MIDLANDS HISTORICAL REVIEW

'Their treason undid them': Crossing the Boundary between Scottish and English in Barbour's *Bruce*

Author: Callum Watson

'Their treason undid them': Crossing the Boundary between Scottish and English in Barbour's *Bruce*

CALLUM WATSON

The maintenance of public morality was a central aspect of aristocratic life throughout the medieval period. Literature provided a means of discussing issues of public morality and particularly for citing examples of the obligations it imposed on the audience. Literary presentations of social obligations are a useful resource for historians to analyse this issue as the often fictive nature of these sources allowed the writers to present an idealised form of such interactions. Discussions of loyalty and treason in literature thus posed an opportunity for writers to address existing tensions and offer ways of resolving on-going conflicts, preventing future eruptions of violence. The issue of loyalty is a central theme of Barbour's *Bruce*, a long narrative poem purporting to recount the life and career of King Robert I of Scotland (r. 1306-29), written in the mid-1370s when tensions were rising between Scotland and England, and the prospect of open war between the two kingdoms was growing increasingly likely.[1] For Barbour, loyalty is the cardinal virtue without which an individual can be of no worth, regardless of what other virtues they might embody. Yet Barbour openly acknowledges the shifting allegiances of some of the men whose achievements he is seeking to commemorate, and he does not always condemn individuals for switching sides in the conflict. This paper explains these apparent contradictions in Barbour's attitude, and in doing so it explores the potential justifications for changing one's allegiance in late fourteenth-century Scotland. Given that Barbour's contemporary audience likely included a significant proportion of Scotland's aristocracy, this paper will therefore offer a valuable insight into wider attitudes among the Scottish political community at the time he was writing.[2]

---

[1] Barbour dates the 'compiling' as 1375 (Bk. 13, ll. 709-714). The poem – almost fourteen thousand lines in length – survives in one complete manuscript – National Library of Scotland, Advocates' MS 19.2.2 (I) – and in one incomplete manuscript that is missing an early portion of the poem – Cambridge, St John's College, MS G.23. The incomplete manuscript (MS C) is slightly older, dating from around 1487, while the Edinburgh manuscript (MS E) was produced around 1489, and for the remainder of this paper all references will be to J. Barbour, *The Bruce*, (A.A.M. Duncan ed. & trans.), (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997).

[2] Barbour's work was known to Andrew of Wyntoun in the 1400s, Walter Bower in the 1440s, and to Blind Hary writing sometime in the 1470s-1480s, cf. Andrew of Wyntoun, *The Original Chronicle of Andrew of Wyntoun*, (F. J. Amours ed.), (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1903-1914), Bk. 8, ll. 177-220, 970-982; W. Bower, *Scotichronicon*, (D.E.R. Watt ed.), (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1993-98), Vol. 6, p. 353, 381; Blind Harry, *The Wallace*, (A. McKim ed.), (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), Bk. 7, ll. 902, 1293; Bk. 12, ll. 1147, 1212-1214; for further examination of the impact of Barbour's work on his contemporary audience, cf. S. Boardman, ''Thar nobill eldrys gret bounte': *The Bruce* and Early Stewart Scotland', in S. Boardman and S. Foran (eds.), *Barbour's* Bruce *and its Cultural Contexts*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), pp. 191-212

Loyalty as a virtue is a subject that Barbour is keenly interested in: he famously presents it as the greatest virtue of all. Loyalty was necessarily a key feature of the relationship between a lord and his vassals, which was ideally envisioned as a reciprocal one.[3] A vassal was expected to show loyalty and in return would expect to be rewarded for his service by his lord.[4] Barbour's understanding of the reciprocal nature of lordship has long been recognised by scholars.[5] His description of the relationship between King Robert, popularly known as the Bruce, and his chief lieutenant Sir James Douglas when they first meet typifies the ideal reciprocal relationship between lord and vassal, noting that Douglas 'servyt ay lely' and that in return the king 'Rewardyt him weile' for his service.[6] Loyalty was so highly prized that it was common for the virtue of loyal characters to be juxtaposed with the wickedness of treason, a crime so vile that the most gruesome punishments were reserved for those convicted of it.[7] *The Bruce* is replete with instances of Barbour identifying the opponents of his heroes as traitors.[8]

The term 'tresoun' – or minor variations thereon – is used twenty-five times throughout *The Bruce*, and the word 'tratour' appears in one form or another a further sixteen times. The meaning of the term is unambiguously associated with the betrayal of trust and Barbour is at pains to emphasise the fact that it can affect individuals across a wide social spectrum:

> Bot of all thing wa worth tresoun,
> For thar is nother duk ne baroun
> Na erle na prynce na king off mycht
> Thocht he be never sa wys na wycht
> For wyt worschip price na renoun,
> That ever may wauch hym with tresoune.[9]

---

[3] S. Reynolds, 'Trust in Medieval Society and Politics', in S. Reynolds (ed.), *The Middle Ages without Feudalism: Essays in Criticism and Comparison on the Medieval West*, (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), p. 3

[4] S. Reynolds, 'Some Afterthoughts on Fiefs and Vassals', pp. 7-8; F. Oakley, *The Mortgage of the Past: Reshaping the Ancient Political Inheritance, 1050-1300*, (New Haven, Conn. & London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 157

[5] L. A. Ebin, 'John Barbour's *Bruce*: Poetry, History, and Propaganda', *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 9: Iss. 4 (1972), pp. 219-20; L. O. Pardon and J. N. Wasserman, 'Chivalry and Feudal Obligation in Barbour's Bruce', in L. O. Pardon and C. L. Vitto (eds.), *The Rusted Hauberk: Feudal Ideals of Order and Their Decline*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 83; D. B. Tyson, 'The Vocabulary of Chivalric Description in Late Fourteenth-Century Biography', in S. Boardman (ed.), *Barbour's* Bruce *and its Cultural Contexts*, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), pp. 133

[6] *The Bruce*, Bk. 2, ll. 170-74

[7] E. Powell, 'The Strange Death of Sir John Mortimer: Politics and the Law of Treason in Lancastrian England', in R. E. Archer and S. Walker (eds.), *Rulers and Ruled in Late Medieval England: Essays presented to Gerald Harris*, (London and Rio Grande: Hambleton Press, 1995), pp. 83-97; J. G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 23-58; J. Benham, *Peacemaking in the Middle Ages: Principles and Practice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 150

[8] For examples of villains being identified as traitors, cf. *The Bruce*, Bk. 3, ll. 599-603, Bk. 7, ll. 196, Bk. 7, ll. 224, Bk. 15, ll. 125

[9] *The Bruce*, Bk. 1, ll. 515-520

In a lengthy digression on the dangers of treason following Bruce's killing of John Comyn (who in *The Bruce* is presented as having brought about his own fate by betraying Bruce to Edward I), Barbour provides a list of notable examples of great men from history who were brought low by treachery, including Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and King Arthur.[10] By including this list of comparable cases Barbour is able to demonstrate the applicability of his observations on the nature of treason as well as to draw positive comparisons between these great heroes and his own – King Robert.

While providing service to the king's enemies could be a treasonous matter, there remained the possibility of reconciliation in certain circumstances. For Barbour, switching sides in the middle of a conflict did not always qualify as treason, and there is no more prominent an example of this than the case of the king's 'dearest nephew' Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray. He is on the Scottish side when Bruce is crowned but is taken captive at Methven and becomes 'English' until taken captive again by Douglas at the Water of Lyne.[11] Barbour is quick to assert that the choice Randolph faces after Methven is to switch sides or be killed:

> Thomas Randell wes ane off tha
> That for his lyff become thar man.[12]

The implication is that since Randolph's oath was made under duress it was not as binding as an oath that had been made willingly. Barbour even extends this to the common people when he observes that the English 'Led thaim with daunger and with aw/That thai na freyndschip durst him schaw'.[13]

However, the case of Randolph's change of allegiance is complicated by the fact that Randolph takes to his new role as an agent of the English king with apparent enthusiasm. He receives praise for capturing the king's banner, and later accompanies John of Lorn – a kinsman of the supposedly treacherous John Comyn and a bitter opponent of King Robert – in pursuing the fugitive king with a tracker dog.[14] Yet when Randolph is eventually reconciled, Barbour provides a description of the earl's character that specifically emphasises his reverence for loyalty and his distaste for treason:

---

[10] *The Bruce*, Bk. 1, ll. 521-560
[11] *The Bruce*, Bk. 2, ll. 237; Bk. 2, ll. 408; Bk. 9, ll. 722
[12] *The Bruce*, Bk. 2, ll. 466-7
[13] *The Bruce*, Bk. 5, ll. 131-132; at the time Barbour was writing some areas of southern Scotland remained under English control, and it may be that this passage reflects his understanding of the situation in these areas.
[14] *The Bruce*, Bk. 7, ll. 87-90

> He [Bruce] knew his [Randolph's] worthi vasselage
> And his gret wyt and his avys
> His traist hart and his lele service…
> … Lawté he lovyt atour all thing,
> Falset tresoun and felony
> He stude agayne ay encrely[15]

The significance of Barbour's decision to include the fact that Randolph briefly fought on the English side is underlined by his choice to omit Bruce's own time in English allegiance. That Barbour does not even acknowledge that Bruce had previously served the English king demonstrates that the writer was not necessarily beholden to record anything that he found embarrassing or awkward, suggesting he included Randolph's support for the English to make a point.

