert Stewart to the throne of Scotland in 1371, John Barbour, Archdeacon of Aberdeen, wrote the Bruce, a narrative poem of 13,864 lines which celebrates the deeds of Stewart's grandfather, Robert Bruce. The poem not only won the immediate acclaim of Barbour's contemporaries, but was considered by many chroniclers to be the most elegant and authoritative account of Bruce's reign.1 Although recent scholars have recognized the poem's merit and repeatedly have edited, anthologized, and praised the Bruce, they have been puzzled by many of its features. In the first place, while the Bruce ostensibly deals with the deeds, wars, and virtues of the illustrious King Robert I, the action of the poem begins in 1286 or twenty years before his reign and ends in 1332, four years after his death. In many episodes, Bruce is forgotten entirely and we focus instead on James Douglas, Edward Bruce, or other lesser heroes. Although Barbour devotes considerable attention to these heroes, moreover, he conspicuously ignores the exploits of the more prominent Scottish hero William Wallace.

In addition to its divided focus and curious limitations of time and subject matter, the action of the Bruce is oddly proportioned. Of the 13,864 lines of the poem, only 408 are devoted to the first 19 years of the narrative, the period from the death of Alexander III to the alliance between Bruce and Comyn in 1304. The next nine years, 1305 to 1314, which encompass events from the murder of Comyn and the coronation of Bruce to the Battle of Bannockburn, are allotted 6,409 lines. Over 2,000 lines are reserved for the episodes relating to the Battle of Bannockburn, chronologically a period of one year, and more than 1,500 of these lines are devoted to the action of the two days of battle — June 23-24, 1314. The last 18 years of the narrative which include the Irish campaign, the capture of Berwick, the negotiations for peace, the death


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of Bruce, and the expedition of Douglas are dealt with rapidly in 4,807 lines. Finally, the Bruce is interrupted so often in its progress by abrupt transitions, didactic digressions, and apparently extraneous matter that many critics feel it lacks development and continuity.

To date, only one solution to these problems has been offered. As R. L. C. Lorimer suggests, the peculiarities of the Bruce may be accounted for by a study of Barbour's sources. In the poem, he argues, Barbour combines two groups of stories from oral tradition, those relating to the Bruce-Stewart family and those relating to the Douglasses. "To compose an original romance or work of epic poetry does not seem to have been Barbour's governing purpose. Rather, he seems initially to have undertaken the task of recording all the stories still current in Bruce-Stewart and Douglas family traditions and both in versifying them and in writing them down, he probably did not alter them any more than strictly was necessary." While the framework of the narrative is based on the exploits of Bruce, Barbour repeatedly inserts stories about Douglas causing the narrative to appear somewhat disjointed and disunified.

Although Lorimer's theory is ingenious, it is supported neither by our knowledge of Barbour's written sources nor by the design of the poem. A more satisfying explanation of the puzzling features of the Bruce is found by re-examining the narrative itself. For the most part in dealing with the Bruce, critics have focused their attention on Barbour's form. But by approaching the Bruce as a conventional epic, romance, or chronicle, they have brought certain assumptions to bear on the poem which are inappropriate to its development and have confused rather than clarified Barbour's purposes. While the Bruce resembles each of these genres in certain ways, it fits no single category comfortably. The poem is neither a "chronicle written in romance spirit,"

5. Wittig, Scottish Tradition, p. 25.
nor an epic "which lacks epic development," but a carefully planned and purposeful narrative. As the present study demonstrates, it is more accurate to view the Bruce as an exemplum or mirror designed to illustrate the importance of the ideals of freedom and loyalty for the Scottish nation. When the poem is considered from this point of view, as we shall see, its puzzling features are explicable.

At the outset of the Bruce, Barbour provides a clear indication of his purpose and method. As he explains, he will tell a true story of great men who lived prior to his time in order to preserve their deeds in our minds:

... I wald fayne set my will,
Gif my wit mycht suffice thartill,
To put in wryt a suthfast story,
That it lest ay furth in memory,
Swa that na [lenth of tyme] it let,
Na get it haly be forget.

Stories such as the one he will relate show us the worthy actions of our ancestors exactly as they occurred (I, 17-22). By carefully considering the example of these heroes, man may gain insight into events, for the experiences of the past may recur in the future. As Barbour warns his countrymen with reference to their own national history:

... wys men sayis he is happy,
That be othir will him chast.
For wnfayr thingis may fall, perfay,
Als weil to-morn as qhisterday. (I, 121-24)

The manner in which Barbour presents the narrative further indicates his concern with the moral and practical utility of "aulde storrys" like the Bruce. Unfortunately, his methods have been obscured in part by the book divisions imposed on the poem by its editors. By dividing the work into twenty large units, they have encouraged the view that the development of the Bruce is one of steady linear progression, a continuous narrative separated into uniform parts. But in the manuscripts the action appears as a series of episodes of greatly varying length, each

6. Alexander Kinghorn, ed., Barbour: the Bruce, A Selection (Edinburgh & London: Oliver & Boyd, 1960), p. 7. See also Janet Smith's statement (French Background, p. xiv) "Barbour's great poem The Bruce—epic, we might call it—is half way between chronicle and romance."

distinct and self-contained and loosely connected to the surrounding episodes by brief transitional passages. 8

By developing the narrative in this way, Barbour directs the reader’s attention to the incident rather than to longer sections of narrative or continuous strands of action. Each episode is carefully developed as a unit with a definite beginning, middle, and end and Barbour typically develops the action by techniques which draw attention to its exemplary value. In some cases, he presents an entire episode as a short exemplum, borrowing the techniques of this genre. 9 But more often, he simply interrupts the action of a particular episode to comment on its significance in a brief digression, a “set speech” by one of the characters, or an example from ancient literature which clarifies the meaning of the event in the Bruce. In depicting the conquests of Edward Bruce in Ireland, for example, Barbour pauses on several occasions to indicate that these events may be seen as an illustration of the way in which pride hinders success. Though Edward Bruce had marched through the entire country, he could not subdue it.

