10-1-1973

A Ukrainian Version of Scotland's Liberator, Bruce

Wolodymyr T. Zyla
Texas Tech University

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Recommended Citation
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Lesja Ukrainka (1871-1913) began her poetic creativity with lyrics devoted to Ukrainian ethnographic themes. This interest, however, was comparatively shortlived because the poetess became more and more concerned with universal themes, those which were interwoven with historical and psychological motifs. She began to deal in particular with the motifs of freedom and love and with the castigation of oppressors. This new concern greatly enriched her poetic scope, provided a new depth to her thought but at the same time subdued her lyrical elements. The best illustration of this change is the poem "Robert Bruce, King of Scotland." This poem reflects Lesja’s transitional stage, noticeable around 1893, from lyrics to dramatic works.

Lesja’s interest in Robert Bruce was inspired by (1) her uncle Myxajlo Drahomanov, who lived at that time as a political emigre in Sofia, Bulgaria, and also by (2) her compatriots’ struggle for a national cause under the Tsarist regime. Highly moved by Drahomanov, in answering his letter; she wrote: "I like your theme (about Bruce), especially interesting to me is the part which deals with the spider." Because of these two profound influences, Lesja wrote the poem "Robert Bruce, King of Scotland." This poem consists of a prologue and six parts. In her prologue, following the traditional requirement, she skillfully introduces her subject:

In thought we’ll fly into the distance soaring,
We shall look upon the martial conflict,
And plunge in memory into ancient glory.


The introductory remarks make the poetess' intentions distinct and worthy of the stirring theme. She explains that the Scottish generations are linked by "martial conflict" which is deeply enshrined in the nation's conscience. The poetess stresses the "ancient glory" which should inspire her to adore Bruce and the triumph of the struggle for Scottish independence. In the first part of the poem, Lesja begins to emphasize the fact that Scotland is a "free country," which has been invaded by King Edward, "the English monarch mighty." The country echoes to the call "Brothers to arms!" to stop the English invasion. But all efforts are futile:

The English army strikes and slays,
The English swords are shining;
The Scottish swords all fall away,
The Scottish knighthood dwining. (p. 241)

Whether this is an accurate description of the situation or an exaggeration is of minor importance. We face a brilliant poetic portrayal which in four lines renders the tragedy of the situation, though it is based on uncertain historical record.

Having militarily defeated the Scottish knighthood and having accepted their white banners, King Edward tries to exhibit his magnanimity by giving "back peace unto the land" (p. 241) and by coming to terms with the Scottish lords. His offer, dictated by might only, discounts Scottish national dignity and its tradition, but the tired Scottish lords cannot reject it. They overestimate the value of peace and thus neglect their national interests. For their freedoms which they inherited from their forefathers, they shall therefore serve the King and shall win from him "favor and noble payment" (p. 241). The poetess ironically comments:

"... Now long may Edward live!
Free Scotland's King forever!" (p. 242)

This shows how little the lords and the knights have respected their country and its freedom and how much they have treasured their selfish interests. But according to Lesja there is among the knighthood one young knight named Robert Bruce who rejects the submission. He looks Edward straight in the face,

As if forked lightning throwing,
His iron gauntlet drew he off,
And hurled it at the foeman. (p. 242)

Bruce at the beginning of the poem is, for Lesja, an ordinary knight with high self-esteem who sees Edward's actions as outrageously wrong.
A UKRAINIAN VERSION OF BRUCE

and therefore steps forward to head the Scottish national forces. Weak at the beginning and without followers, he hides in the mountains in order to overcome the general apathy and to raise the banner of freedom. Robert sees in Edward's actions an intended treason, and he attempts to show that the savage treachery must be rejected:

We have no knighthood, we have no strong lords,
In England's cause they endeavour,
But still in the land dwell the bold Scottish folk,
They will not wear fetters forever! (p. 242)

Here Lesja introduces a new social element, the Scottish folk, the peasants, who take the Bruce's banner and fight, despite the fact that they have not previously influenced Scottish life and its institutions. The poetess was aware that Bruce's fight belonged to the Middle Ages when the feudal system dominated the economic, social, political, and judicial institutions, when lords, some knights, and some churchmen ruled over the majority of the people who were only partly free. This new social element is Lesja's original poetic invention, and it adds a very special color to the poem. The poetess raises an essential question:

"... Who will plough
When the field without freedom is dwelling?" (p. 242)

This very last line speaks not only to the human conscience but to the human heart, and to deep national feelings. The country folk respond with great enthusiasm, and Bruce, the lonely leader, who had fled to the mountains, returns to head an army, ready for war and inspired by one device:

"For freedom and native land cherished!" (p. 243)

With this feeling in its heart, Robert's legendary army moves forward,

But not one bold knight in addition to him [Bruce]
Did the Scots have in their rally. (p. 243)

Then come the battles with the English, and the Scots are defeated each time, despite the overall courage displayed by the common folk. The powerful lords are too strong and too wise, and it is impossible to drive them into the mountains or into the glens, where they could be crushed.

Six times the wise meadows, six times the broad glens
With spilt blood were drenched and repleted,
Six times rang through Scotland the echoing cry:
"The Scots, ah, the Scots are defeated!" (p. 244)

Many people fall in these hard battles, others are scattered and their leader Robert Bruce remains again alone but still unconquered. This time he moves to the Irish shore with the decision never more to return to his country. He contemplates joining the crusaders and moving to Palestine so

That he might on a blessed campaign, with the years
And the strength that remained, give some aid there. (p. 245)

While on the desolate shore, lonely Robert waits for the ships which carry the crusaders to the Holy Land and recalls his own country and its mournful fate. Here his watchful eye catches a spider at work high on the ceiling. This is, of course, the spider which had attracted Lesja to Bruce’s story and became an inspiration to her. Thus she describes the spider in the finest way, depicting its effort and determination to achieve the goal:

And thuswise six times fell the spider,
And six times she climbed, till at last,
The seventh time, she was victorious,
And the thread to the wall was made fast. (p. 246)

This accomplishment changes Robert’s determination

And [he] cried: “Can it be that a knight has
Than a spider less will to endure?” (p. 246)

He returns to his native land with a firm decision to go to the battlefield for the seventh time:

“All men, to arms! . . .

To arms! Now who’s behind me?” (p. 246)

The Scottish folk respond enthusiastically to this new call and uphold Robert’s final decision:

Scotland will rise! The Scottish soul
Has nor burned out forever,
A seventh time as at the first
The folk will throng together. (p. 246)

The insurrection comes as a complete surprise for the English, whose military forces are dispersed and difficult to assemble at once. Bruce’s country folk, on the contrary, are appearing as if from underground, led by their courageous leader who looks like a “thunderbolt.”

5. See Kosach-Krywynyk, p. 175.
This final battle, in the Ukrainian version, is not called the battle of Bannockburn; it is just the decisive battle, where suddenly fortune's wheel turns towards the Scots because

... each Scot shall a free lord be
In his forfathers's country. (p. 248)

And they become victorious in this great battle, and their banners and swords are raised high again.

Then the thankful Scots offer their royal crown to Robert Bruce, and he becomes "Free Scotland's King forever!" (p. 249). Through this act, which is also the product of Lesja's imagination, the Scots recognize Robert Bruce's services to his country as well as his determination to carry the struggle to its completion.

But being proud of their King, the Scots also want to remind him that they will not tolerate oppression:

We have crowned thee as King and our ruler,
We'll uncrown thee again easily,
And if thou shouldst rise up against us,
Then we shall rise up against thee. (p. 250)

The poem ends with an inspiring conclusion that God should grant the Scottish people

"Agreement sincere, order true!" (p. 251)

because

"While still the sun is shining in the heavens
The Scottish people will not bear the yoke!" (p. 251)

