

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLIX

© *Leeds Studies in English* 2018
School of English
University of Leeds
Leeds, England

ISSN 0075-8566

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLIX

2018

Edited by

Alaric Hall



Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

School of English

University of Leeds

2018

Worthy, Wycht, and Wys: Romance, Chivalry, and Chivalric Language in John Barbour's *Bruce*

James W. Titterton¹

Introduction

In the 1370s John Barbour, archdeacon of Aberdeen, composed a narrative poem about the life of Robert I of Scotland (*r.* 1306–29) and his victory over the English in the First War of Independence. The poem, known simply as *The Bruce*, appears to have been commissioned by Robert II (*r.* 1371–90), as Barbour received a royal pension from 1378 until his death in 1395. This is said to have been granted 'for the compilation of the book of the deeds of the late King Robert the Bruce'.²

It is a long work, written in Old Scots, the vernacular of fourteenth-century Scotland, full of battles and ambushes, daring escapes and base betrayals. It is a story about warriors and the hard business of warfare. Its principal characters are knights, courageous and skilled in battle, stalwart in the face of hardship, and loyal to their king. They also possess finer graces and are lauded by the poet for their courtesy and generosity to both friend and foe. They are heroic figures and Barbour calls their story a *romanys* (1.446), worthy of comparison with the tales of Charlemagne or Alexander.

It seems strange, then, that so many scholars have argued that *The Bruce* is neither a romance nor chivalrous. Kliman and Cameron have even gone so far as to argue that it should be read as an anti-romance that subverted contemporary chivalric norms. Through a close study of Barbour's text and his use of chivalric language, this article will argue that *The Bruce* has been misunderstood and that it is indeed a chivalric text. Keen defined chivalry as 'an ethos in which martial, aristocratic and Christian elements were fused together. [Chivalry] is a way of life in which we can discern these three essential facets, the military, the noble, and the religious'.³ Using this definition as a starting point, this article will outline what Barbour meant

¹ My thanks to Dr Alan V. Murray for his advice in the writing of this piece and his encouragement to publish my research. My thanks also to Dr Trevor Russell Smith for his comments and editorial guidance.

² John Barbour, *The Bruce*, ed. by Archibald A. M. Duncan (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), pp. 2–3. All references to book and line numbers in the text are taken from this edition and all translations are my own.

³ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 16–17. For an examination of how this definition remains relevant to later medieval Scotland, see Katie Stevenson, *Chivalry and Knighthood in Scotland, 1424–1513* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), pp. 1–12.

by the term 'chivalry' and who or what he considered 'chivalrous' by studying the vocabulary that he used to describe his knightly characters and their deeds.

The Historiography of *The Bruce*

Scholars have studied *The Bruce* for its themes of freedom and nationalism, and its significance as the first major work of vernacular Scots literature. A number have also addressed Barbour's treatment of chivalry, while the question of the poem's genre has often been bound up with the study of its content. The most prolific Barbour scholar of the last century, and the key proponent of the anti-romance/anti-chivalry theory, was Kliman.⁴ She contrasted the so-called 'courtly code' with Barbour's more practical concept of chivalry: the 'objects of the standard chivalry — personal fame, defeat of unbelievers, achievement of personal salvation, a lady's love — are not appropriate to the nature of the work'.⁵ Kliman regarded the minor role played by women in *The Bruce* and the characters' failure to perform any love service as evidence of Barbour's rejection of conventional chivalry.⁶ Kliman also argued that Robert Bruce's use of guerrilla warfare should be seen as a rejection of the conventional tactics of 'courtly' chivalry.⁷ Edward Bruce (c. 1280–1318), Robert's brother, more remarkable for his 'willingness to die' than his 'prowess or wisdom', is the poem's example of a 'hero in the old tradition', while Robert adopts Barbour's more practical, if unconventional, idea of chivalry.⁸

Key to Kliman's understanding of chivalry in *The Bruce* is the theme of loyalty and the role of the common people in the war for Scottish freedom. Robert Bruce is encouraged, and occasionally rescued, by his subordinates: not typical behaviour for a hero of courtly romance.⁹ This extends even to commoners, who are encompassed in a 'new transcendent chivalry' motivated by love of Scotland and 'the desire for freedom'.¹⁰ Kliman listed all the named commoners who appear in *The Bruce* and their valiant deeds, the kind 'usually associated with the chivalrous warriors of the upper class'.¹¹ Again, Kliman repeated her argument that *The Bruce* contains the 'theme of chivalry in conflict with strategy' and that Robert Bruce's use of cunning and deception in the poem was 'antithetical to chivalry in the usual sense'.¹²