Couth he haf governit hym throu skill,
And fallowit nocht to fast his will,
Bot with mesour haf led his deid,
It was weil sik, withouten dreid,
That he mycht haf conquest weil
The land of Ireland eurik deill
Bot his outrageous succrudy
And will, thar mar wes [than] hardy,
Of purpos letit hym, perfay, . . . (XVI, 312-29) 10

Most obviously, Barbour uses the exempla he develops from the narrative to illustrate the qualities essential to an ideal king or ruler. As

8. In the two manuscripts (Cambridge MS. G. 23 and the Edinburgh MS.), the Bruce is not divided into books. The only division is that of long paragraphs or sections, demarcated by a space for an illuminated letter. John Pinkerton in his edition of 1790 (London: H. Leigh) first divided the poem into twenty books. His divisions were followed by many editors since his time, including W. W. Skeat and W. M. Mackenzie (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1909). John Jamieson, however, to distinguish his edition of 1820 (Glasgow: Maurice Ogle & Co.) from Pinkerton’s, divided the work into fourteen books. In only one edition since Pinkerton’s, the 1856 edition of Cosmo Innes (Aberdeen: Spalding Club), is the work printed according to the paragraphs of the manuscripts.

9. See, for example, Barbour’s account of the encounter with the men of Galloway (VI, 1-372) in which he presents Bruce’s defeat of 200 men in a narrow pass as an example of valor—the mean between foolhardiness and cowardice.

10. See also, for example, XIII, 632-60; XII, 206-324; I, 515-564.
he emphasizes, the character of the ruler is critical for the survival and well-being of the nation. A worthy king inspires his subjects to noble deeds; a villainous one prompts their destruction:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\ldots \text{ for quhen that be} \\
&\text{Is of sic will and sic bounte,} \\
&\text{That he dar put him till assay,} \\
&\text{His folk sall tak ensampill ay} \\
&\text{Of his gud deid and his bounte,} \\
&\text{That ane of thame sall be worth thre} \\
&\text{Of thame that vikkid chiltane has;} \\
&\text{His vrechidnes so in thame gais,} \\
&\text{That thai thair manlynes sall tyne} \\
&\text{Throu vrechidnes of his couyne. (IX, 69-78)}
\end{align*}
\]

During the course of the poem, Barbour defines and contrasts these two types of rulers, dramatically illustrating the virtues necessary to a king and the unworthy qualities to be avoided.

In the figure of Bruce, Barbour creates a model of the good king or ruler. As the narrative unfolds, Bruce exhibits by turn the many qualities essential to his position—strength and courage in battle, wisdom and prudence in the maintenance of the realm, generosity, courtesy, and compassion toward his subjects, and personal honor, integrity, and devoutness. More important than any single aspect of his character, as Barbour repeatedly emphasizes, is Bruce's ideal combination or balance of virtues. He is not only valiant, but he is also prudent. As the narrator observes "\ldots hardyment, gournit with vit,/That he all tym vall samyn knyt,/Gert him of vorschip haf the priss \ldots" (VI, 369-71). Bruce can defeat a formidable number of his enemies single-handed as seen in his encounter with the men of Galloway (VI, 1-372), but he also knows when to retreat and save the lives of his men as evidenced by his actions at Methven and Dalry (II, 426-40; III, 31-60). He combines firmness and justice in his rule with compassion for his people. Thus to the admiration of many critics, Bruce even pauses in the middle of a dangerous march in Ireland to comfort a poor laudsan-woman in the throes of childbirth. As the narrator emphasizes after describing the incident:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{This wes a full gret curtasy,} \\
&\text{That sic a kyng and swa mychry} \\
&\text{Gert his men duel on this maner} \\
&\text{Bot for a full pouir laynder. (XVI, 289-92)}
\end{align*}
\]

Above all, Bruce's actions are infused by a sense of honor befitting a ruler. As king and leader of the Scots, he is uncompromising in his loyalty to his subjects and the principles for which they struggle.
Set in opposition to the Bruce are the Edwards of England whom Barbour presents as types of the tyrant or unjust ruler. In contrast to his treatment of the Bruce, he assigns to the English kings a more odious character than they had historically. A striking example of his technique is found in his presentation of the death of Edward I (IV, 189-335). By skilfully transferring this event from its true chronological position in July, 1307 to the previous year, Barbour links Edward's death with his cruel treatment of the Scottish prisoners in 1306. Although the two incidents occurred a year apart, Barbour represents Edward callously sentencing the Scots on his death-bed:

And quhen he to the del wes ner,
The folk that at Kyndrummy wer,
Com with the presoners at thai had tane,
And srie [vr]to the kyng ar gane.
And for to confort him thai tald,
How thai the castell to tham gald,
And how thai to his will var brocht,
Till do of thame of what euir he thoche;
And askit quhar thai sud of thaim do.
Than luikit he awfully thame to,
And said, gyrnand, "hangis & drawis!" (IV, 312-22)

As the narrator adds, Edward was so cruel that he could hope for no mercy from God after his death. But even more reprehensible than their cruelty, Barbour stresses, is the English kings' deviousness and lack of principle as rulers.11 In the Bruce, they represent the negation of the principles essential to the worthy king.

Bruce's ideal combination of traits is further emphasized by Barbour's treatment of Edward Bruce, who in many episodes is presented as a foil to his more illustrious brother. Daring in battle, often to an extreme, Edward possesses the courage and strength of a warrior without the corresponding prudence and wisdom essential to a king. In delineating the exploits of Edward Bruce, Barbour repeatedly draws attention to his rashness. When the Scots land at Turnberry Point only to find themselves dangerously outnumbered by the enemy, it is Edward Bruce who insists on giving battle (V, 64-70). Likewise, it is Edward who, with only fifty men, daringly attacks 1500 of the English under Sir Aymer de St. John (IX, 54-631). Again Edward rashly grants Sir Philip de Mowbray a year’s respite in the Siege of Stirling. As Bruce reprimands his brother, "That wes vnwisly done, perfay;/ I herd neuir quhar so lang varynyg/ Wes gevin to so mychty ane kyng . . ." (XI, 38-40). While Edward's "rash boldness" is often successful, it can also lead to ruin and defeat as his tragic exploits in Ireland reveal (XVIII,

11. See, for example, I, 91-118; XIX, 141-202.
I-184). Thus, while Edward is a worthy fighter whose prowess exceeds most men's, he is surpassed by his brother the Bruce, who combines strength with intelligence.

Finally, Barbour treats James Douglas and, to a lesser extent, Thomas Randolph as examples of the ideal knight and subject. Douglas, though too young and willful to achieve the stature of king, is repeatedly presented as an embodiment of knightly virtues:

All men lufth him for his boute;
For he wes of full fayr effect,
Wyss, curtiass, and deboner;
Lang and luffand als wes he,
And our all thing luffy lawte. (I, 360-64)

The key to his character, however, is in the last line. Above all else, Barbour stresses Douglas’ loyalty. From the beginning of the work to its concluding scenes, Douglas is consistently associated with this virtue. He is introduced with an elaborate digression on the importance of loyalty (I, 356-78), and even after his death, Barbour interrupts the narrative to remind the reader that, like the ancient Fabricius, Douglas always shunned treason and valued loyalty (XX, 516-24; 562-66).