Lesja Ukrajinka's "Robert Bruce, King of Scotland" is a thrilling tale depicting Bruce and the Scottish peasants in their fight for freedom. Bruce is portrayed as a national hero from the very beginning of the poem. He defies the English King, fights his armies, and finally himself becomes the Scottish King. The events in the poem, as can be seen from the above description, do not follow historical chronology; on the contrary, they are set according to the poetic requirements of Lesja's imagination. Thus, for example, Lesja transfers Bruce's coronation to the end of the poem, whereas historically it took place (March 25, 1306) immediately after the murder of John ("the Red") Comyn, a possible rival to Bruce for the throne. This change becomes quite justifiable because Bruce earns the royal title of Scotland as a deserved recognition. Lesja develops Bruce's character gradually. He begins as a common but valiant knight, homeless wanderer, loser for six times on the battlefields (which Lesja does not name but rather numbers); he then becomes victor at Bannockburn
(the place of this battle is not named in the poem), and the narrative ends by depicting his greatest achievement: becoming King of a free Scottish nation. At each stage the poetess stresses his glowing patriotism, his chivalric spirit of adventure so common for a medieval knight, and his highly inspiring influence on the peasantry. Robert has all the necessary features of a great character and is moved by determination and courage. It is quite rare for a knight, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, to give up the glory of a crusade in order to fight for his own country. This feature of Bruce's character is truly rare, and his patriotism illustrates his love for Scotland. We often regard medieval leaders as lacking a national conscience; they were instead moved by their religious feelings. This absence of patriotism, however, is not characteristic of John Barbour's *The Bruce*, which was finished in 1375, and it is not characteristic of Lesja's Robert Bruce.

Lesja's poem may be rightly called a modern version of Bruce's story. It is shortened and simplified, but at the same time it is very effective. The poetess freely interprets the Scottish liberation war, and for that reason inserts in her poem the fantastic episode with the spider. This episode came to her from Myxajlo Drahomanov who, in all probability, gained it from Sir Walter Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather* and sent it to Lesja in translation. The similarity between

   In judging feudalism it must be remembered that organized anarchy is better than anarchy which has no organization, and that without it European society might have dissolved into complete chaos. Whatever its faults, the feudal system did at least give some order to society in a lawless age, and it held the kingdoms together until such time as the rising of power of the monarchy could weld them into strong coherent states. (p. 170)
8. Selections from Barbour's Bruce, ed. Walter W. Skeat (Bungay: Richard Clay and Sons Limited, 1900).
11. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1971, XIX, 383:
   In later times Robert I [Bruce] has come to be revered as one of the heroes of Scottish national sentiment. Many legends have gathered around his name, notably the famous tale of the spider, which was first given currency by Sir Walter Scott in his *Tales of a Grandfather*, 1st series (1828), where he describes it as a tradition in the Bruce family.
Scott’s version and Lesja’s poem is so great that the source of this episode becomes obvious: “… If the insect shall make another effort to fix its thread, and shall be successful, I will venture a seventh time to try my fortune in Scotland.”

Lesja’s poetic version reads:

And thuswise six times fell the spider,
And six times she climbed till at last,
The seventh time, she was victorious,
And the thread to the wall was made fast. (p. 246)

The latter version is much shorter, but more colorful and more artistically portrayed.

Lesja was not familiar with Barbour’s The Bruce because of the language barrier, but she could have read Sir Walter Scott’s The Lord of the Isles, which during her time was available in Russian translation, as well as in German and French, languages that she knew. Scott’s poem has, however, not exerted much influence on Lesja because it is made of two independent plots, connected with each other merely by accidental circumstances of time and place. Even the battle of Bannockburn, which in Lesja’s version is the core of her poem, is, in Scott’s poem, merely an episode in the love of Ronald and the Maid

(11 cont’d)


12. We came to this conclusion after carefully comparing the spider story as it is told by Sir Walter Scott in Tales of a Grandfather, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Cadell and Co., 1828), I. 117-118, with Lesja Ukrajinka’s poem. It is impossible to find any similarities between Lesja’s version and Eliza Cook’s poem “Try Again.” Furthermore, in 1893 Lesja had just begun to study English and therefore could not use English originals. On November 7, 1893, she wrote to her grandmother: “The English language is very difficult, but I will know it, because my teacher tells me that I have language ability and therefore I should soon know English.” Kosach-Kryvynuk, p. 220.

13. Scott, p. 117.


of Lorn. There are only a few textual similarities which have already been pointed out by Ukrainian critics.

Should Lesja have been familiar with Barbour’s epic, *The Bruce*, her poem would have benefitted greatly, because Barbour is the founder of Scottish literature. She would have found useful his general treatment of the theme and his presentation of the chivalric spirit that dominates the epic. But Lesja’s poem has many original qualities which make it second only to Barbour’s work. It has Barbour’s lofty idealism, it is a patriotic poem, it is a lucid depiction of appropriate details, it is characterized by a significant graphic compression, and it depicts combat which are quite vivid.

