

12-15-2015

Radical Attribution: Robert Burns and 'The Liberty Tree'

Corey E. Andrews

Youngstown State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Andrews, Corey E. (2015) "Radical Attribution: Robert Burns and 'The Liberty Tree'," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 41: Iss. 1, 174–190.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol41/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

RADICAL ATTRIBUTION: ROBERT BURNS AND “THE LIBERTY TREE”

Corey E. Andrews

The role that the poem “The Tree of Liberty” has played in the reception history of Robert Burns has been long and complicated, fraught with constant dispute over attribution as well as the poem’s political import. The case continues to bedevil current editors and critics of the poet, who have presented multiple arguments for the poem’s attribution to either Burns or other contenders such as Alexander Geddes.¹ While the present article will also engage in such necessary discussion, it will also seek to expand the parameters of the debate by presenting the Scottish contexts—both political and literary—for the concept of liberty. In eighteenth-century Scotland, the idea of liberty was deeply embedded in the momentous political change in governance wrought by the Union of 1707. The concept also invoked the abiding spirit of Jacobitism in Scottish political discourse, tempered by the failed uprisings in 1715 and 1745. Both of these factors—in addition to British strictures on radical political discourse in the 1790s—affected how the concept of liberty was perceived differently in Scotland than in America or France during their periods of revolutionary uprising. In the Scottish context, there was deep skepticism about the plausibility of political liberty within the confines of

¹ For contrasting arguments on the attribution, see *The Canongate Burns*, ed. Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), 847-851, and Gerard Carruthers and Norman R. Paton, “Did Robert Burns Write ‘The Tree of Liberty’?,” in *Fickle Man: Robert Burns in the 21st Century*, ed. Johnny Rodger and Gerard Carruthers (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2009), 242-256.

the British Union; at the same time there was much doubt about the viability of either Jacobite rule or independent self-governance.²

As will be shown, the Scottish variations on liberty and the liberty tree testify to the concept's enduring resonance in a time of great tumult and hope for political change, yet they also attest to abiding skepticism about the practice of liberty within the Union. The literary representation of liberty in eighteenth-century Scottish verse will be assessed in this light, where the enthusiasm for political upheaval connoted by the liberty tree was counterbalanced by the necessarily modified and constrained role that liberty played within existing British governance. The brutal repression of dissenting thinkers and writers in Britain during the 1790s also speaks to the pressing need to understand the peculiarly Scottish contexts of liberty; the liberty tree, in particular, must be situated within these contexts in order to determine its likelihood as a symbol for political change that would either restore Jacobite rule or more radically, create a new structure of independent governance for Scotland.

Internationally, the liberty tree became as much a battleground as a site for political assembly, serving as a symbol that demanded physical protection in order to fully evoke and represent the concept of liberty to its defenders. Numerous discussions of the liberty tree in America and France attest to this scenario, where attempts to destroy liberty trees were met with armed resistance.³ As David Harden notes, "to satisfy the symbolic need ascribed to it, the liberty tree had to be alive and growing, a constant witness to the glory of the Revolution and the victory of Reason."⁴ That liberty trees assumed such powerful signification in actual

² For discussion of self-rule at this time, see T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: A History, 1700-2000* (New York: Viking, 1999), 3-30, and Murray Pittock, *A New History of Scotland* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003), 161-224. For background on the Jacobite revolts, see Devine, 31-48, and Murray Pittock, *Jacobitism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

³ See for example Alfred Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 244-271, and *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation*, ed. Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011). For more on the nature of tree symbolism and its political usage, see Laura Rival, "Trees, from Symbols of Life and Regeneration to Political Artefacts," in *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism*, ed. Laura Rival (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 1-38.

⁴ David Harden, "Liberty Caps and Liberty Trees," *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 88.

political experience suggests that they served as transformative symbols, capable of “symbolic transmission across geographic distance, the translation of images between social levels and the cultural frameworks that both limit and provide for the production and reception of successful representations.”⁵ In such manner, the liberty tree acted as a transformative and transatlantic symbol that could articulate political repression and uprising at the same time.