But more important than Barbour’s presentation of the Bruce as a kings’ mirror or a series of examples designed to illustrate the qualities essential to a good king, is his treatment of the narrative as an example for the entire Scottish nation. As his critics have not recognized, Barbour considerably restructures the history of 1286-1332 to demonstrate the importance of ideals relevant to the Scots at the time in which he is writing. By repeated emphasis in the individual episodes, he encourages us to view the war between Scotland and England as a conflict of freedom against thraldom, right against might, a struggle in which the Scots are victorious because of the principles for which they fight. This view of the war controls the pace, structure, and proportions of the Bruce, and, in many cases, governs Barbour’s treatment of specific historical events.

In the opening episodes of the poem, one can see clearly the relation between the two kinds of mirrors in the Bruce. As Barbour indicates at the outset of the poem (I, 27-33), he will focus deliberately on both Bruce and Douglas, and, in lines 37-444 which serve as a poem or prologue to the action, he divides his attention carefully between the two heroes. Significantly, he presents each in terms of the most important virtue he represents as king or subject. Bruce, whom he introduces as the rightful and worthy ruler, is portrayed as the champion of Scottish freedom. In contrast both to John Balliol, who would betray his country’s independence for the crown, and to King Edward I of England, whom
Barbour represents as a usurper of freedom, Bruce steadfastly defends the ideal upon which Scotland's existence as a nation depends (I, 157-64). Likewise, in the second part of the prologue, Barbour introduces Douglas as the champion of "laute"—loyalty, fidelity, honor—the virtue which gives worth to all other knightly qualities. But by linking the virtues which Bruce and Douglas represent as king and subject to recent historical events still fresh in the minds of his audience, Barbour skillfully gives them a significance beyond the ordinary scope of the "kings' mirror." As the prologue suggests, the war between Scotland and England was caused by a threat to these ideals and the Scots, though fewer in number and less powerful than the English, will be victorious only because they fight for freedom and right.

Rather than providing a continuous narrative of the years 1286-1304, in the prologue, Barbour concentrates on two incidents which he presents as examples of English injury to the Scots by interference with their freedom and right. By his manipulation of history in delineating these incidents, he forces us at the outset of the poem to consider the action in terms of its underlying moral significance. His treatment of the dispute over the succession, the first of the two incidents, immediately reveals the emphasis he gives to the narrative. According to Barbour, after the death of Alexander III in 1286, the Scots summon Edward I from the Holy Land to help them determine their lawful king. Edward, however, instead of dealing honorably, attempts to gain sovereignty over the Scots. He first offers the crown to Bruce, who, in Barbour's version, refuses it unless he can reign in freedom:

"Schr," said [Bruce], "Sa god me save,
The kynryk scharn I nocht to have,
Bor gyff it fall of rycht to me:
And gyff god will that it sa be,
I sall als frely in all thing
Hald it, as it aferis to king;
Or as myn eldris forouch me
Held it in freyste reawe." (I, 156-64)

Edward then presents the crown to Balliol, who is willing to compromise Scottish freedom to become king. For this reason, Balliol reigns only briefly before he is degraded and the country is subjugated by the English (I, 171-78). After graphically representing the atrocities committed against the Scots as a result of their loss of freedom, Barbour concludes this section of the prologue by celebrating the ideal of freedom in a dramatic outburst by the narrator:

A! fredome is a noble thing!
Fredome mayss man to haiff liking;
Fredome all solace to man giffits:
He levys at ess that frely levys!
A noble hart may haif nane ess,
Na elys nocht that may him pless,
Giff fredome failghe; for fre liking
It gharnyt our all othr thing. (I, 225-32)

To present the dispute over the succession as a conflict of freedom and thraldom, Barbour considerably alters the history of 1286-98. In the first place, Scotland was not as helpless in 1286 as Barbour suggests. Six guardians, appointed less than a month after Alexander's death by a convention at Scone, ruled in the name of the king's lawful heir, the infant Margaret of Norway. Among them were two earls, Alexander Comyn of Buchan and Duncan of Fife, and two barons, John Comyn of Badenoch and James the Stewart. As the public records indicate, this body managed the affairs of state effectively during the "sex ger" interval between kings. 12

Edward I, moreover, had considerable precedent for his intervention in the Scottish dispute. On several occasions since the death of Alexander III, he had been consulted by the Scots as a "friendly arbitrator" or adviser in their internal affairs. 13 Finally, he conducted the business of selecting a king with at least outward concern for the law. By transferring all reference to the public debate between Bruce and Balliol to the beginning of the prologue, in his version before the arrival of Edward I as arbitrator, Barbour is able to omit entirely the elaborate legal proceedings which governed each step of the competition. When he deals with Edward's judgment in favor of Balliol, the only hint he provides that a parliament or official debate was held under Edward's supervision is found in the following few lines:

And syne till Scotland word send he
That thai suld mak ane assemblie;
And be in by suld cum to do
In all thing, as thai wrayt him to. (I, 145-48)

Barbour's omissions are striking both in view of the formality with which the proceedings were conducted and in terms of the other chron-


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icle accounts of the competition. The actual competition for the crown lasted from the parliament at Norham in May, 1291, to the judgment in favor of Balliol at Berwick in November, 1292, and involved fourteen competitors in proceedings before a court of 104 auditors.\textsuperscript{14} After lengthy arguments by the major claimants, Balliol was finally chosen on the basis of a strict rule of primogeniture. Unlike Barbour, moreover, both English and Scottish writers devote considerable attention to the events of the competition. Gray, Guisborough, and the Lanercost chronicler, for example, all refer to the Parliament of Norham, the debate of the claimants, the efforts of Edward I to ascertain the opinions of legal experts, the appointment of a commission of Scots and English to judge the case, and their ultimate selection of Balliol as king.\textsuperscript{15} The Scottish chroniclers, Wintonoun, Forthoun, and Bower, likewise report the details of the competition and even summarize the intricate arguments of the major claimants.\textsuperscript{16} Where they differ from the English writers is in their attempt to rationalize the outcome of the competition by means of anecdote. According to the Scots, although the commission favored Bruce on the basis of both law and custom, Edward I forced them to select Balliol as king because of an encounter with the Bishop of Durham.\textsuperscript{17}

Finally, Barbour's treatment of Bruce's rival, although suitable for his purpose, is misleading. Balliol, in fact, was king for more than a "litill quhile," and though he ultimately delivered his sceptre in abject

\textsuperscript{14} For a detailed summary of the proceedings between May, 1291 and November, 1292 and the texts of the relevant documents, see: Sir Francis Palgrave, ed., \textit{Documents and Records Illustrating the History of Scotland} (London: Record Commission, 1837), pp. i-xciv, 14-56; for a good review of the conflicting claims, see: Barnaby C. Keeney, "The Medieval Idea of State: the Great Cause, 1291-2," \textit{University of Toronto Law Journal}, VIII, 48-71.