A clearer indication of what made Randolph's actions justifiable – at least in Barbour's eyes - can be seen when Randolph is eventually captured and brought before the king. According to Barbour, Randolph rebukes the king and expresses dissatisfaction with Bruce's use of guerrilla tactics when he should instead be facing the English in open battle. Walter Ullman has identified the term *diffidatio* – a term used in later legal documentation – as referring to the legitimate withdrawal of loyalty, usually on the basis that a lord had not fulfilled his responsibility to a particular vassal.[16] This would fit with Randolph's initial rebuke of Bruce, as the earl apparently feels Bruce is neglecting his responsibilities as king by failing to meet the English in open battle. Of course, once he has been convinced that Bruce's strategy is the most appropriate he is welcomed back into the king's inner circle, where he remains for the remainder of the poem. This seems to give Barbour the opportunity to record the fact that Randolph did indeed switch sides during the course of the conflict but avoids tarnishing either the king's or the earl's reputation because of this fact.

Randolph provides the most notable but far from the only example of an individual withdrawing their loyalty over a dispute with the king. Barbour also presents Sir Ingram Umfraville – who despite having been in English allegiance for much of the poem receives mostly positive treatment in *The Bruce* – as politely withdrawing his allegiance to Bruce over the execution of Sir David Brechin in the aftermath of the Soules conspiracy, an attempt to overthrow the king in 1320:

> He [Umfraville] said agane, 'Schyr, graunt mercy
> And I sall tell you planely,
> Myne hart giffis me na mar to be

---

[15] *The Bruce*, Bk. 10, ll. 270-272, 290-292
[16] W. Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages*, (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 64

> With you dwelland in this countre,
> Tharfor bot that it nocht you greve
> I pray you hartly of your leve.
> For quhar sua rycht worthi a knycht
> An sa chevalrous and sa wicht
> And sa renownyt off worschip syne
> As gud Schyr David off Brechyn
> And sa fullfyllyt off all manheid
> Was put to sa velanys a ded,
> Myn hart forsuth may nocht gif me
> To dwell for na thing that may be.'[17]

Bruce graciously allows Umfraville to leave and Barbour reserves no criticism for the manner of his departure.[18] Barbour even acknowledges the possibility that switching sides could lead to conflicting obligations when Umfraville is constrained to offer advice damaging to his former lord – King Robert – on the basis of his obligation to his subsequent lord – Edward II.[19]

The Scots also benefit from a person switching sides during the conflict on one particularly notable occasion, namely the capture of Berwick in 1318. The opportunity to finally capture the town – which was in English hands since 1286 – is presented to King Robert when a burgess, Syme of Spalding, offers to betray the town to the Scots. Syme is provoked into the course of action by the captain of the town, whose suspicion and mistreatment of the Scots in the town has become unbearable.[20] It might be argued that since Syme of Spalding is a mere burgess he is not held to as high a standard of behaviour as the more noble characters in *The Bruce*, and thus his change of heart is not taken as seriously as it might otherwise. However, if indeed all three estates could be culpable of treason, as the judicial records showing that men from all social strata could be condemned for this crime would suggest, then it seems reasonable to infer that it is also possible for them to negotiate a change of allegiance in certain circumstances, just as the nobility could.[21] Barbour's account of the Syme's role in the capture of Berwick would seem to support this. The episode may reinforce the notion that, like Randolph's brief period of service to the English, switching sides was acceptable so long as an individual could demonstrate that their rights were being denied by his previous lord. In the case of Syme of Spalding, it is surely the case that his usefulness to the achievement of one of Bruce's goals – namely the recovery of Berwick – facilitated his ability to negotiate his