While the liberty tree unequivocally represented political upheaval, its specific meanings depended greatly upon its placement in different settings. James Epstein notes that there are always “intense ... struggles to appropriate key signs within a ‘shared’ or national political idiom. Indeed, the authority to give accent or meaning to such signs is an essential part of the exercise of political power.”⁶ In the case of the liberty tree, those who could successfully adopt the tree as their primary symbol could also deploy its meanings in support of their specific cause, regardless of its previous significations. As Epstein observes, “struggles to enforce or destabilize such meanings often define the contested terrain of politics.”⁷ As liberty trees migrated from America to Europe, they underwent such unavoidable changes in their process of “cross-cultural transmission” into entirely different contexts.⁸ The meanings of the liberty tree were particularly transformed by the symbol’s transmission into eighteenth-century French political life, where it became an increasingly contested site of expression and ownership. This was especially evident during the 1790s, when the liberty tree as appropriated by French radicals expressed much different symbolism than its previous application in American contexts. As Epstein remarks, “radicals were able to employ symbolic gestures in ways that served not only to reinforce but also to alter or subvert meanings.”⁹ In the French context, this meant not only supporting the revolutionary cause but also justifying the regicide at the Revolution’s core that made it so unpalatable for many Britons and other Europeans. In order to justify regicide, French

⁵ Ibid., 68.

⁶ James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 71.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Harden, 102. For more on this process in the realm of theory, see Karine Zbinden, *Bakhtin between East and West: Cross-Cultural Transmission* (London: Legenda, 2006).

⁹ Epstein, 71.

revolutionaries emphasized the roots of liberty in classical antiquity, looking particularly to the example of the Roman Republic. French revolutionaries believed the search for liberty through uprising was "a call for the equal citizenship under law that Europeans remembered as the final legacy of Rome."¹⁰ However, as Mortimer Sellers observes, this legacy was both fragile and premonitory, speaking to the end of Republic and emergence of Empire, signified by the emergence of Napoleonic rule.¹¹

This process of cross-cultural transmission can be further witnessed in the transformation of the liberty tree's American and French symbolic meanings in Scotland, where the discourse of liberty had been strongly inflected by John Wilkes's Scottophobic politics in the 1760s.¹² The concept of liberty served multiple political functions in eighteenth-century Scotland, symbolizing not only revolutionary independence but also the political future of the Scottish nation within the British Union. Scottish poets in particular offered several intriguing, discursive representations of political liberty throughout the century. In James Thomson's well-known poem *Liberty* (1734), he assesses the origin of "British liberty" in world history, examining its transformation from its ancient roots to its manifestation in the present. As in Thomson's other more overtly political works, *Liberty* seeks to preserve current policy by alluding to the precedent of illustrious exemplars; in his preface to the work, this is phrased as "the attempt to trace Liberty, from the first Ages to her Excellent Establishment in Great Britain."¹³ His range is encyclopedic, examining first the concept's application in the histories of Egypt, Phoenicia, Persia, and Palestine before turning to commendable instances of liberty in Greece and Rome. Although he examines the "decline" of liberty in some cases (especially Greece), Thomson is

¹⁰ Mortimer Sellers, "The Roman Republic and the French and American Revolutions," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic*, ed. Harriet I. Flower (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 357.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wilkes's slogan "Wilkes and Liberty" was well in advance of the American Revolutionary usage; for more on how his virulent Scotophobia related to the discourse of British liberty, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 105-116.

¹³ James Thomson, *Works* (London: A. Millar, 1736), vi. Thomson's most influential political work is, of course, "Rule Britannia." Its composition and usage as a political song in 1740, however, speaks to its ineffectiveness as a palliative to those disenfranchised Scots who would revolt five years later.

persistent in tracking its apparently ineradicable presence in history. The “Goddess of Liberty” repeatedly addresses the poet in order to alert him to the ongoing saga of “British Liberty” as it was prefigured in the past. He dwells particularly on ancient Rome, which he markedly contrasts with contemporary Italy: “The Ruins of the Great Works of Liberty [are] more magnificent than the borrowed Pomp of Oppression.”¹⁴ The poem ends with the admonitions of the “Goddess of Liberty” for the continuance of “British Liberty,” which involves the promotion of “Sciences, Fine Arts, and Public Works” as well as “the encouragement of these from the example of France, tho’ under a Despotic Government.”¹⁵ As a whole, Thomson’s *Liberty* is an effort to justify the present governance of Scotland within the British Union, situating the theory and practice of liberty in decidedly selective historical contexts that favor quiescent politics.¹⁶

Fifty years later, Scottish poets would conceptualize liberty in markedly different fashions. Though some Scottish poets had represented the concept in the interim, the most significant intervention in the poetic discourse surrounding Scottish liberty came from the works of Robert Burns.¹⁷ The importance of the concept of liberty to Burns has been long established, for he clearly employed it as a guiding ideal, writing of it repeatedly in connection with both Jacobitism and American

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4. Anti-French sentiment from this period is common in British political discourse; for more on the role of national prejudice in British governance, see Colley, 11-54.