Kliman's work is useful for providing a broad framework for studying chivalry in *The Bruce* but her assumptions about chivalry and medieval warfare are dated. In an article examining Barbour's use of rhetoric, Kliman argued that the poet used the fourth-century work of military theory Vegetius's *De re militari* to shape the content of his pre-battle speeches, although she failed to provide any evidence of a direct link between the texts.¹³ Her conclusion, based on that purely hypothetical link, was as follows: '[Charles] Oman

⁴ Kliman's arguments about Barbour's attitude towards chivalry draw extensively on the work of Wittig. See for example Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958).

⁵ Bernice W. Kliman, 'The Idea of Chivalry in John Barbour's *Bruce*', *Medieval Studies*, 35 (1973), 477–508 (p. 478).

⁶ Kliman, 'Idea of Chivalry', pp. 479–81.

⁷ Kliman, 'Idea of Chivalry', pp. 490–92.

⁸ Kliman, 'Idea of Chivalry', p. 493.

⁹ Kliman, 'Idea of Chivalry', p. 497.

¹⁰ Kliman, 'Idea of Chivalry', p. 505.

¹¹ Bernice W. Kliman, 'The Significance of Barbour's Naming of Commoners', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 11 (1973), 108–13 (p. 109).

¹² Kliman, 'Significance of Barbour's Commoners', pp. 110–11.

¹³ Bernice W. Kliman, 'Speech as a Mirror of *Sapientia* and *Fortitudo* in Barbour's *Bruce*', *Medium Ævum*, 44 (1975), 151–61.

refers to most battles in the Middle Ages as between chivalrous maniacs, seeking glory rather than victory. So for Barbour to use Vegetius as a model of behaviour for his ideal hero is a significant departure from romance and even historical norms'.¹⁴ Oman's 'chivalrous maniac' model of medieval warfare had been superseded even when Kliman wrote the above statement. As far back as 1954, Verbruggen dismissed Oman's arguments as 'facile', lacking 'both synthesis and critical insight'.¹⁵ Fifty years of military history has demonstrated that there was a science to medieval warfare, in which effective leadership and strategic acumen were more important than brute force.¹⁶

Despite this glaring flaw, Kliman's interpretation has influenced many later scholars.¹⁷ For instance, Purdon and Wasserman took Kliman's conclusions and suggested that *The Bruce* was intended to call Scottish knights away from the glamour of conventional chivalry and towards more practical service under the Stewart kings.¹⁸ Cameron (formerly Vāthjunker) repeated the idea that, in criticising the conduct of Edward Bruce, Barbour 'rather than redefining the code of chivalry [...] rejects it'.¹⁹ On the subject of James Douglas (*d.* 1330), whom Barbour portrays as Robert Bruce's chief lieutenant, she wrote that he 'does not conform to the courtly concepts of chivalry any more than his swarthy physique does', and 'it is impossible to call Douglas an "ideal knight" without redefining the concept of chivalry beyond recognition'.²⁰ She would go on to elaborate on this theme, claiming that Barbour was redrawing the boundaries of chivalric virtue to emphasise *mesure* or cunning, as employed by Robert Bruce and Douglas, over thoughtless courage, as exemplified by characters such as Edward Bruce and Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray (*d.* 1332).²¹

Stevenson largely agreed with Kliman on Barbour's portrayal of chivalry, arguing that he 'modified the practice of chivalry to fit in his stories'.²² Scenes like the infamous 'Douglas Larder', in which James Douglas had the blood of an English garrison which he had executed mixed with the contents of a wine-cellar, are instances in which Barbour's attempt to portray

¹⁴ Kliman, 'Speech as a Mirror', pp. 151–52.

¹⁵ Jean F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe During the Middle Ages, from the Eighth Century to 1340*, trans. by Sumner Willard and Sheila C. M. Southern, 2nd rev. edn (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997), p. 2.

¹⁶ The literature on medieval military history is vast. Key texts include Philippe Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Michael Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); John France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades, 1000–1300* (London: UCL Press, 1999); John Gillingham, 'Richard I and the Science of War in the Middle Ages', in *War and Government in the Middle Ages in Honour of J. O. Prestwich*, ed. by John Gillingham and James C. Holt (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1984), pp. 78–91; Helen Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare: Theory and Practice of War in Europe, 300–1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Raymond C. Smail, *Crusading Warfare, 1097–1193* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956); Matthew Strickland, *War and Chivalry: The Conduct and Perception of War in England and Normandy, 1066–1217* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Verbruggen, *Art of Warfare*.