\textsuperscript{17} According to the Scots, the Bishop of Durham reminded Edward of Bruce's nobility and courage and asked him where he would be if Bruce were made king. Edward answered him in French, "vous aves bun chante" and remarked that things shall go otherwise than he had first arranged. (Forthoun, \textit{Annals}, LXXII; Wintonoun, \textit{Cronykil}, Bk. VIII, 11. 889-916; Bower, \textit{Scotichronicon}, Bk. XI, chap. xi.
humility to Edward, he had moments of rebellion and strength. Moreover, as G. W. S. Barrow points out, there is no evidence other than the anecdotes in the Scottish chronicles of Balliol's degrading agreement with Edward to obtain the crown. But by placing the decision for Balliol entirely in Edward's hands and by omitting the events of the competition, Barbour turns the situation of 1286-89 into a dramatic example of English infringement of Scottish freedom and right.

The remainder of the prologue serves as a second example of the English threat to these ideals. Barbour begins with a general description of the wretchedness of the Scots and then, as a case in point, refers to the experiences of the Douglasses, relating how Sir William was deprived of his lands, imprisoned, and finally put to death as a martyr (I, 281-87). Again Barbour embellishes the historical fact to suit his thematic purpose. While William Douglas was imprisoned by the English, it was not without provocation. Having joined the Scots who followed Wallace, he was forced to submit to the English at Irvine in 1297, and a few weeks later, was confined to Berwick Castle for failing to fulfill his terms of surrender. According to the records which survive, Douglas died in prison of natural causes rather than English execution. Turning from the fate of William Douglas to his son, James, Barbour stresses his unjust treatment at the hands of the English king. Like Bruce, Barbour indicates, Douglas is deprived of his rightful position in favor of a candidate of Edward's choosing. Significantly, by focusing on Douglas rather than Bruce between 1298 and 1304, Barbour avoids dealing with a questionable period in Bruce's career when, as public records indicate, on at least three occasions before 1305, he put his own interests before his country's and joined forces with those who could best advance his career.

When one recognizes the emphasis of the prologue and Barbour's concern with presenting the events of 1286-1332 as an example of the

18. Balliol reigned for three years and seven months from November 30, 1292, to July 7, 1296. Near the end of his reign, for example, he defied Edward I, revoked his homage and fealty, and denounced the actions of the English king in harsh terms (Fordun, Annals, LXXXVI-VII).

19. Barrow, Robert Bruce, p. 44.


21. There is no record that he was slaughtered by the English while he was in prison. According to Bain, CDS, II, nos. 1054, 1055, Douglas died before January 20, 1298-99 when his wife is referred to as his widow.

22. Bain, CDS, II, nos. 832, 909, 910, 961, 995, 1109, 1292, 1301, 1302, 1303, 1334, 1356, 1385, 1403, 1420, 1437, 1465, 1495, 1510, 1540, 1546, 1548, 1651, 1652, 1657, 1691, 1743; Palgrave, Documents, pp. cvii, 197-200.
importance of freedom and right, the time limits and proportions of the Bruce are no longer puzzling. The years 1286-1332, arbitrary in terms of Bruce’s career, are the chronological limits of the first period of the War of Independence, the period in which the Scots successfully defended their freedom. The death of Alexander III in 1286 is the event which in Barbour’s view precipitates the dispute over the succession and the English attempt to gain sovereignty over Scotland. And 1332, the year with which the poem ends, marks the conclusion of this phase of the war. In that year, Edward III initiated a more aggressive policy toward the Scots and encouraged Balliol, the son of the late King John, to cross the border in arms and claim the throne as his vassal. Barbour, however, carefully avoids reference to this event and the renewed threat of English domination in order to limit the narrative to the Scot’s victory over the English.

While the prologue introduces the causes of the war as a breach of Scottish freedom and right, the body of the poem represents the Scot’s actions and the ultimate defeat of the English as the just triumph of these ideals. Although the proportions of the poem are odd in historical terms, they are well suited to Barbour’s purpose. Logically, he gives most emphasis to those events which provide the best examples of his theme. As the greatest victory for the Scots, the Battle of Bannockburn thus warrants the attention it receives in the Bruce. One can see clearly Barbour’s manipulation of the events of 1286-1332 for his own thematic purposes by examining two different kinds of episodes in detail.

In the first of these episodes, the encounter between Bruce and John Comyn, Barbour is forced to manipulate known history to fit his own view of the war. As he indicates at the outset of the narrative proper, the Scottish struggle for independence is like the Biblical struggle of the Macabees to free their land and avenge the wrongs inflicted on them. As God preserved these warriors, so He will aid the Scots against the English (l. 459-75). But although the Scots are aided by God and thus should be victorious, historically at this time, as Barbour’s audience knew, they suffered repeated set-back and defeat. Barbour skilfully resolves this conflict by inserting a curious series of episodes between Bruce and John Comyn, the nephew of Balliol.

According to Barbour, after the occupation of the English, Comyn recognized Bruce’s pity for his countrymen and approached him with a plan. One of them would become king and lead the nation out of bondage; the other would receive his ally’s lands in return for aid in this venture. Bruce chose to take the kingdom and entered into a secret pact with Comyn to this effect. Within a short time, however, Comyn treacherously revealed the agreement to Edward I, whereupon the English
king summoned Bruce to a parliament and challenged him with the matter. With the aid of a loyal servant, Bruce fortunately escaped to Scotland where he confronted Comyn with the indenture and killed him before the altar of Friar's Church, Dumfries.

Historically, no record survives of the alliance between the two men other than the anecdotes in contemporary chronicles. While English letters refer to Comyn's murder, they fail to mention his previous relations with Bruce. The few facts of the agreement which might be verified, moreover, either are not substantiated or are contradicted by public record. According to the documents extant, for example, Edward I did not hold a parliament at this time which Bruce could have attended. Yet these episodes cannot be discredited entirely since each of the major chroniclers, Scottish and English, includes a version of these events. As E. M. Barron suggests, Bruce probably murdered Comyn in an unpremeditated quarrel. The two men were members of rival parties and had been on bad terms since 1298. In 1299 at a council of Scottish leaders, Comyn even seized Bruce by the throat in a moment of anger. The story of their alliance appears to have developed later in an effort to explain Bruce's deed and may even be based upon the circumstances of an actual alliance between Bruce and Bishop Lambert, formed in the same year as the purported Bruce-Comyn agreement and similar in many details.