¹⁶ On Thomson’s politics, see Mary Jane W. Scott, *James Thomson: Anglo-Scot* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988) and Glynis Ridley, “The Seasons and the Politics of Opposition,” in *James Thomson: Essays for the Tercentenary*, ed. Richard Terry (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2000), 93-116.

¹⁷ For instance, one might consider *The Land of Liberty* (1776), written by the now-forgotten Scottish poet John Tait. In this lengthy work, Tait assesses the role that liberty played in Scottish politics in the past and especially the present. His indebtedness to Thomson is immediately apparent in his use of Spenserian stanzas as well as Spenserian allegory, both liberally employed in Thomson’s *The Castle of Indolence* (1748). In *The Land of Liberty*, liberty is decidedly quiescent, for opposition to governing bodies yields only anarchy; in this case, Jacobite (and potential American) rebellion is coded as the work of divisive “faction.” In both cases, rebellion is instigated only through means of “faction,” which was a keyword for Tait. He would explore the concept more fully in another of his longer political poems *The Fall of Faction* (1776).

revolutionary politics.¹⁸ Indeed, Robert Crawford has claimed that "Burns as the first major poet to respond with excitement to the ideals of the American Revolution."¹⁹ That being said, his political leanings have always been a subject of controversy, during his lifetime and into the present. As Chris Jones notes, the poet is hard to pin down: Burns "oscillated between celebrating the patriotism of a contented peasantry, willing to perish . . . for Royal George, and making disparaging comments about belted earls. He was suspected of diverting confiscated cannons to the French and joining in a public rendering of the *ca ira*."²⁰ His response to the latter accusation led to several written appeals for clemency to his supervisor Robert Graham of Fintry, which have been regarded by some critics as testimony to the poet's ambiguous politics as an employee of the state.²¹ In any event, selective sampling of the poet's life and works has been (and continues to be) used to promote political representations of Burns as a radical or conservative figure.

Because of this critical tendency, it is worth examining the specific instances of liberty as a keyword in Burns's writings. One finds references to the concept of liberty in works like "The Kirk's Alarm," "A Toast at a Meeting of the Dumfries Volunteers," "Here's a Health to Him that's Awa," "When Guilford Good," "Love and Liberty," "Bruce's

¹⁸ Burns's politics have been amply assessed in existing criticism; of note is Marilyn Butler's "Burns and Politics," in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, 86-112, and Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 115-143. Burns's relationship to Jacobitism has also been explored in depth; for a brief survey of this criticism, see Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2003), 4-5.

¹⁹ Robert Crawford, "Robert Burns and the Mind of Europe," in *Robert Burns in Global Culture*, ed. Murray Pittock (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 51.

²⁰ Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993), 69. Burns's role in transporting the cannonades has been questioned by Jennifer Orr and Gerard Carruthers, "'The Deil's Awa' wi' the Exciseman': Robert Burns the Giver of Guns to Revolutionary France?," in Carruthers and Rodger, 257-266.

²¹ For even-handed discussion of this critical episode in Burns's life, see Robert T. Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns, The Man and the Poet: A Round, Unvarnished Account* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 222-231. See also McIlvanney, 205-206.

Address,” and “Ode for General Washington’s Birthday.”²² In such poems, liberty is often depicted as personal resolve against adversity and authoritarian oppression. For instance, the “Ode for General Washington’s Birthday” celebrates “Liberty’s bold note” and asks that

Thy harp, Columbia, let me take.
See gathering thousands, while I sing,
A broken chain, exulting, bring,
And dash it in a tyrant’s face!²³

Robert Irvine identifies the tyrant here as George III, whose oppression has been overthrown by America’s “sons of Liberty” (25) who “know, and dare maintain, The Royalty of Man” (28).²⁴ Similarly, Roger Fechner has argued that “Burns was a political poet for whom the idea of America and the idea of liberty were synonymous.”²⁵ In this “Ode” (which was never published during the poet’s lifetime), liberty has a markedly contemporary inflection, evoking and endorsing American politics more readily than British; the reason for this might be that “his idea of America ... was a wonderful contemporary example of his multi-faceted concept of liberty—civil, personal, religious, social.”²⁶ Hence, seen in this light, the famous lines from *Love and Liberty* might be read not only as an expression of personal freedom but also as a commentary on American revolutionary politics, in which liberty fractures the ideological strongholds of law and religion upon the freedom-seeking self: “A fig for those by law protected! / LIBERTY’S a glorious feast / Courts for Cowards were erected, / Churches built to please the PRIEST.”²⁷

However, one should not overstate the connections between Burns’s idea of liberty and such specific political contexts as the American Revolution

²² See J.B. Reid, *A Complete Word and Phrase Concordance to the Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 1889 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1969), 277. Reid lists eight instances of “liberty” in Burns’s works, but two refer to “The Tree of Liberty” which is attributed to Burns.