¹⁷ See Anne M. McKim, 'James Douglas and Barbour's Ideal of Knighthood', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 17 (1981), 167–80; Phoebe A. Mainster, 'How to Make a Hero: Barbour's Recipe', *Michigan Academician*, 20 (1988), 225–38.

¹⁸ Liam O. Purdon and Julian N. Wasserman, 'Chivalry and Feudal Obligation in Barbour's *Bruce*', in *The Rusted Hauberk: Feudal Ideals of Order and their Decline*, ed. by Liam O. Purdon and Cindy L. Vitto (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), pp. 77–95.

¹⁹ Sonja Vāthjunker, 'A Study in the Career of Sir James Douglas' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1992), p. 178.

²⁰ Vāthjunker, 'Study in the Career of Douglas', p. 258.

²¹ Sonja Cameron, 'Chivalry in Barbour's *Bruce*', in *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France: Proceedings of the 1995 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. by Matthew Strickland (Stamford: Watkins, 1998), pp. 13–29 (pp. 18–21).

²² K. Stevenson, *Chivalry and Knighthood*, p. 154.

a chivalric ideal was forced to defer to the evidence of history. This is a key point that will be expanded on below. Stevenson differed from Kliman's interpretation on one significant subject: according to Stevenson, Edward Bruce's reckless courage was not chivalric at all but was 'an abandonment of a key part of chivalric knighthood' because he placed personal glory before victory.²³

The idea that Barbour presents a marginal or radical interpretation of chivalry was repeated again in a recent collection of essays on *The Bruce*. Purdie interpreted Barbour's emphasis on prudence and cunning as a rejection of medieval romance's fixation on displays of reckless bravery.²⁴ Likewise, she interpreted two incidents from the poem in which noblemen do gallant service to a woman, namely John Webiton's death in fulfilment of his vow to defend Douglas Castle and Robert Bruce's decision to halt his army in order to allow a laundress to give birth, as sly jokes on Barbour's part, intended to highlight to his audience 'the limitations of romance as a lens through which to read Bruce's history'. Given-Wilson also stated that Barbour's depiction of Bruce 'did not always measure up to the chivalric ideal' because he employed ruses.²⁵ According to Given-Wilson, this anticipated the content of later 'chivalric biographies', such as Jean Cuvelier's life of Bertrand du Guesclin (*d.* 1380) and the biography of Marshal Boucicaut (1366–1421).

Romance, *Chanson* or Biography?

Closely associated with the question of chivalry and *The Bruce* is the debate concerning its genre. Barbour calls it a *romanys* (1.446) but a number of scholars have questioned whether it is truly a 'romance', often citing what they believe to be its unconventional attitude towards chivalry as evidence that it should be seen as a broadly 'historical' text.²⁶ This is symptomatic of a larger issue in medieval studies: there is no satisfactory definition of 'medieval romance' that encompasses all the disparate texts that have been categorised under that name. In the twelfth century, the term 'romance' simply referred to texts translated from Latin into the vernacular, the 'romance languages'. In time, it came to encompass any narrative in the vernacular.²⁷ According to Sergi Mainer, 'the most general, inclusive and completely acceptable definition

²³ K. Stevenson, *Chivalry and Knighthood*, p. 157.

²⁴ Rhiannon Purdie, 'Medieval Romance and the Generic Frictions of Barbour's *Bruce*', in *Barbour's Bruce and its Cultural Contexts: Politics, Chivalry and Literature in Late Medieval Scotland*, ed. by Steve Boardman and Susan Foran (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2015), pp. 51–74 (pp. 70–71).

²⁵ Chris Given-Wilson, 'Chivalric Biography and Medieval Life-Writing', in *Barbour's Bruce and its Cultural Contexts: Politics, Chivalry and Literature in Late Medieval Scotland*, ed. by Steve Boardman and Susan Foran (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2015), pp. 101–18 (here 116).

²⁶ See *Barbour's Bruce: A Fredome Is a Noble Thing!*, ed. by Matthew P. McDiarmid and James A. C. Stevenson, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1985), I, 45; R. James Goldstein, *The Matter of Scotland: Historical Narrative in Medieval Scotland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 133–36; Phoebe A. Mainster, 'Folkloric Elements in Barbour's *Bruce*', *Michigan Academician*, 19 (1987), 49–59 (pp. 50–58); Joachim Schwend, 'Religion and Religiosity in *The Bruce*', in *Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance: Fourth International Conference (1984) Proceedings*, ed. Dietrich Strauss and Horst W. Drescher (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1986), pp. 207–15 (pp. 207, 213). For an excellent overview of different attempts to classify *The Bruce*, see Purdie, 'Medieval Romance', pp. 53–55.