Skillfully, Barbour exploits the Bruce-Comyn incidents to rationalize the action of the first section of the narrative—the early set-backs of the Scots. In contrast to all of the chronicle accounts except Wymoun's which follows the Bruce verbatim, Barbour makes Comyn rather than Bruce suggest the alliance. By this change, he is able to assign to Comyn a statement of Bruce's right to be king:

... schir, will ge nocht se
How that gouernyt is this countree?
Thai sla our folk but enchesoune,
And halidin this land agayne resounce,
And ge tharoff [full] suld lord be. (I, 485-89)

23. See, for example, Bain, CDS, II, nos. 1747, 1754.
26. For this suggestion, see: Mackenzie, Bruce, pp. 387-88.
27. Compare with Bruce, I, 477-510; Fordun, Annals, CXIII; Bower, Scotichronicon, Bk. XII, chap. v; Liber Placodensis, ed. by F. H. J. Skene (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1880), Bk. IX, chap. iv; Gray, Scalacronica, p. 29.
Likewise, in defending the proposed alliance, Barbour has Comyn refer to the urgent desire of the Scots to free themselves from English "thrall-age" and the need for a leader to implement their struggle. (I, 500-02). Thus, in betraying Bruce, in Barbour's view, Comyn commits treason against his country as villainous as that of Mordred, Brutus, and the betrayer of Alexander.

But although Bruce's murder of Comyn is justifiable in these terms, Bruce sinned in killing him at the altar and thus, as Barbour explains:

\[\ldots\] sa hard myscheiff him fell,
That ik herd neuir in romanys tell
Off men sa hard [steel] as wes he,
That efterwart com to sic boun. (III, 45-48)

The idea of a hard struggle before success as a result of Bruce's sin is reiterated throughout the first section of the narrative becoming almost a leit-motif to the action. At the outset of the history, Barbour indicates he will tell:

Off men that war in gret distres,
And assayit full gret hardynes
Of thai mycht cum till thai entent \ldots\ (I, 447-49)

After Bruce is crowned at Scone, he reminds himself that he will have a difficult fight before achieving his purpose. "He wysst, or all the land war wonyn,/ He suld fynd full hard barganyng \ldots\" (II, 190-91). Likewise, the good woman of Arran prophesies that Bruce will overcome his foes and rule the country, but first "\ldots feill anoyis thoill she sall,/ Or that yaur purpose ende haf tane \ldots\" (IV, 659-60). By thus linking the murder of Comyn directly with the early defeats of the partisans, Barbour shapes the historical action of the first section of the narrative to fit his scheme.

A more dramatic example of Barbour's treatment of history to reinforce his thematic purpose is found in his presentation of the Battle of Bannockburn. Unlike the Bruce-Comyn incidents, these episodes initially do not contradict Barbour's scheme. But the manner in which Barbour presents the events significantly heightens their exemplary value. By repeatedly qualifying the action of the battle, he turns the famous military victory for the Scots into a climactic illustration of the importance of freedom and right.

In the first place, Barbour draws maximum attention to this section of the narrative. At the outset of these incidents, he abruptly changes the pace of his story, and in contrast to the rapidity of the action leading up to Bannockburn, he relates the events of the two-day battle with
painstaking slowness. The action repeatedly is interrupted by detailed descriptions of weapons, military strategy, and lengthy "set speeches." Full reports are given of the preparations of the two armies, with exact renditions of the number of troops, the region from which they are drawn, the routes of their march, and the peculiarities of the terrain. The battle itself is impeded in its progress by frequent digressions, and some of the episodes are related twice, once as we witness the event and again as a messenger repeats the action. 28

In addition to setting off the battle from the rest of the narrative by these changes in tempo and technique, Barbour continually points up the moral significance of the action by narrative comments, anecdotes, and digressions. In contrast to the order chronicle accounts of Bannockburn, 29 he presents the battle as a struggle for freedom and right in which the outcome is determined by a power greater than sheer military force. By relying on the aid of God and the ideals for which they fight, the Scots, though fewer in number, are able to defeat the entire English army.

At the outset of the battle, Barbour represents the English rejoicing in the anticipation of their certain victory. Confident in the power of their army, they believe that "na strinth" can withstand them. But as the narrator interjects:

A litill stane oft, as men sayis
May get wextir ane mekill wane.
Na manis mycht may stund agane
The grace of god, that all thing stetis. . . . (XI, 24-27)

In the descriptions of the events which follow, Barbour places a heavy emphasis on the "mycht" of the English and their confidence in their own "streth," referring to them as "men of mekill mycht" or men "mar of mycht" so often that these phrases become almost an epithet for their forces. 30 Unlike the English, the Scots place their trust in God and the principles for which they fight. The difference in their attitudes is underscored vividly by a brief incident which Barbour inserts before the fighting of the second day. As both sides prepare for the battle, the Scots kneel in prayer to God, the source of their "mycht." Edward,

28. See, for example: Bruce, XI, 509; XII, 170; XII, 355-66.
29. See, for example: Gray, Scalacronica, pp. 52-57; Vita Edwardi Secundi Monaci cuissidam Malmesberiensis; the Life of Edward the Second by the so-called Monk of Malmesbury, ed. and transl. by N. Denholm-Young (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd., 1957), pp. 49-56.
however, misinterprets their gesture dramatizing the distance between his outlook and the Scots:

The Scotch men full deuotly
Knekyt [all] doun, till god to pray,
And a schорт prayer their maid thai
Till god, till help thame in that fight.
And quhen the Ynglis king had sicht
Of thame kneeland, he said in by -. -
"Yon folk kneelis till ask mercy."
Schir Yagerame said, "Ye say suth now;
Thai ask mercy, bot nocht at gow." (XII, 476-84)

While the English fight solely to extend their power, Barbour emphasizes, the Scots struggle for the freedom and right of their land. At the outset of the battle, Bruce summons all men "that lufis vs tendirly/
And the fredome of this cuntrie . . . " (XI, 62-63). The Scots think to "de in that melle;/ Or than to mak thar cuntrie fre" (XI, 378-9). In battle, they will defend "thair richt/ Agane men of full mekill mycht" (XI, 418-9). Thus although the English are numerous and powerful and the Scots are but "few folk of ane sympill land" (XI, 202), Bruce and his men will be victorious, for "quhar god helpis, quhat may withstand?" (XI, 203). By comments like these, Barbour repeatedly points up the significance of the episode and weaves into the very fabric of the text the thematic opposition of freedom and thraldom, right and might.