²³ *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), II:732-734, lines 4-7. All references to Burns’s works will be to this edition.

²⁴ *Robert Burns: Selected Poems and Songs*, ed. Robert P. Irvine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 406.

²⁵ Roger Fechner, “Burns and American Liberty,” in *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns, A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997), 276.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁷ Kinsley, II:195-209, lines 254-257.

or the Jacobite revolts; as Thomas Crawford notes, "'liberty' is a key-concept with Burns, and he means different things by it at different times."²⁸ In addition, Crawford reminds us that "Burns was always in the habit of linking the national and revolutionary struggles of different periods together in his mind."²⁹ This is clearly evident in such works as "Here's a Health" as well as "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn," which are safely couched in nostalgic visions of former national glory that do not impinge on the political present. Even his specifically Jacobite works employ nostalgia that bespeaks an expressly imagined relationship with the idea of restored Stuart rule; this is made abundantly clear in his correspondence as well, in which Burns alludes to the Jacobite cause primarily as a source of sentimental attachment.³⁰ For those works that were more obviously topical, Burns typically chose to cloak his authorship; like the "Ode for General Washington's Birthday," *Love and Liberty* was never published during Burns's lifetime. This factor should be a vital consideration when addressing his politics, for it indicates the extent to which Burns recognized the limitations and ramifications of liberty as a political ideal that could realized in the present.

Murray Armstrong has recently envisioned the state of Scottish radicalism in a novel about the life of Thomas Muir, which seeks to represent the "astonishing burst of political activity" occurring in Scotland in 1792; in this landscape, Muir's radicalism takes on a decidedly nationalist intonation.³¹ However, invoking the discourse of liberty at this time could be perceived as a potentially seditious act, for "the French Revolution had made it impossible for radicals merely to retrieve the symbolic discourse of British libertarianism; meanings had been irrevocably changed."³² In addition, while the concept of liberty appeared to have acquired an indelible radical stance, the Union had

²⁸ Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 241.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

³⁰ See for instance the following sentiments in a letter to Alexander Cunningham from 11 March 1791, apropos Jacobitism in its safely neutralized state: "When Political combustion ceases to be the object of Princes & Patriots, it then, you know, becomes the lawful prey of Historians & Poets" (*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985], II:82). All references to Burns's letters will be to this edition.

³¹ Murray Armstrong, *The Liberty Tree: The Stirring Story of Thomas Muir and Scotland's First Fight for Democracy* (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2014), i.

³² Epstein, 80.

slowly become a political reality for Scots to accept with or without their consent. For Burns, this state of affairs required considerable discretion, especially concerning publication; while he frequently expressed discontent with the present form of Scottish governance in his letters, he was very cautious about making such statements in his published work. Part of Burns's caution had to do with personal preservation; even in his correspondence, his political avowals speak to his awareness of the contingency of his situation. For instance, in a letter to Robert Graham of Fintry from 9 December 1789, in which he had enclosed an election ballad entitled "The Five Carlins," Burns averred that "I am too little a man to have any political attachments."³³ These aspects of Burns's correspondence and publication history suggest that he was wary of claiming ownership of politically sensitive works that could cause him serious trouble with his Excise superiors. His concerns about caring for an ever-growing family also have to be considered as a valid reason for his reluctance to publish works that could be perceived as seditious.³⁴

In spite of this clear pattern of behavior, much has been made of Burns's radicalism, with supporters finding his works expressive of universalist ideals for equality while critics point to his apparent complicity with slavery as evidence of his lack of egalitarianism.³⁵ Assessing Burns's politics is a perilous enterprise if we conflate the poet as a historical figure with his public persona as Scotland's Bard. Burns certainly understood that he could not sacrifice his private identity (replete with multiple responsibilities for dependent others) in service to his public role as a national poet. For this reason, among others, he withheld or actively suppressed his authorship of certain volatile known works in his canon; this also includes works that he published

³³ Letters I:454-455.