²⁷ Sergi Mainer, *The Scottish Romance Tradition, c. 1375–c. 1550: Nation, Chivalry and Knighthood* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), p. 12.

which can be given is that romance is a narrative of a certain length'.²⁸ This definition, however, is too broad to be very useful for a modern critical study.

Cameron argued that *The Bruce* strays too far from the 'courtly romance' model to be considered part of the same genre: the characters 'fail to engage in the popular chivalric pursuits of winning ladies, fighting in tournaments and sleeping with their lord's wife'.²⁹ John Finlayson, in his attempt to define the medieval romance, distinguished between the 'heroic' narratives of the *chanson de geste* and the 'romantic' by the emphasis they place on martial qualities, 'on the ends which they are made to serve, and on the contexts within which they operate'.³⁰ In a heroic narrative, 'the hero tends to fight in defence of his lord or society, or in furtherance of political ends', whereas in romance 'the hero is conceived of basically as an individual, not as essentially a representative of his society' who engages in solitary adventures for his own glory.³¹ Finlayson further differentiates between the simple 'romance of adventure', an episodic series of knightly deeds, and the more sophisticated 'courtly romances', such as the works of Chrétien de Troyes or the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in both of which the knightly deeds serve to highlight the inner struggle of the characters.³² If one accepts Cameron and Finlayson's definitions of romance then *The Bruce* should be considered a heroic narrative, a latter-day *chanson de geste*.

Mainer has argued that the above definition of romance is too restrictive and that it gives undue preference to the 'sub-genre' of courtly romance, as exemplified by Chrétien and his imitators:

this creates difficulties for a broad analysis of the genre insofar as both the intellectual and socio-political contexts as well as the aesthetic values of a romance composed in Champagne in the late twelfth century cannot be judged in the same way as one written, for example, in fifteenth-century Scotland.³³

Mainer has argued for the 'cultural distinctiveness and singularity of Scottish romance'.³⁴ Discussing *The Bruce* as the first (surviving) Scottish 'historical romance', he described it as an 'eclectic romance'. It is written in octosyllabic couplets, a typical feature of French 'courtly romance', has a 'martial, masculine and male-centred narrative' typical of epic literature, and marginalises the courtly world of love affairs and tournaments in a manner similar to contemporary Anglo-Norman and Middle English romances.³⁵ Barbour's adaptation of older, foreign romance traditions created a form of distinctively Scottish romance that promoted the ideal that the good of the 'commonwealth' should be placed above individual glory: 'the traditional quest for identity and a place within feudal society is transformed into a search for the consolidation of shared values'.³⁶

Kaeuper used *The Bruce* as an example of a 'historical account' that was seen by contemporaries as akin to 'accounts in imaginative literature' such as the Arthurian romances.³⁷

²⁸ Mainer, *Scottish Romance*, p. 14.

²⁹ Cameron, 'Chivalry in Barbour's *Bruce*', p. 14.

³⁰ John Finlayson, 'Definitions of Middle English Romance', *Chaucer Review*, 15 (1980), 44–62, 168–81 (p. 52).

³¹ Finlayson, 'Definitions of Romance', p. 53.

³² Finlayson, 'Definitions of Romance', pp. 56–57.

³³ Mainer, *Scottish Romance*, pp. 12, 14 (quote).

³⁴ Mainer, *Scottish Romance*, p. 16.

³⁵ Mainer, *Scottish Romance*, p. 29.

³⁶ Mainer, *Scottish Romance*, p. 257.