---

[17] *The Bruce*, Bk. 19, ll. 95-108
[18] *The Bruce*, Bk. 19, ll. 109-118
[19] *The Bruce*, Bk. 19, ll. 152-157
[20] *The Bruce*, Bk. 17, ll. 22-30
[21] For examples of Scottish treason legislation, albeit from the fifteenth-century, cf. RPS, 1430/42. Date accessed: 17th May 2018; RPS, 1430/43. Date accessed: 17th May 2018; RPS, 1430/46. Date accessed: 17th May 2018; RPS, 1436/10/6. Date accessed: 17th May 2018; RPS, 1450/1/31. Date accessed: 17th May 2018; RPS, 1455/10/5. Date accessed: 17th May 2018; RPS, 1455/10/8. Date accessed: 17th May 2018; RPS, 1455/10/9. Date accessed: 17th May 2018

return to Scottish allegiance. The same sense of usefulness can be detected in Umfraville's return to English allegiance, particularly by the fact that Barbour claims that Edward II immediately sought Umfraville's advice on how best to prosecute the war against Scotland.[22] This in turn suggests that the ability to promote one's own usefulness to a cause was a significant factor in enabling such changes of allegiance in reality as well.

The frequency and ease with which Scots, and Englishmen, switched sides during the fourteenth-century conflicts between the two kingdoms may help to explain this interest in loyalty and treason in Barbour's *Bruce*. Dissatisfaction and dissention among Scotland's nobility was a frequent cause of concern for writers in late medieval Scotland. For a member of the Scottish nobility, service to the English crown often offered more lucrative rewards in terms of patronage than showing loyalty to the Scottish king, since the English crown was undoubtedly wealthier.[23] Political expediency was a major factor in determining whether a Scottish landholder switched sides. For instance, Bruce himself was 'English' from 1302 (when the possibility of the restoration of his rival John Balliol as King of Scots had never looked more likely) until 1306 (when he made public his ambition to seize power).[24] William Douglas, so-called Knight of Liddesdale, did homage to Edward III in 1352 after his kinsman had taken advantage of William's time in captivity following the Battle of Neville's Cross to usurp his authority in the Marches.[25] George Dunbar, Earl of March and a descendant of Thomas Randolph, submitted to Henry IV in 1400 following a personal dispute with David, Duke of Rothesay, and Archibald 'the Grim', natural son of the James Douglas who receives so much praise from Barbour.[26] Scottish nobles might also find it expedient to change sides when the English were in the ascendancy in Lowland Scotland. A.J. Tuck described the Anglo-Scottish cross border conflict as 'something of a civil war'.[27] Alistair Macdonald too has noted a considerable amount of evidence suggesting cross-border cooperation among noblemen with a great deal to be gained by limiting the effects of warfare in the Marches on their own lands.[28] The fact of shifting loyalties could not be denied, but it had to be explained. Barbour sought to justify the changes in the allegiances of men who – in his view at least – had not always fought

---

[22] *The Bruce*, Bk. 19, ll. 146-151
[23] A. King, 'Best of Enemies: Were the Fourteenth-Century Anglo-Scottish Marches a `Frontier Society'?', A. King and M. A. Penman (eds.), *England and Scotland in the Fourteenth Century: New Perspectives*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), p. 125
[24] G. W. S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, (Edinburgh: 1976), pp. 121-124, pp. 146-148
[25] *Rotuli Scotiae in Turri Londinensi et in Domo Capitulari Westmonasteriensi*, (D. Macpherson ed.), (London, 1814-1819), i, 752-753
[26] *Foedera, Conventiones, Litterae, et cujuscunque generis Acta Publica,* (T. Rymer ed.), (London, 1704-35), pp. viii, 149
[27] A. J. Tuck, 'The Emergence of a Northern Nobility, 1250-1400', *Northern History* Volume 22 (1986), p. 7
[28] A. J. Macdonald, *Border Bloodshed: Scotland and England at War, 1369-1403*, (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), p. 223

for the 'right' side.

Key to any discussion of how these works deal with the issue of shifting loyalties is the question of whether the authors are offering an opportunity for their audience to modify their behaviour. Barbour repeatedly makes it clear that Bruce and Douglas' knightly virtues inspire the same virtues in the men who witness their great deeds.[29] Barbour recounts two similar tales of three traitors both of which end with an interesting statement attributed to Bruce that makes treason the corrupting force that defined them as evil men.[30] This warning against treachery is tinged with the possibility of redemption for those reading the poem, at least if they renounce their treacherous ways. Barbour states categorically that even men innately given to evil can change their nature with the application of intelligence ('Throu thar gret wit') and indeed that they are obliged to do so.[31] In reality, noblemen could be calculating in all of their social interactions. Barbour sought to adapt attitudes to make calculations more open and honest, but did not seek to deter his audience from carefully considering the social interactions they might undertake. In much this way, Barbour was adapting his narrative to suit the challenges Scotland was experiencing at the time he was writing and the new demands this put on the martial class, using chivalric conventions such as loyalty and good lordship as a basis for this discussion.