³⁴ For a good discussion of the issue of Burns's loyalty to the state at this time (though with differing conclusions than mine), see Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 377-386.

³⁵ For a discussion of Burns as universalist poet, see Thomas Crawford, "Burns, Genius, and Major Poetry," in *Love and Liberty*, 341-353; for a critique of Burns's relationship to slavery, see Gerard Carruthers, "Robert Burns and Slavery," in *Fickle Man*, 163-175, and Nigel Leask, "'Their Groves of Sweet Myrtle': Robert Burns and the Scottish Colonial Experience," in *Robert Burns in Global Culture*, 172-188.

anonymously or pseudonymously.³⁶ In a letter to Frances Dunlop from 17 July 1789, concerning "The Kirk's Alarm" (which alludes to a "liberty chain," to be wielded like a weapon), Burns wrote that "I do not wish to be known in it, tho' I know, if it ever appear, I shall be suspected."³⁷ Similarly, Burns disavowed authorship of "Here's a Health to Him that's Awa" (first published anonymously in the *Edinburgh Gazetteer* in 1792) in his famous letter to Graham of Fintry from 5 January 1793; in addition to denying any role in the "Cà ira" incident, Burns also insists that any poems he might have sent to the *Gazeteer* had "nothing whatever to do with Politics."³⁸ Such deliberate cloaking also occurred with Burns's most overtly nationalist song, "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn" (also known as "Scots wha hae"). While Burns claimed authorship of this song in correspondence to George Thomson, Maria Riddell, and Frances Dunlop (to whom he described the song as "another little bagatelle of mine, of which I am really proud"), he published it anonymously in the *London Morning Chronicle* (8 May 1794), far afield of the Scottish newspapers in which his authorship might be most suspected.³⁹

For supporters of the "radical" Burns, his purported authorship of "The Tree of Liberty" has often been regarded as the strongest evidence of his revolutionary principles. For example, Christopher Hitchens suggests that the poem indicates that Burns was "a great partisan of the 1789 Revolution in France."⁴⁰ However, due to its checkered history in editions of the poet's works ranging from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, Gerard Carruthers and Norman R. Paton state that "the story of the text's retrieval leaves more unanswered questions regarding its provenance and transmission than any other work attributed to the poet."⁴¹ First appearing in Robert Chambers's 1838 edition of Burns's work, the poem was reported as from a manuscript in the poet's hand, but

³⁶ Among Burns's anonymous or pseudonymous works are "Lines on Stirling," "Elegy on the Year 1788," "Ode on the Departed Regency Bill," and "The Heron Ballads," among others; all of these examples display the poet's clear engagement with politics. Other notable works unpublished during the poet's lifetime include "The Kirk's Alarm" and *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*.

³⁷ *Letters*, I:422.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, II:174.

³⁹ For examples of letters that privately discuss his authorship of this work, see *Letters*, II:235-236, II:248, II:263, and II:269 (the source of the quote to Dunlop).

⁴⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 9.

⁴¹ Carruthers and Paton, 242.

this subsequently disappeared. Burns's most recent editor Robert Irvine concisely describes the situation: "Many have doubted that this poem is by Burns: the manuscript on which Chambers based it, in Burns's handwriting, has been lost. But some of the doubts seem grounded in political distaste, and there is no obvious reason to doubt Chambers's account of his source."⁴² Robert Crawford attests to Chambers's scholarly character as evidence of Burns's authorship of "The Tree of Liberty," stating that "Robert Chambers was one of the greatest of all Burns scholars. His archives ... confirm he was a meticulous man."⁴³ Crawford adds that "I think the attribution is strong, and ... the poem demonstrates how vigorously he continued both to hint at and to articulate directly a republican position in his last years."⁴⁴ In *The Canongate Burns*, editors Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg contend that "there are no grounds to suspect that the manuscripts seen by Chambers was a forgery,"⁴⁵ while Carruthers and Paton suggest instead that the poem may have been the work of the radical poet Alexander Geddes.⁴⁶

For a number of reasons, I do not believe this poem to have been authored by Burns, although it was written and published with him clearly in mind. It is most likely the work of a talented mimic who may (or may not) have been Alexander Geddes. Thomas Crawford asserts that if one does not attribute the poem to Burns, it must be the work of "some talented literary criminal of the early nineteenth century, or some anonymous democrat of the seventeen-nineties who wrote nothing else of value which has been preserved."⁴⁷ I disagree that "The Tree of Liberty" was written by a "criminal" forger, seeing it instead as the work of a

⁴² Irvine, 402. This is the only explanation that Irvine provides for the poem's inclusion (and positive attribution) in his edition of Burns's works.