³⁷ Richard Kaeuper, 'The Societal Role of Chivalry in Romance: North-Western Europe', in *The Cambridge*

Yet this distinction between history and romance is modern, not medieval, as can be seen in Barbour's own use of the term. He describes his *romanys* as a story of 'sympill folk and worthy' (1.463), who were in 'gret distress' but eventually came to 'gret hycht and till honour' through the grace of God and their own 'full gret hardynes' (1.447–52). He emphasises the disparity in numbers between his heroes and their enemies, and in one instance states that the odds were at least a thousand to one (1.453–55). In the same section, Barbour compares his heroes to the biblical Maccabees:

Thai wrocht sua throu thar vasselage
That with few folk thai had victory
Off mychty kingis as sayis the story,
And delyveryt thar land all fre,
Quharfor thar name suld lovyt be (1.472–76)

The same comparison was made by Robert Bruce's supporters in the Declaration of Arbroath (1320).³⁸ Barbour's use of it here in conjunction with the term *romanys* alerts us to the fluidity of contemporary genre boundaries. We would not normally connect the Hebrew Scriptures with medieval romance but, in the fourteenth century, such a comparison was both logical and appropriate. Judas Maccabeus was one of the Nine Worthies, 'the tally of nine supreme heroes' who were key figures in what Keen called 'the historical mythology of chivalry'.³⁹ The Worthies included such solidly historical figures as Alexander the Great and Godfrey of Bouillon alongside (from a modern perspective) the mythical Hector of Troy and King Arthur. The boundaries between Scripture and myth, history and romance were not clearly defined to the medieval mind.⁴⁰

It is this very fluidity of genre that informs Barbour's use of romantic *exempla* in *The Bruce*. He explicitly compares the deeds of his heroes, men of the recent past, with Greek and Roman heroes known to the medieval audience through the *romans antiques*, a sub-genre of romance concerning heroes that predated Chrétien's Arthurian tales and remained popular into the fourteenth century.⁴¹ Describing John Comyn's betrayal of Robert Bruce, Barbour equates Bruce with Alexander, Julius Caesar, and Arthur, all famous heroes brought low by treachery (1.510–60). In Book 6, Barbour invites his audience to choose who 'that mar suld prysit be': Robert Bruce, who held a ford alone against two hundred men, or Tydeus of Thebes, a hero of the *Roman de Thèbes*, who defeated fifty men singlehanded (6.271–86). These comparisons are not just reserved for Robert Bruce. James Douglas is compared to Hector in both looks and deeds (1.395–405). Thomas Randolph's capture of Edinburgh Castle is compared to Alexander's capture of Tyre in the *Roman d'Alexandre* (10.706–40).⁴²

Barbour uses the term *romanys* three more times in *The Bruce*. Describing the hardships that befell Robert Bruce, Barbour declares that he 'herd never in romanys tell | off man sa hard frayit as wes he | that efterwart com to sic bounté' (2.46–48). Barbour again makes the explicit connection between *romanys* and a triumph over great odds. In the midst of his

Companion to Medieval Romance, ed. by Roberta L. Kruger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97–114 (here 98).

³⁸ *The Declaration of Arbroath*, ed. by James Fergusson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), p. 8.

³⁹ Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 121–24.

⁴⁰ Susan Foran, 'Biography, Romance and Chivalry: Barbour's *The Bruce* and Chandos Herald's *La Vie du Prince Noir*' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2006), pp. 19–20.

⁴¹ Purdie, 'Medieval Romance', p. 61

⁴² For other examples of romantic *exempla* see Barbour, *The Bruce*, 1.339–41, 2.531–50, 3.187–266, 3.267–98,

hardships, while crossing Loch Lomond in a tiny boat, Bruce reads to his men the ‘romans of worthi Ferambrace’, encouraging them with the tale of how a few men successfully held the castle Aigremore against a great host of pagans (3.435–66). The connection between *romans* and the few defeating the many is repeated a third time in Barbour’s description of Edward Bruce’s campaigns in Galloway. Edward Bruce, we are told, ‘discumfyt commonly | mony with quhone’ (9.492–93) and that if men were to rehearse all the deeds ‘off his hey worschip and manheid | men mycht a mekill romans mak’ (9.496–97).

Purdie attempted to argue for a ‘friction’ between the romantic and historical elements in *The Bruce*, arguing that the former, which was understood to be fabulous, conflicted with Barbour’s desire to present a truthful account of real events and people: ‘most [medieval] authors will make their generic intentions clear one way or another, but Barbour does not, choosing instead to evoke both categories with confusing determination’.⁴³ Purdie never satisfactorily demonstrates that Barbour or his audience would have considered a *romans* to be inherently fiction or to contain fabulous elements such as magic spells or giants. Based on the evidence above, Barbour appears to have understood *romans* to mean a narrative in which heroic individuals, such as the Maccabees or Charlemagne’s paladins, overcome great odds through their acts of valour.⁴⁴ The struggle of Robert Bruce and his followers against the English provided such a narrative from recent history, after he had edited out certain inconvenient facts.⁴⁵

