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TRANSNATIONAL BALLADEERING: ‘SCOTS, WHA HAE WI’ WALLACE BLED’ IN 1820s AFRO-NEW YORK

Marvin McAllister

In early October 1821, William Brown, manager of a small African American theater company, transferred his entertainments from his second-floor private residence at Thomas Street on Manhattan’s West Side to a larger venue on Mercer Street in Greenwich Village. James Hewlett, Brown’s star actor, leading man, and matinee idol, christened this new space with a special October 1st benefit performance. Typically on benefit nights, a performing artist would showcase his or her best material, hoping to draw and please the broadest population of adoring fans. For his October 1821 benefit and a second benefit evening in January 1822, Hewlett exploited the rich tradition of Scottish folk culture, specifically Robert Burns’s historical ballad “Scots, wha hae wi’ Wallace bled.”¹ This Highland song about oppression and freedom offered Hewlett and his predominately Negro public the perfect vehicle to indulge in emotionally rousing fight scenes, contemplate Afro-New York’s most pressing issue, slavery, and assess this community’s commitment to full American citizenship.

William Brown and James Hewlett were not the first nineteenth-century theater practitioners to recognize and build on cultural commonalities between Africans and Scots. On multiple occasions in the early 1820s, the Park Theatre, Manhattan's premiere theatrical institution, merged Scottish and stage African musical material. As standard practice, the Park interjected popular songs into established dramatic pieces, most often between acts but occasionally within the natural flow of a dramatic narrative. In June 1821, Park managers inserted the stage African melody “Pity the Slave” from Thomas Morton's sentimental musical The Slave (1816) into the middle of a contemporary Scottish-flavored musical

drama, *Rob Roy Macgregor*; or, *Au’d Lang Syne* (1818), composed by John Davy and Henry Bishop and based on the Sir Walter Scott novel.\(^2\) The Park’s Black-Scottish cross-cultural fusions flowed in the opposite direction as well. Two weeks after mounting their intertextual *Rob Roy*, the Park announced a production of Morton’s *The Slave* with two Scottish melodies mixed in: “A Highland Laddie Heard of War" and “My Highland Home When Tempests Blow.” In advertisements for this production, Park managers announced that an actor named Mr. Moreland would sing the interpolated songs as a character named Captain Malcolm, a respectable Scottish lad in love with a quadroon named Zelinda. However, in Morton’s original musical, there is no Scottish Captain Malcolm, only a Dutch Captain Clifton, but to justify interjecting Highland songs into *The Slave*, the Park’s creative team opted to change names and nationalities.

Manhattan’s Park Theatre probably blended Scottish songs with stage African musicals, and vice versa, because they sensed some musical affinity between these two cultural groups. An 1825 article published in the *African Repository and Colonial Journal* titled “Specimens of African Genius” noted striking similarities between Scottish clans and the Solima people of Sierra Leone. One core commonality was how musical artists from both cultures composed ballads chronicling the legendary exploits of their heroes.\(^3\) Additionally, musicologist Charles Hamm found that when composers like Thomas Morton crafted stage African musicals, they did not study West or East African tonal structures. Instead, they reached for more familiar Scottish folk songs to achieve the desired “primitive” musical effect.\(^4\)

Although I suspect Hewlett and Brown were not drawn to “Scots, wha hae wi’ Wallace bled” because they viewed Burns’ ballad and Scottish folk culture as uncultivated or primitive, let us consider this “primitive / civilized” binary for a moment. Writing about balladeering discourse and British romantic poetry, Maureen McLane points out that in this unavoidable comparison of savage ballads versus refined concertos, the

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\(^2\) Advertisements for these intertextual evenings can be found in *New York American*, June 18, 1821, 3 and June 29, 1821, 3. Morton’s *The Slave* was basically a musical version of Thomas Southerne’s *Oroonoko* (1695/1696) which was adapted from Aphra Behn’s short novel *Oroonoko: or The Royal Slave* (1688). Davy and Bishop’s *Rob Roy* musical was adapted from Sir Walter Scott’s 1817 novel *Rob Roy*. Scott’s novel was inspired by Rob Roy MacGregor, a clan leader and folk hero widely recognized as the Scottish Robin Hood.