⁴³ Robert Crawford, "Robert Burns and the Mind of Europe," 54. While Crawford is correct in his estimation of Chambers's character as a scrupulous editor, basing his attribution on this factor is not compelling proof of Burns's authorship in my estimation.

⁴⁴ Robert Crawford, *The Bard*, 375.

⁴⁵ Noble and Hogg, 847.

⁴⁶ Carruthers and Paton, 253-255.

⁴⁷ Crawford, *Burns: A Study*, 251. I think Crawford largely misses the point here; to imitate Burns in the 1790s was not a "criminal" act, but rather an attempt to establish an intertextual relationship with a famous "brother poet." This had everything to do with the nature of the competition for recognition in the literary marketplace, rather than the production of inauthentic, "forged" copies of a greater original that was Burns.

writer inspired by Burns's example but wise enough to suppress authorship of a clearly radical poem that would likely have been seen as seditious. My reasons have largely to do with the nature of Burns's engagement with radical politics in his last years, particularly concerning any overtly "revolutionary" works which could have been ascribed to him. As has been noted, Burns was chary about publishing anything that might be interpreted as plain evidence of radicalism.

By the early 1790s, Burns already had a host of imitators whose works were published in large part because of the precedent of his celebrity.⁴⁸ This period of Burns's life saw the poet withdrawing from active publication of poems (whether new verse or even new editions of his works) and turning to largely anonymous, unpaid work with Scottish song.⁴⁹ Those political works he did write were purposely cloaked by Burns, who recognized the severity of the consequences of being identified as a supporter of the French Revolution and proponent of radical politics. Carruthers and Paton are certainly correct in asserting that "Scotland might be seen to be a place where reformers were dealt with much more harshly than in England."⁵⁰ Because of the harsh sentences imposed upon such figures as Adam Skirving (who received fourteen years transportation), T. Fyssh Palmer (seven years) and Thomas Muir (fourteen years), Burns would have been quite alert to the danger created by open espousal of revolutionary sentiments.⁵¹

In addition to these factors, the poem itself has few of the characteristics of Burns's mature style. Due to internal evidence (viz., reference to regicide by French revolutionaries), the poem had to have been written during January 1793 or thereafter. It openly espouses the revolutionary meanings associated with liberty and the liberty tree, but it does so without reference to overtly Scottish contexts. In fact, the poem's only allusions to national governance are to "auld Britain" and "auld

⁴⁸ For discussion of this feature of Burns's celebrity and influence upon Scottish labouring-class poets, see Corey E. Andrews, "'Far fam'd RAB': Scottish Labouring-Class Poets Writing in the Shadow of Robert Burns," *Studies in Hogg and His World*, 23 (2013): 41-67.

⁴⁹ For more on this dimension of Burns's later career, see Corey E. Andrews, *The Genius of Scotland: The Cultural Production of Robert Burns, 1785-1834* (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2015).

⁵⁰ Carruthers and Paton, 250.

⁵¹ Thomas Crawford, *Boswell, Burns and the French Revolution* (Edinburgh: Saltire Society, 1990), 69. See also Armstrong, ii-xi.

England,” neither of which features prominently in Burns’s oeuvre.⁵² The poem also has certain peculiarities that do not resemble known works by Burns. For instance, describing the tree itself, the speaker says

Upo’ this tree there grows sic fruit,
 Its virtues a’can tell, man;
 It raises man aboon the brute,
 It maks him ken himself, man.
 Gif ance the peasant taste a bit,
 He’s greater than a lord, man (ll. 9-14).

The imagery of fruit in these lines is anomalous in Burns’s works, where it can be found employed ironically in only his poems “A Poet’s Welcome to his Love-Begotten Daughter” and “Despondency.” In both cases, the “fruits” of illicit intercourse and deep depression are especially bitter to ingest.⁵³ In “The Tree of Liberty,” the fruit supplants the tree itself as the ultimate source (and generator) of liberty, thus making the tree and its defense quite secondary for its would-be protectors and proponents of liberty.

Although the prohibiting agent is aligned with “Superstition’s hellish brood” (identified as France’s oppressive king in the first stanza),⁵⁴ the poem also clearly alludes to the Christian tree of knowledge. William Ruddick states that “it cannot have helped the Liberty Tree in its struggle for iconographic existence as a living emblem of freedom that it came up against the biblical emblem of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.”⁵⁵ This is apparently the case in “The Tree of Liberty,” which conflates the two trees as sources of knowledge and revolutionary stimuli.