However, these ideals receive their greatest emphasis in the elaborate "set speeches" which Barbour adds to the narrative of Bannockburn. The longest and most dramatic of these speeches is inserted in the center of the episode between the two days of battle. This address, climactic in its tone and position, provides the poem's most effective statement of the significance of the war. After asking his men whether they wish to continue fighting and receiving the reply that "nane payne sall refusit be/ Till we have maid our cuntrie fre" (XII, 205-06), Bruce reviews the causes for which they struggle:

The first is, that we hat the richt:
And for the richt ilk man suld ficht. (XII, 235-6)

In addition, they fight on their own land, and if victorious, they will be much enriched by English spoils. Finally, and most important, they fight for the freedom of their country while the English struggle only for power:

. . . we for our lyvis
And for our childer and our vivis,
And for the fredome of our land,
[At strengnit] in battle for to stand,
And thai for thai mycht anerly,
And for thai leit of ws lichtly,
And for thai wald distroy vs all,
Main thame to ficht. . . . (XII, 245-52)

As Bruce emphasizes, the Scots might have remained in bondage, but
their desire for freedom brought them together to combat the English
(XII, 281-83). Thus, he concludes that although the English have
greater might, they fight for unjust ends and therefore will be overcome.

Significantly, at the end of the Bannockburn episodes, Barbour boldly
interrupts the narrative to announce the year in which he is writing,
1375, or the fifth year of the reign of Robert Stewart, the grandson of
Bruce, and to pray that Bruce's descendants follow the worthy example
of his deeds:

God grant that thai, that cummyne ar
Of his ofspring manyneyme the land,
And hald the folk weill to warrand,
And manyeteme richt and ek laute,
As well as in his tym he did he! (XIII, 708-12)

Barbour's concern with presenting the events of 1286-1332 as an
example of the importance of freedom, right, and loyalty is seen vividly
by comparing the Bruce with two closely related works—Wynount's
Cronykil and Blind Harry's Wallace. As many critics have noted, both
of these narratives exhibit an unusual degree of dependency on the
Bruce.31 As Wynount admits on several occasions within the narrative,
he has based portions of the history directly on the Bruce.32 Two chapters
of the Cronykil, in fact, are taken almost verbatim from Barbour's
narrative, and, at the end of these chapters, Wynount leaves a gap in
his text, referring the reader to the Bruce for the events he omits.33
Likewise, Blind Harry's Wallace draws heavily on the Bruce. As George
Neilson points out, the Minstrel Hary engages in wholesale pillaging
of the Bruce transferring at will many phrases, characters, episodes, and
even historical events.34 In developing the portrait of his hero, for
example, Hary incorporates Barbour's descriptions of Bruce and Dou-
glas.35 He joins Wallace with comrades like Sir Christopher Seton, Sir

31. See, for example, Skeat, The Bruce, pp. xciii-cvi; George Neilson, "On
Blind Harry's Wallace," English Association Essays and Studies, I (1910),
85-112.

32. Wynount, Cronykil, Bk. VIII, 11. 177-78, 2923-30.

33. Wynount, Cronykil, Bk. VIII, chap. ii, 1. 18.


35. Blind Harry, Harry's Wallace, ed. by Matthew P. McDiarmid (Edin-
burgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1968), X, 1239-40; II, 91-2; XI, 341-4;
Bruce, XX 378; III, 74-6.
Robert Boyd, and Ramsay of Auchterhouse, who have been wrested from their true historical association with Bruce. Likewise, he appropriates many of the episodes from the *Bruce* for use in the *Wallace*—the pursuit of Bruce by sleuth-hounds and his exciting escape across a river, the siege of a castle by men hidden in a wain of hay, among other incidents. Finally, he creates for Wallace battles at Loudounhill, Methven, and Linlithgow not substantiated by contemporary records, in which the Scots defeat the English by stratagems like the ones used in the *Bruce*.

Each author, however, exploits the material he borrows from Barbour in a manner very different from his predecessor's. Wynount, on the one hand, expands Barbour's text to form a continuous chronicle carefully filling in the material which Barbour has omitted, the lengthy debate about the succession, the events of Balliol's reign, and Wallace's rebellion among other incidents. But more important, he changes the focus and emphasis of the narrative by methodically expunging all of the passages in the *Bruce* which Barbour uses to elucidate the action and underscore its exemplary value. In the chapters under consideration, for example, he deletes in its entirety the long celebration of freedom which serves at the outset of the *Bruce* to emphasize the causes for which the Scots struggle. He likewise omits Barbour's passionate outburst against treason and the series of ancient "examples" of this vice, introduced to clarify our view of Comyn's dealings with Bruce. Finally, he ignores Barbour's condemnation of Comyn for his plot against Bruce and the ten-line digression on the folly of that character's pride and ambition. Thus, by these changes he converts Barbour's selective exemplary narrative into a more inclusive history of the origins and development of the Scottish nation.

Hary, on the other hand, develops a narrative designed to move rather than instruct, a work intensely nationalistic and anti-English in outlook, organized around the life of a single, almost superhuman hero. In contrast to Barbour, he concerns himself not with the ideals behind the various episodes, but with the feelings which the action is designed to evoke. Thus, although he pillages a great deal from Barbour, Hary borrows few of his digressions. Rather than the didactic comments,

36. *Wallace*, VII, 1276; *Bruce*, V, 171; II, 243*; *Wallace*, III, 52; VI, 331; VII, 245; *Bruce*, II, 244; IV, 342, 505; VIII, 415; *Wallace*, VII, 890; *Bruce*, XIV, 29.


narrative interruptions, and exampla, he introduces highly charged rhetorical passages to intensify the impact of the action and arouse the feelings of the reader. When the young Wallace is captured and imprisoned by the English, for example, the narrator interrupts the action for almost 100 lines to insert three long laments which emotionalize Wallace's role. At the same time, Hary's rhetoric functions to incite the reader's anger against the English for the harm they inflicted upon the Scottish land and people. In presenting the history, Hary carefully follows each outrage of the English by a passionate expression of anti-English sentiment. Thus although the Bruce and the Wallace both treat the Scottish War of Independence from a nationalistic point of view, Barbour focuses on the meaning behind the struggle, while Hary exploits its emotive value.