Scottish, Irish, African, or even Native American “savage” odes often won the “cultural sweepstakes.” The rudest, most barbaric melodies from Scotland, America, or Africa were venerated for their ability to move the crowd with a “sublime pathos” unmatched by Handel or Bach.\(^5\)

Hewlett felt, understood, and exploited the emotional energy of this Burns ballad, but beyond assumed musical commonalities or the primal power of a “savage” war-cry, his appropriating performances launched a cross-cultural investigation. McLane explains how balladeering “offers numerous cases for both cross-cultural and trans-medial investigation, and invitation for further critical and creative work, *poiesis* in its broadest sense: *making*” (McLane, 112). In this case, Manhattan’s star Negro performer capitalized on the transnational potential of balladeering, more specifically Hewlett and his Afro-New Yorker public exploited a political undercurrent through this Black-Scottish connection.

In late eighteenth-century international debates on slavery and the slave trade, Scottish intellectuals and artists took strong positions against African bondage. According to theater historian Richard Gale, as the British Empire reconsidered its involvement in slavery, Scottish Enlightenment writers like Francis Hutcheson assumed leadership roles in the early anti-slavery movement. Hutcheson, along with his students Adam Smith and William Robertson, propagated abolitionism throughout Europe and helped launched the anti-slavery movement in the United States. In 1799, inspired by this rising abolitionist activity, Scottish dramatist Archibald MacLaren composed a sentimental stage African drama, *The Negro Slaves; or The Blackman and Blackbird*, in which white and black characters eloquently and passionately advocated for the end of a degrading and unenlightened institution.\(^6\) As much as art can serve as an expression of politics, James Hewlett located the same creative, critical and political voice in Robert Burns’s anti-colonial ballad.

Alternatively titled “Bruce's Address to His Army” or “Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn,” Burns’s heroic ode immortalizes two Scottish national heroes, William Wallace and Robert Bruce. In 1793, after visiting Bannockburn, the site of Scotland's most celebrated military victory over England, Burns was inspired to write a song commemorating this early fourteenth-century battle. Composing in the Scots dialect and to the tune of the popular air “Hey tuttie taitie,” Burns creatively reimagined what Robert Bruce might have said to his troops before this history-making confrontation. After its publication in 1794, Burns’ poetic address


became an anthem for the ongoing Scottish independence struggle within the United Kingdom, and it was even selected as the official song of the Scottish National Party. This nationalistic ballad offered Hewlett and his largely black audiences an opportunity to identify with Scots and Scottish heritage on two levels, first, as oppressed colonial subjects, and second, as would-be revolutionaries.

To open the ballad Burns introduces the two icons of Scottish independence, the martyred renegade Wallace and the Scottish clan leader Bruce:

Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,
Scots wham Bruce has af - ten led:
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victory.

In the late thirteenth century, William Wallace inadvertently joined Scotland's liberation struggle when he began plundering English travelers as a politically conscious highwayman. Impressed with his lucrative guerilla tactics, Scottish noblemen like Robert Bruce recognized Wallace as “a guardian of the kingdom,” in other words, a proletarian leader of an unofficial resistance campaign. Upon hearing of Wallace’s insurgent banditry, England's King Edward I, infamously known as “the hammer of Scots,” dispatched forces to defeat Wallace and the traitorous Scottish nobles. Out of political expediency, some noblemen, including Robert Bruce, reconsidered their support of Wallace and switched allegiances back to Mother England, essentially sacrificing the soon-to-be martyred bandit. And after losing a decisive Battle of Falkirk in 1298 to superior English forces, Wallace was removed as “guardian of the kingdom.” For several years, the crafty but isolated rebel managed to elude Edward’s army, but Wallace was eventually betrayed by Scottish nobles, delivered to Edward I, and executed in August 1305. Thus, we arrive at the “Wallace bled” invoked in this opening stanza, a bandit turned Scottish guardian ultimately sacrificed by cowardly or calculating Scottish nobles.

Scotland’s history of colonial oppression under the English crown, especially the tyrannical Edward I, mirrored American colonial struggles with George III in the 1770s. In essence, Wallace’s grassroots

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insurrection was based on the same fundamental aspiration toward self-rule that ignited New World rebellions against colonial authorities in North America, South America, and the Caribbean. For the patrons supporting Hewlett’s early 1820s benefit performances, the relatively recent uprisings in the American colonies and Haiti would have been fresh on their minds. More specifically, the definitive options of “gory bed” or “victory” presented in Burns’ opening stanza might have evoked Patrick Henry’s famed “liberty or death” rhetorical flourish. In March 1775, Henry, a habitual colonial rabble-rouser, delivered a legendary address to a group of delegates gathered in Richmond, Virginia, as they contemplated whether to defy British tyranny and chose revolution. Earlier, back in 1765, Henry had introduced a set of resolutions before the Virginia House of Burgesses in opposition to British Parliament’s Stamp Act. He boldly declared that American colonials possessed the same rights as the English, especially the right to be taxed only by their own representatives; that Virginians should pay no taxes except those voted by the House of Burgesses; and that anyone supporting the right of Parliament to tax Virginians should be considered an enemy of the colony. The colonial body defeated the more extreme Henry resolutions but adopted the rest, which prompted the loyalist Virginia Governor Francis Fauquier to temporarily dissolve the House of Burgesses.