⁵² Kinsley, *Poems*, II: 910-913, lines 57, 59, 85. For instance, the words “Britain,” “British,” and “Briton” appear only twelve times in Burns’s verse (of which two can be found in “The Tree of Liberty” if attributed to Burns), while “England” and “English” are mentioned twelve times as well (once in “The Tree of Liberty”). See Reid, 60, 141.

⁵³ Viz., his illegitimate daughter in “A Poet’s Welcome” depicted as the “sweet fruit of mony a merry dint” (Kinsley, I: 99-100, line 25) and “the newly-gather’d fruits” beside the hermit’s “humble cell” in “Despondency” (Kinsley, I: 232-234, lines 33, 31).

⁵⁴ Viz., “A prison built by kings, man, / When Superstition’s hellish brood / Kept France in leading stings, man” (lines 6-8).

⁵⁵ William Ruddick, “Liberty Trees and Loyal Oaks: Emblematic Presences in Some English Poems of the French Revolutionary Period,” in *Reflections of Revolutions: Images of Romanticism*, ed. Alison Yarrington and Kelvin Everest (London: Routledge, 1993), 61.

Other peculiarities are the unironic allusions to "Afric's wealth" (17) and "Gallia's slaves" (26), the embedded nature of the American Revolution as a wellspring of liberty (never named and only glimpsed "frae yont the western waves, man" [28]), and the blunt casualness with which the regicide is described—"the watchman cracked his crown / Cut aff his head and a', man" (39-40). These latter sentiments do echo Burns's in his oft-quoted letter to Dunlop from 12 January 1795 about the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette: "Entre nous, you know my Politics; and I cannot approve of . . . whining over the deserved fate of a certain pair of Personages.—What is there in the delivering over a perjured Blockhead and an unprincipled Prostitute to the hands of the hangman, that it should arrest for a moment, attention, in an eventful hour."⁵⁶ As well-known as this letter is now, however, we should recall that it was not intended for publication and cannot be seen in the same light as those political works for which he claimed authorship; this is especially evident in his prefatory "entre nous" remark.

More to the point, the reference to "England" as synonym for Britain (or perhaps even Scotland) is particularly jarring when considering the work as authored by Burns: "Syne let us pray, auld England may / Sure plant this far-famed tree, man; / And blithe we'll sing, and hail the day / That gave us liberty, man" (85-88). This focus on England rather than Scotland is further demonstrated by the poet's statement that liberty trees cannot be found "'Twixt London and the Tweed" (64). Not only did Burns never mistake England for Britain or (especially) Scotland, he was especially attentive to perceived slights by those who would subsume his nation under the banner of England.⁵⁷ Mention of England in his works is typically confrontational, even in his songs; for instance, in "The Banks of Devon," Burns contrasts the superior beauty of the Devon River in Perth to the "proud Rose" of England and the "gay, gilded Lillies" of France.⁵⁸ Elsewhere he is blunter in his comparisons of Scots to English; in "On Miss J. Scott, of Ayr," for example, he writes, "Oh, had each SCOT of ancient times, / Been, Jeany Scott, as thou art, / The bravest heart on English ground, / Had yielded like a coward."⁵⁹ The most obvious example of Burns's Scottish chauvinism (and anti-Union

⁵⁶ *Letters* II:334.

⁵⁷ Carruthers and Paton also highlight this anomaly in "The Tree of Liberty" (see 249-250).

⁵⁸ Kinsley, I: 368-369, lines 14, 13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, II: 771, lines 1-4.

sentiment) is seen in his song “Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation.” This song, which appeared anonymously in the fourth volume of the *Scots Musical Museum* (1792), represents what James Kinsley calls “the feeling [that] long ran high against the ‘Thirty-one Rogues’—the Scottish Commissioners” responsible for negotiating the Union.⁶⁰ The song also registers the poet’s anger about the subsuming of Scotland within (and by) England, expressly named as the chief source of antagonism and corruption.