Robert Burns’ “Robert Bruce’s March to Bannockburn” is another work which is comparable to Lesja’s poem. Burns writes:

> Wha for Scotland’s KINh, and LAW,  
> Freedom’s sword will strongly draw,  
> Free-man stand, or Free-man fa’  
> Let him follow me!”

Lesja’s poem certainly suggests his influence:

> "Who still has not surrendered freedom,  
> Let him to the fighting!  
> Who honour still recalls and fame—  
> To arms! Now who’s behind me?” (p. 246)

Finally let us consider why Lesja Ukrayinka has introduced some significant changes in the historical material while structuring her plot. The Ukrainian critic and literary scholar, Petro Odarcenko, partially answers this question by saying that

> The Scottish-English war of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries must serve as an historical example for Ukrainians. In order to make this example comparable to Ukrainian reality, Lesja Ukrayinka purposely has changed some historical facts; in her poem the Scottish knighthood surrenders to King Edward (analogous to the Ukrainian nobility who surrendered to Moscow), in the poem, contrary to historical facts, the decisive role in freeing Scotland belongs to peasantry (analogous to the

Ukrainian peasantry who remained faithful to the Ukrainian nation). 21

The participation of the peasantry in the poem was stimulated in Lesja’s mind by Drahomanov, who in his “Program” wrote that “the simple Ukrainian folk on its way to freedom unavoidably would have to use armed fighting and insurrection.” 22 At this point it is of interest to mention that Barbour in his epic (Book X, [A. D. 1308-1313]) mentions a farmer, William Bunnock, who helped the Bruce to take the castle Linlithgow which was held by the English. He took a wain of hay to this castle with eight men hidden within it, and then set up an ambush with his other friends. When the wain was half-way through the castle-gate, he gave a signal and the eight men and the men in ambush seized the castle. 23 Sir Walter Scott also mentions that

The stout yeomanry, and bold peasantry of the land, who were as desirous to enjoy their cottages in honourable independence, as the nobles were to reclaim their castles and estates from the English, contributed their full share in the efforts which were made to deliver the country from the invaders. 24

Thus there is a possibility that these two facts could have exerted some influence on Lesja too, if Drahomanov mentioned them to her.

Furthermore, Drahomanov’s political concept of responsible relations between the King and his people is reflected in Bruce’s election as King after the liberation and in the conditions placed upon him by the people. Lesja also indicates that the principle of true freedom contradicts aggression:

Then we shall not follow behind thee
To seize on another’s rich hoard. (p. 250).

But besides the social and political questions, Lesja was also concerned about her artistic approach, because her poem had to appeal to freedom-loving people and had to raise forever the universal problem of justice, true heroism, and undivided beauty.

22. Ibid., p. 20. Translation my own.
23. Selections from Barbour’s Bruce, pp. 231-235. This same story is mentioned by Sir Walter Scott in his Tales of a Grandfather, pp. 158-162. Scott adds also that “King Robert rewarded Binnock by bestowing on him an estate, which his posterity long afterwards enjoyed” (p. 162). Scott calls the farmer Binnok and not Bunnock (bunnok) as in Barbour’s epic. According to him in 1828 this name was pronounced Binning (p. 158).
"Robert Bruce, King of Scotland" is a good example of a serious social work, elaborated with idealogical pathos which perpetuates the sentiment of Scotish nationality. The poem's universal theme shows Ukrainians the uncertainties and fears that accompany any serious struggle, and it points forward to the time when the final triumph will come after the Ukrainian "Bannockburn" is fought and won.

The style of "Robert Bruce, King of Scotland" indicates some difficulties which the young poetess realized and tried to overcome in order to free her theme from limitations, to keep it imaginative and inspiring. In order to preserve the stature and the beauty of this poem, which can be rightly called a "hymn of freedom," the poetess used some stylistic devices of Ukrainian dumy25 which by their virtue are essentially poetic and have provided the poem with effective coloring and adequate impressiveness.

25. Dumy are lyrical epic folk songs of heroic character which depict important events in the history of Ukraine beginning with the fifteenth century.

*Texas Tech University*