As for Henry’s signature 1775 address, it should be noted that the only historical record we have of this speech comes from the reports of eyewitnesses who attended a special assembly of the Virginia House of Burgesses to consider revolution. One thoroughly moved eyewitness, Judge St. George Tucker, recalled that, right before Henry’s famous closing words, he warned the Virginia Convention that “there is no retreat but in submission and slavery! Our chains are forged. Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston! The war is inevitable and let it come!”10 Projecting the willing warrior, Henry starkly articulated the unthinkable yet inescapable alternative to war: enslavement, with the shackles already fitted, waiting to be more permanently applied to the colonial subjects. Henry then concluded by dramatically stating his resolute position: “Give me liberty, or give me death.” Another eyewitness, John Roane, recalled the theatricality of Henry’s dramatic conclusion, specifically how he projected himself as a “condemned galley slave,” who is physically and psychologically dominated, yet still able to project the “incarnation of freedom,” unafraid to face death.11 Following Henry’s emotional and highly theatrical presentation, the delegates voted

to support his resolution to establish a militia and plan a defense against British forces. Furthermore, when the Virginia House of Burgess met a couple months later, many delegates arrived with “liberty or death” sewn into or painted on their coats. Thus an American legend was born, complete with its very own branding. Today, Henry’s inspired final phrase is remembered, celebrated, and recited as not just grand rhetorical tradition but as nation-defining American literature (cf. McCants, 125).

Much as Henry warned of forged and clanking chains, Burns’s fictional Robert Bruce would exploit chains and the cowardly stain of slavery to rouse his fellow Scotsmen, but the nobleman first had to rejoin the fray. Wallace’s arrest, execution, and martyrdom inspired Robert Bruce to reconsider his commitment to independence. In 1306, a recommitted Bruce, grandson of a claimant to the Scottish throne, traveled to Scone where Scottish kings were traditionally installed. At this meaningful site, Bruce crowned himself King of Scotland. His impertinent act infuriated Edward I who sent English troops to quell yet another Scottish uprising. The next stanza of the anthem brings us to Bannockburn, where in June 1314, England faced Scotland on the battlefield. Burns imagines a fully recommitted Bruce, who challenges and questions his men:

Now's the day and now's the hour
See the front o' battle lour;
See approach proud Edward's power
    Chains and slavery!

Wha will be a traitor knave?
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a slave!
    Let him turn and flee!

Burns’s “proud Edward” functions as the detestable symbol of English despotism, an unambiguous enemy who would have definitely elicited boos and hisses from the patriotic Americans attending Hewlett’s performances. The approaching Edward and his army also reference an equally arrogant King George III, with his economically repressive taxation without representation. Both unjust colonial rulers were synonymous with “chains and slavery.” Then Burns/Bruce asks the clarifying questions: Who were the “traitors, cowards, or base slaves” in their ranks? If any man fit these descriptors, this battle was not for him.

Hewlett’s cross-cultural balladeering and performative homage to Scottish independence linked Afro-New York, Patrick Henry and Robert Burns in a powerful convergence of trans-cultural insurgent histories. But
by no means am I suggesting that Henry or Burns were fervent abolitionists, to the contrary, their histories reveal conflicted relationships to New World slavery.

Burns’s national ballad was about never submitting or surrendering; therefore, when Burns writes “Wha sae base as be a slave?,” he is far from sympathizing with enslaved persons in late eighteenth-century Jamaica or nineteenth-century America. According to Burns biographer Robert Crawford, the Scottish bard believed strongly in “the man of the independent mind,” so his imagined Bruce was scorning and deriding any man who allowed his independence to be taken away.12 Although Burns penned the famous “The Slave's Lament” (1792), about a Senegalese slave dispersed to Virginia, and was greatly admired by Negro abolitionist Frederick Douglas, this struggling poet also considered working as a bookkeeper on a Jamaican plantation.