The most important aspect to recognize about “Such a Parcel of Rogues” is that its indignant politics are rendered quiescent from start to finish, as is illustrated clearly in the first stanza: “Fareweel to a’ our Scottish fame, / Fareweel our ancient glory; / Fareweel even to the Scottish name, / Sae fam’d in martial story!”⁶¹ The song recounts the gradual incorporation of Scotland into its southern neighbor with distressed alarm: “Now Sark rins o’er the Solway sands / And Tweed rins to the ocean, / To mark whare England’s province stands” (5-7). At the same time, it betrays markedly fatalistic sentiments about this process. The martial spirit of Scotland has been “subdued” by “a coward few / For hireling traitors’ wages” (9, 11-12). Where ancient Scots had been able to defeat “English steel” (13) in battle, the contemporary “parcel of rogues in a nation” (16) have colluded with England so that Scotland has been “bought and sold for English gold” (23). In response to this venality, the speaker can only “mak this declaration” (22) and let others know of the deeds of the Scottish “parcel of rogues” who betrayed their country. In fact, the speaker is described as having an “auld grey head” which he seeks to “lien in clay, / Wi’ BRUCE and loyal WALLACE!” (19-20). If this song truly expresses nationalist sentiment, it is decidedly quiescent, where the speaker’s nostalgia for his nation’s glorious past may have clouded his judgment of the Scottish present. Despite his invocation of warriors like Bruce and Wallace, the song issues no direct threat to England (or Scottish “rogues,” for that matter). Perhaps Burns is suggesting that Scotland has no warriors left to fight “English steel,” thus rendering the nation vulnerable to the corruption of its venal leaders.

Are such political outcomes found within “The Tree of Liberty”? For some, the poem espouses undeniably Burnsian radicalism; Thomas Crawford argues that “if this work, which many consider to be apocryphal, is ever definitely proved to be by Burns, it will have to be

⁶⁰ Kinsley, III:1403.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, II:643-644, lines 1-4.

recognized as the most extreme development of his political thought and emotions that we possess."⁶² Looking closely at the poem's political import, I would argue that "The Tree of Liberty" is actually not extreme enough to be the suppressed or unacknowledged work of Burns, for it does not convey his more typical endorsement of revolutionary change achieved through violence. For Burns revolutionary violence was a key element to radical reform, necessary for the expression of political liberty. The representation of liberty in "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn" is especially violent, where Scottish followers of Bruce are urged to "lay the proud usurpers low; / Tyrants fall in every foe; / Liberty's in every blow!"⁶³ The speaker chastises Scots for not rising up to break the "chains and slaverie" (8) that bind them to England, but the action is distinctly located in the distant past by using Bruce as speaker and alluding to "proud EDWARD's power" (7). Such strategies are remarkably consistent in Burns's overtly political writings; he rarely locates revolutionary violence in the Scottish present, tending to represent political liberty achieved through violent revolt in a past far predating the Union and the Jacobite rebellions.⁶⁴ In addition, "The Tree of Liberty" is far too explicit in its allusiveness to the French experience of revolution to have been written by Burns during a time of great anxiety and repression in Scotland; this is apparent from the very first line of the poem, which describes the liberty tree as "the tree o' France" (1).

Regardless of its provenance and authorship, "The Tree of Liberty" openly relies on Burns the writer and national icon for its effectiveness, and this is the real reason that it continues to garner attention. Without the figure of Burns in the background, "The Tree of Liberty" is simply one more example of the great body of anonymous writings generated and circulated at any time in history. Its impact on history is negligible, but upon Burns Studies it has exerted an abiding, perhaps regrettable influence. It is to be hoped that we can begin to assess Burns's politics

⁶² Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study*, 246.

⁶³ Kinsley, II: 707-708, lines 21-23.

⁶⁴ Violence is a recurring theme in Burns's body of works, where it frequently expresses emotional duress (such as in the poem "A Prayer Written Under the Pressure of Violent Anguish") as well as physical violence. For a differing discussion of this element of Burns's political writings, see Andrew Noble, "Burns, Scotland, and the American Revolution" in *Robert Burns in Transatlantic Culture*, ed. Sharon Alker, Leith Davis and Holly Faith Nelson (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 31-51.

with greater consideration of his own contexts, as well as those surrounding his nation. As I have tried to illustrate, the Scottish discourse of liberty has unique elements when examined within the guiding contexts of Burns's own life. In my view, key biographical factors and close analysis of his extant, acknowledged works suggest that Burns did not write "The Tree of Liberty." Uncritically adding "The Tree of Liberty" to the poet's résumé should be resisted in the interests of historical veracity, for it is as important to observe what Burns did not choose to acknowledge as well as what he did (and for what reasons). Doing so can only contribute to our understanding of Burns's complex and contradictory character, particularly regarding his views of the Scottish past and his nation's future within the British Union.

Youngstown State University