---

[29] *The Bruce*, Bk. 5, ll. 359-66; Bk. 7, ll. 601; Bk. 9, ll. 411-415; Bk. 16, ll. 193
[30] *The Bruce*, Bk. 5, ll. 655-8; Bk. 7, ll. 493
[31] *The Bruce*, Bk. 4, ll. 735-9

Bibliography

Archival sources

The Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707, K. M. Brown et al (eds.) (St Andrews, 2007-2015) < http://www.rps.ac.uk/>

Primary sources

Barbour, J., *The Bruce*, (A.A.M. Duncan ed. & trans.), (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997)

Blind Harry, *The Wallace*, (A. McKim ed.), (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003)

Bower, W., *Scotichronicon*, (D.E.R. Watt ed.), (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1993-98), 9 volumes

Foedera, Conventiones, Litterae, et cujuscunque generis Acta Publica, (T. Rymer ed.), (London, 1704-1735), Volume 8

Rotuli Scotiae in Turri Londinensi et in Domo Capitulari Westmonasteriensi, (D. Macpherson ed.), (London, 1814-1819), Volume 1

Wyntoun, A., *The Original Chronicle of Andrew of Wyntoun*, (F. J. Amours ed.), (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1903-1914), 6 volumes

Secondary sources

Barrow, G. W. S., *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, (3rd edn.) (Edinburgh, 1988)

Bellamy, J. G., *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages*, (Cambridge, 1970)

Benham, J., *Peacemaking in the Middle Ages: Principles and Practice*, (Manchester, 2011)

Boardman, S., ''Thar nobill eldrys gret bounte': *The Bruce* and Early Stewart Scotland', in Boardman, S., and Foran, S., (eds.), *Barbour's* Bruce *and its Cultural Contexts*, (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 191-212

Ebin, L. A., 'John Barbour's *Bruce*: Poetry, History, and Propaganda', *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 9: Iss. 4 (1972), pp. 218–242

King, A., 'Best of Enemies: Were the Fourteenth-Century Anglo-Scottish Marches a `Frontier Society'?', in King, A., and Penman, M. A., (eds.), *England and Scotland in the Fourteenth Century: New Perspectives*, (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 116-135

Macdonald, A. J., *Border Bloodshed: Scotland and England at War, 1369-1403*, (East Linton, 2000)

Oakley, F., *The Mortgage of the Past: Reshaping the Ancient Political Inheritance, 1050-1300*, (New Haven, Conn. & London, 2012)

Pardon, L. O., and Wasserman, J. N., 'Chivalry and Feudal Obligation in Barbour's *Bruce*', in Pardon, L. O., and Vitto, C. L., (eds.), *The Rusted Hauberk: Feudal Ideals of Order and Their Decline*, (Gainesville, 1994), pp. 77-95

Powell, E., 'The Strange Death of Sir John Mortimer: Politics and the Law of Treason in Lancastrian England', in Archer, R. E., and Walker, S., (eds.), *Rulers and Ruled in Late Medieval England: Essays presented to Gerald Harris*, (London and Rio Grande, 1995), pp. 83-97

Reynolds, S., 'Some Afterthoughts on Fiefs and Vassals', in Reynolds, S., (ed.), *The Middle Ages without Feudalism: Essays in Criticism and Comparison on the Medieval West*, (Farnham, Surrey, 2012), pp. 1-15

Reynolds, S., 'Trust in Medieval Society and Politics', in Reynolds, S., (ed.), *The Middle Ages without Feudalism: Essays in Criticism and Comparison on the Medieval West*, (Farnham, Surrey, 2012), pp. 1-16

Tuck, A. J., 'The Emergence of a Northern Nobility, 1250-1400', *Northern History* 22 (1986), pp. 1-17

Tyson, D. B., 'The Vocabulary of Chivalric Description in Late Fourteenth-Century Biography', in Boardman, S., and Foran, S., (eds.), *Barbour's Bruce and its Cultural Contexts*, (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 119-136

Ullmann, W., *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages*, (London, 1967)