When Hewlett, a free Afro-New Yorker from Long Island, arrived at the question, “Wha sae base as be a slave,” here is where the creative, cross-cultural refiguring of the Burns ballad truly begins. He moved Burns’s ballad beyond the philosophical “man of the independent mind” and spoke directly to the current and painfully real circumstances of slavery in Manhattan. Enslaved Afro-New Yorkers were among William Brown’s most loyal patrons at his new theatrical venture in the remote Greenwich Village, and they were core supporters of Afro-New York’s first theatrical star James Hewlett.13 Yet in the figurative language of this Burns ballad and in Patrick Henry’s hyperbolic, political rhetoric, New York’s bondmen and bondwomen were already “base” or degraded, seemingly accustomed or fully acclimated to their shackles. The potential for Hewlett to offend leisure-loving slaves out for a modicum of leisure or theatrical escape was great and perhaps unavoidable. But with his recreation, Hewlett intoned Bruce’s address not to shame or blame an enslaved public for their bondage, but to directly and forcefully decry oppression not miles across the Atlantic Ocean or centuries in the past, but here at home.

And if a ballad about a fourteenth-century revolution did not hit home enough, Hewlett and his fellow Afro-New Yorkers drew direct inspiration from a more contemporary response to oppression. During the summer of

1822, the Greek War to gain independence from the Turks was a popular topic in the New York media. The National Advocate offered the strongest and most consistent coverage of the Greek efforts, thanks in large part to the editor of this daily, Manual Mordecai Noah, who had previously served as a diplomat in Northern Africa. In March of 1813, President James Madison appointed M.M. Noah consul at Tunis, and during his years as consul, Noah became fully acquainted with the longstanding conflicts between the Turks and the Greeks. Through editorials and articles published in the National Advocate, and even an original drama The Grecian Captive (1822), Noah made the case for an undeniable connection between the Greek War and the successful American campaign for independence. Noah argued that citizens of a free country like the United States could not possibly observe the Greek fight for liberty with indifference.\(^4\)

Far from indifferent, politically attuned Afro-New Yorkers like Hewlett did their part to publicize and financially support the Greeks. In December 1823, the Abolition Society, a group of Afro-New Yorkers committed to the end of slavery and the slave trade in the United States, announced a Greek benefit ball at the Mercer Street Theatre. In their announcement, the organizers fully articulated the sentiments not just behind their transnational connection but also behind Hewlett’s appropriation of Scotland’s revolutionary heritage. The Abolition Society wrote, “This appeal, it is hoped will be felt with peculiar force on that day, which cannot fail most powerfully to recall the descendants of Africans, the blessings of freedom, and prompt them to unite with their white brethren in resisting the arm of despotism whenever it may be reared.”\(^5\) “That day” was January 1, 1824, the same day, since 1808, that American Negroes traditionally celebrated America’s “official” abolition of the slave trade in U.S. territories. This Afro-New Yorker group planned on holding a special event to raise money for another oppressed people, thus bringing attention and pressure to despots like the Turks. This benefit ball was not the only African American-inspired Greek fundraiser scheduled for the Mercer Street Theatre. According to a January 19, 1824 playbill, James Hewlett organized his own benefit for the Greeks at Brown’s theater, and for this event he featured his most popular solo performance work.\(^6\)

However, highlighting oppression at home or abroad was only half of Hewlett’s targeted message to enslaved and free Afro-New Yorkers. After questioning his men and exhorting all cowards, traitors, and slaves

\(^{14}\) M.M. Noah, The Grecian Captive; or the fall of Athens (New York: E.E Murden, 1822), iii.
\(^{15}\) Thompson, Documentary History, 144.
\(^{16}\) New York Evening Post, December 30, 1823, p.2
to bow out and remain slaves to English repression, Bruce, now King of Scotland, emboldened his would-be revolutionaries with freedom talk:

Wha for Scotland's king and law  
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,  
Free-man stand, or Free-man fa’  
Let him follow me!

By oppression's woes and pains!  
By your sons in servile chains!  
We will drain our dearest veins!  
But they shall be free!

The liberation rhetoric in this verse, rooted in struggle and sacrifice, provided Hewlett with the imaginative language to reorient a subjugated community toward the future. The sense of generational sacrifice here is palpable, as Bruce's soldiers prepare to shed their blood so future Scots will only know freedom. By singing of a long-term obligation to future generations, “your sons in servile chains,” Hewlett spoke directly for all Afro-New Yorkers who anticipated complete emancipation in the coming years. Back in 1817, the New York state legislature had passed a gradual emancipation bill, which decreed that after a period of measured manumission, slavery would be completely abolished throughout the state on July 4, 1827.17 Burns’s freedom rhetoric served to intensify Afro-New York’s expectation of and desire for full emancipation, not just for themselves but for their sons, daughters, and grandchildren.