An important question remains to be considered. Why in 1375-76 did Barbour turn to the events of 1286-1332 as a mirror for the Scottish nation? Obviously, in writing about the War of Independence under Robert Bruce, Barbour chose a subject inherently interesting to his countrymen. As the immediate descendants of Bruce, Douglas, and the other Scottish heroes, his readers either had witnessed the events related in the poem or had learned about them from the first-hand accounts of their contemporaries. But more important, the years 1286-1332 and 1332-71 were linked by an unmistakable repetition of history. Each period opened with the death of a powerful Scottish king, a popular leader and champion of independence. In the turmoil which followed in 1286 and again in 1332, a Bruce and a Balliol had vied for the throne of Scotland, leaving the country open to outside intervention and dismemberment. In each case, Balliol had turned to England for aid, and, by compromising the freedom of his nation, had secured the crown. While his reign was brief, in each instance it resulted in the virtual subjection of Scotland to England and the devastation of much of the country. The Scots loyal to the Bruce party in 1306 and again in 1333 rose against the English, and, after a long struggle, regained most of their territory and secured peace with the English.39

The resemblance between the two periods, however, only served to make the difference more poignant. Although the situation was similar in 1286 and 1332, the roles of the principal actors were played with less competence after the death of Bruce. As king was David Bruce,

who in his youth was forced to flee Scotland for the more secure refuge of France and as a man considered turning the succession to the Scottish throne over to the English king. The leading nobles, unlike the defenders of freedom and right represented in the Bruce, were repeatedly diverted from their struggle by feuds and self-interest. By the early 1360's, the country had split into factions. David and certain of his allies were negotiating with Edward III while Robert Stewart and the Earls of Douglas and March were in open rebellion against the crown. When Barbour wrote in 1375-76, David Bruce had died, Robert Stewart had succeeded to the throne, and peace at least temporarily had been restored between rival parties. But the dangers of the previous decades were too serious to be ignored. By narrating the deeds of Robert Bruce, James Douglas, and their adherents at this time, Barbour fashioned a work flattering both to the new king, the grandson and namesake of Robert Bruce, and to the powerful Douglas family. But more important, he provided an example useful to the new dynasty of a united Scotland in which the king and his subjects were bound by mutual loyalty in defense of their freedom.

Significantly, in the twenty years before Stewart's accession, two of the most important issues in Scottish history were the issues with which the Bruce is concerned, the importance of freedom and loyalty. These themes dominated the successive parliaments of 1363-4, 1366, 1368 and lay behind many of the Anglo-Scottish confrontations of 1350-71. Although by 1341 the Scots had recovered most of their territory and were in a strong enough position to bring David II back from France, the threats to their freedom were renewed in 1346, when David was captured at Neville's Cross after a rash campaign against the English. In return for the release of their king, Edward III placed extreme demands on the Scots for ransom and homage. By 1350, the situation was so desperate that David appealed to the Pope for aid, describing his plight in moving terms. If no help was forthcoming, David warned, he would have no alternative but to consider Edward's terms which he enumerated as follows:

... that the King of England may let the King of Scots and fellow captives go free, he and his men would do homage to the King of England and his successors, and would assist him and them in their wars against France. The King of Scots would be cited to the Parliaments and councils of the King of England. Also those banished and proscribed from Scotland and their heirs, whose goods have been confiscated, would be restored and their goods
recovered. Also, if the King of Scotland die without lawful heir, The King of England or his son would be King of Scots, and the King of England and his people would have all the castles and fortresses of Scotland in their power until these promises are fulfilled.40

Thus, from the outset, in the background of the negotiations was the very real threat that if Scottish diplomacy failed, David might be forced to capitulate to Edward’s demands for homage and transference of the succession.

Between 1350 and 1357, the English exerted continual pressure through the captured nobles and king to meet Edward’s terms, particularly his demand for the transference of the Scottish succession to himself or to one of his sons. But as a result of the stubborn refusal of the Scots to undermine the provisions established by Bruce and ratified by three successive parliaments in 1315, 1318, and 1326 for a Stewart king if David died childless, Edward finally withdrew this condition while raising the stipulated ransom from 40,000 pounds to 60,000 pounds and finally to the crushing sum of 100,000 marks. If the terms of the treaty were not met, David bound himself to return to English captivity.41

Edward’s attempts to gain sovereignty over Scotland, however, did not end with the release of David Bruce. When the Scots began to experience difficulty in raising the ransom money, he once again renewed his demands for homage and transference of the succession. Between 1360 and 1363, he put such extreme pressure on the Scottish king that David journeyed to England and engaged in negotiations with Edward subversive to the interests of the Stewart and disturbing to many of the Scots. In a conference at Westminster on November 27,

40. Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Petitions to the Pope, ed. by W. H. Bliss (London, 1890), I, 203. Earlier critics, basing their interpretations solely on the version printed in Cal. Papal Petitions, I, 203, felt that the appeal of 1350 showed David’s willingness to obtain his release by giving in to all of Edward’s demands. But as E. W. M. Balfour-Melville later demonstrated ("David II’s Appeal to the Pope," SHR, XL1 (1962), p. 86), this version of the petition leaves out some important words in its summary which suggests that these were the extreme terms of Edward III, which David considered but did not accept in toto.

1363, he agreed to provisional terms of peace which appeared to undermine the principles for which Bruce had fought.\footnote{42}

In return for the cancellation of his ransom and the restoration of certain Scottish territory, David agreed that Edward or one of his sons would succeed to the throne of Scotland if he died childless. The disinherited English nobles Athol, Beaumont, Percy, and Talbot, and "all who claim lands in Scotland"\footnote{43} were to be restored of their lands and possessions. Further provision was made in several articles that the two kingdoms, their laws and their churches, would be kept separate, the new ruler being styled the King of England and of Scotland. A second coronation was to take place at Scone and the king "after having been crowned King of England, [was] to come regularly to the kingdom of Scotland . . ."\footnote{44} Finally, among the minor articles of the agreement was a provision that William Douglas would be restored to his ancestral estates in England. As the documents calendared by Bain reveal, after the rebellion in May, Douglas had renewed his favor with David and was present at Westminster in November when the agreement was drafted. For his services, he received from Edward III a silver gilt cup worth £ 10, 1s, 6d.\footnote{45} Thus, in 1363, only a little more than a decade before the *Bruce* was written, David Bruce and William Douglas, the immediate descendents of Barbour's heroes, demonstrated their willingness to negotiate with the English on terms contrary to those for which their forefathers had fought.