With oppression and freedom fully defined for Scotsmen, Americans, and Afro-New Yorkers, the final Burns verse calls for decisive action, and perhaps the ultimate sacrifice:

Lay the proud usurpers low!  
Tyrants fall in every foe!  
And Liberty’s in every blow!  
Let us do or die!

In this verse, Burns and Hewlett take their publics back to Bannockburn, where roughly 6,000 Scottish soldiers risked their lives against a much

larger English army of nearly 20,000. Unlike the 1298 Battle of Falkirk, the Scots miraculously emerged victorious, and in 1328, King Edward III signed a treaty at Edinburgh that formally recognized Scotland as an independent kingdom. England also accepted Robert Bruce as a sovereign monarch and acknowledged Scots as free men and women. From a marauding Wallace who was sacrificed and bled to a redeemed royal Bruce who led, Burns commemorated Scottish heroes who chose freedom over repression and committed mind, body, and soul to national liberation.

No matter how incomplete or unfinished Scotland’s independence may have been, in the early 1820s, this borrowed revolutionary tradition challenged Hewlett and his fellow Afro-New Yorkers, especially the men, to reassess their commitment to liberty and citizenship. Burns’s idea of truly liberated citizenship, the “man of the independent mind,” was very much a gendered concept, which was consistent with black intellectual and political leadership in the 1820s. Writing about citizenship and masculinity in early nineteenth-century America, historian Mia Bay emphasizes how white males often excluded black males from the polity because whites believed Negroes did not possess “all the qualities of men.” Such exclusion struck a chord with nineteenth-century African American intellectuals like David Walker. When he wrote his famous *Appeal to Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), Walker directly addressed the relative manhood of his black brethren, urging them not to be “submissive to a gang of men, whom we cannot tell whether they are as good as ourselves.”18 Burns’ imagined version of Robert Bruce similarly questions the manhood of Scottish soldiers in 1314 and, by extension, Burns questioned his countrymen in 1790s Scotland. Likewise, in 1820s Manhattan, Hewlett’s present-centered, cross-cultural rendition of “Scots, wha hae wi’ Wallace bled” challenged male Afro-New Yorkers to submit no longer to the whims of white men whose moral superiority was in serious doubt.

After hearing Hewlett intone “Bruce's Address,” on at least two separate occasions, did a brigade of adoring male fans march out of Brown’s Mercer Street Theatre and launch a glorious rebellion against their Euro-American oppressors? Not surprisingly, Hewlett’s passionate reinterpretations of “Scots, wha hae wi’ Wallace bled” failed to ignite a Bannockburn on the island of Manhattan, nothing approaching the insurrections devised and occasionally executed by slaves and free blacks in Virginia, South Carolina, or Georgia. Despite figurative heroes like

William Wallace and Robert Bruce and contemporary role models like the rebellious modern Greeks, Afro-New Yorkers would wait patiently until 1827 for complete emancipation. Yet historian George Lipsitz can help us appreciate the political potential and limitations of Hewlett’s calculated Black-Scottish crossover.

Lipsitz contends cultural production can function as an important “rehearsal for politics” without ever fomenting tangible political action. In *Time Passages*, he writes,

> Culture can seem like a substitute for politics, a way of posing only imaginary solutions to real problems, but under other circumstances culture can become a rehearsal for politics, trying out values and beliefs permissible in art but forbidden in social life. Most often, however, culture exists as a form of politics, as a means of reshaping individual and collective practice for specified interests, and as long as individuals perceive their interests as unfilled, culture retains an oppositional potential.\(^\text{19}\)

Hewlett’s transnational, trans-historical identifications with Wallace and Bruce served as training or “making” sessions for Afro-New Yorkers yearning for freedom and truly participatory citizenship. His musical homage and imaginative reenactment of revolution was designed to simulate and envision, not deliver, substantive liberation. What this borrowed ballad could do is reshape and clarify the political aspirations of long-suffering Afro-New Yorkers. As a form of politics, Burns’ historic recounting of a national struggle reminded African Americans that their emancipation was incomplete, unfulfilled; and therefore, free and slave Negroes needed to remain vigilant and oppositional. As rehearsal for Afro-New York’s imminent liberation, Hewlett’s cross-cultural balladeering transcended “primitive” musical assumptions, married revolutionary histories and rhetoric, and metaphorically removed the chains, thus allowing African Americans to prepare for larger roles in American society.

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\(^{19}\) George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 16.