On March 4, 1363/64, the Westminster provisions were put before the Estates in a parliament at Scone. The Scots rejected the agreement

\footnote{42. For the text of the treaty, see: *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland*, ed. by T. Thomson and C. Innes (Edinburgh, 1814-75), I, 493-5. There has been a tendency among recent historians, particularly Ronald Nicholson ("David II, the Historians and the Chroniclers," *SHR*, XLV [1966], 59-78) and Bruce Webster ("David II and the Government of Fourteenth Century Scotland," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, XVI [1966], 115-30) to defend David II against the attacks of 18th, 19th, and early 20th century scholars. Although Nicholson and Webster are certainly correct in arguing that David II was not as base and ineffective a king as modern historians have represented him, their view of David as an efficient ruler is equally extreme. In their energetic attempts to restore the reputation of David II, both historians ignore or fail to explain satisfactorily events like the Westminster Conferences of 1363, where David negotiated the transference of the Scottish succession to a son of Edward III and other acts of submission which would undermine Scottish independence.}

\footnote{43. *APS*, I, 494.}

\footnote{44. *APS*, I, 494.}

\footnote{45. Bain, *CDS*, IV, no. 22.}
in no uncertain terms, emphasizing that they would rather pay the entire ransom than subject themselves to England. As Bower reports, the Estates:

immediately and without further deliberation or hesitation made the response that generally each man and particularly by all, the three estates would "in no way agree to have the English rule over them. . . ."

Significantly, their rejection of Edward's demands is echoed and intensified in the successive parliaments of 1365-68. With each successive parliament, however, the problem was merely postponed rather than resolved. In view of the increasing sacrifices needed from an already impoverished nation to meet David's ransom payments, the Scottish Estates could not be expected to hold out indefinitely. By 1369, conditions were growing desperate. The customs had been raised to four times their original amount; the nobles were at odds; and the land had been devastated by famine. If no relief were forthcoming, David Bruce would either have to return to the Tower or grant the English some of the concessions he had considered at Westminster. Happily for the Scots, Edward III became involved again in French wars and in order to secure his northern boundaries, eased his demands for peace. The choice between freedom at all costs and at least partial subjection to England was thus averted, but the problem remained critical to the survival and well-being of the Scottish nation. Barbour's narrative, with its emphasis on the importance of freedom and the dangers of its loss, reminds the Scots of the significance of the decision which David Bruce fortunately was not required to make in 1369.

Equally relevant to Barbour's contemporaries was the emphasis on loyalty in the Bruce. Between 1342 and 1371, the history of Scotland was marred by civil strife and discord. Internal feuds threatened to tear the country asunder while the conflicting self-interests of the king and certain of his powerful nobles rendered the nation vulnerable to English intervention. Particularly dangerous was the increasing dissension between David Bruce and Robert Stewart. Their mutual enmity not only weakened the state from within, but made David more willing to consider Edward III's demands for changes in the Scottish succession. In


47. APS, I, 495-7.
1362, the friction even reached the proportions of an armed rebellion against the crown by Stewart, Douglas, and March. 48

In the late 1360’s the rift between the king and his nobles widened as factions grew in opposition to the new queen, Margaret Logie. As A. M. Mackenzie reports, Stewart and Logie had never been on friendly terms. 49 Some had tried to achieve a reconciliation by arranging for a marriage between Stewart’s heir, John of Carrick, and Logie’s niece, Annabel Drummond of Stobhall. This alliance, however, failed to make peace between the Stewart and Bruce factions. By 1368, Logie even induced David to imprison Stewart and his three eldest sons. 50 This impolitic move nearly precipitated outright civil war by Stewart’s son-in-law, John of the Isles.

The threat of disloyalty and feuds between the king and his powerful nobles, moreover, did not end with the reign of David Bruce. The very act of Robert Stewart’s accession was disrupted by the opposition of the Douglas family. According to Bower and the Plascarden author, after the death of David Bruce, a council met at Linlithgow to deliberate the right of succession to the Scottish throne and unanimously agreed that Robert Stewart should be king. 51 Despite this decision, William Douglas contested Stewart’s rights and asserted that the Scottish crown should come to him through Edward Balliol. This claim, though legally tenuous, was a challenge to the new king because of Douglas’ power and influence in the south of Scotland. His actions, moreover, threatened to reopen the Bruce-Balliol controversies of 1291-2 and 1333 which in each case seriously weakened the nation and left it open to English intervention.

As Wyntoun reports, Douglas assembled his followers at Linlithgow. 52 He immediately was opposed by the Earls of March and Murray and Sir Robert Erskine with a superior force and was persuaded to give up his resistance. He promised to give his full consent to Stewart’s succession and to obey the future king in all things. In return, it was agreed that James Douglas, his eldest son and heir, would be allied by marriage with Stewart’s daughter, Margaret. Douglas himself was promptly restored to favor, being appointed justice of Scotland south

50. Liber Plascardensis, Bk. IX, chap. xlvii.
51. Liber Plascardensis, Bk. IX, chap. xlix.
52. Wyntoun, Cronykil, IX, 12-20.
of the Forth, and was present at the parliament at Scone in April, 1373 when the royal succession was settled on the five surviving sons of Robert II and their heirs.

The settlement between the new Stewart dynasty and the Douglas family is reflected significantly in Barbour’s narrative by the double focus on Robert Bruce and James Douglas. As we have seen, it is Douglas whom Barbour chooses as the example of the ideal knight within the poem, the subject always faithful to the king and inextricably bound to him by undying loyalty. In Barbour’s repeated delineation of Douglas in terms of this virtue, one senses a model not only for the knight in general, but a particular example addressed to Robert Stewart’s new son-in-law. His prayer that those who live after Bruce will “mayntyme and land,./ And hald the folk well to warrand,./ And maynteme richt and eke laute,/ As weill as in his tymne did he!” (XIII,709-12) is equally applicable in 1371 as in 1332. If the king and his subjects are not bound by mutual loyalty, Scotland’s struggle for freedom will be ineffective.

Thus, Barbour’s narrative of 1286-1332 is relevant to the time in which he is writing in at least two ways. The Bruce is a poem overtly flattering to the new Stewart dynasty, and, as such, must be seen within the context of the pro-Bruce tracts which preceded it, as well as the increasingly pro-Stewart literature which followed. But, more important, as the present study demonstrates, the Bruce is a mirror directed to the Scottish king and people. In view of the recent threats to Scottish independence under David II and the increasing dissension within the country, the poem reminds the reader of the importance of freedom, right, and loyalty above all other concerns and the dangers inherent in a loss or compromise of these ideals. After eight decades of war, the Bruce provides a dramatic statement of the principles which the Scottish king and people must preserve.

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