If *The Bruce* is not strictly a ‘romance’, would it be better to call it an ‘epic’, a fourteenth-century *chanson de geste*? This is also problematic, as *The Bruce* differs in several key respects from the typical *chanson*.⁴⁶ *The Bruce* is written in octosyllabic couplets, while *chansons* were composed in assonated or mono-rhyme stanzas with lines of ten or twelve syllables.⁴⁷ The heroes of the *chansons* are typically preoccupied with fighting pagans or exacting vengeance for personal wrongs, neither of which strictly applies to *The Bruce*.⁴⁸ Neither Bruce nor his followers possess special swords or horses, nor do they quarrel much among themselves.⁴⁹ The only major similarity is the appearance of a treacherous villain, a role fulfilled by John Comyn (1.477–568).⁵⁰ To confuse the matter further, modern scholarship regards the aforementioned ‘romans of worthi Ferambrace’ as an ‘established *chanson de geste*’.⁵¹ Some later *chansons* self-identify as romances, in the manner of *The Bruce*.⁵² Whatever distinctions

5.238–306, 14.312–16, 20.531–78.

⁴³ Purdie, ‘Medieval Romance’, p. 53.

⁴⁴ Foran, ‘A Great Romance’, pp. 3, 9–13.

⁴⁵ Mainster, ‘How to Make a Hero’, pp. 230–31.

⁴⁶ Like romance, *chanson de geste* is a broad genre that is difficult to define satisfactorily. Kay has likened the *chansons* to a family who share common characteristics that are not necessarily present in every member of that family: Sarah Kay, *The ‘chansons de geste’ in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 8–9.

⁴⁷ *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms, Methods, Trends*, ed. by Albrecht Classen, 3 vols (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), II, 1684.

⁴⁸ Marianne Ailes, ‘What’s in a Name? Anglo-Norman Romances or *chansons de geste*?’, in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, ed. by Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (Cambridge: Brewer, 2011), pp. 61–75 (pp. 69–74).

⁴⁹ Jessie Crosland, *The Old French Epic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951), pp. 278–88.

⁵⁰ Crosland, *Old French Epic*, pp. 276–78.

⁵¹ Ailes, ‘What’s in a Name?’, p. 66.

⁵² Kay, ‘*Chansons de geste*’, p. 7.

modern scholars might draw, medieval audiences evidently did not see the two genres as wholly distinct.

A third possibility is to categorise *The Bruce* as a vernacular 'chivalric biography'.⁵³ This genre first gained popularity in the late fourteenth century, around the same time that Barbour was writing. These texts, almost all written in Middle French or Anglo-Norman, chronicled the careers of noted historical knights.⁵⁴ Some, like the lives of Boucicaut and Bertrand du Guesclin mentioned above, concerned knights of middling or noble birth, while others had royal subjects, such as Guillaume de Machaut's life of Pierre I of Cyprus (*r.* 1358–69), *La Prise d'Alexandrie*, and Chandos Herald's life of Edward of Woodstock (1330–76), *La Vie du Prince Noir*. In Ferris' perceptive statement, chivalric biography 'focusses on the person as knight, not on the knight as person'.⁵⁵ The subject is usually portrayed in a highly generic, idealised fashion, beginning with his precocious youth, his desire to do great deeds leads him into an exemplary martial career through which he acquires love and loyal followers, before finally making a worthy end.⁵⁶ Given-Wilson described the line between 'truth and fiction' in these texts as 'hazy', as they were largely based on oral testimony and recollection of specific deeds and incidents.⁵⁷ It was up to the author to collate these recollections, arrange, edit and enhance them to create a portrait of his subject.

A useful comparison can be made between *The Bruce* and the two chivalric biographies referred to above: the *Prise d'Alexandrie* and *Vie du Prince Noir*. Neither author describes his text as a romance but their works possess significant similarities to *The Bruce*.⁵⁸ All three are written in octosyllabic couplets, the traditional form for courtly romance. They are all concerned with a royal protagonist who was renowned as a warrior and a ruler in their own lifetime: Robert Bruce, Pierre I of Cyprus, and Edward of Woodstock (later known as the Black Prince). Each protagonist has a supporting character, a knight notable for both their prowess and loyalty to the protagonist.⁵⁹ In *The Bruce* this role is fulfilled by James Douglas (2.149–74). Pierre is supported by Perceval of Coulouges.⁶⁰ In the *Vie du Prince Noir*, Woodstock is aided by the author's patron, John Chandos.⁶¹

⁵³ As did Duncan, for example: Barbour, *The Bruce*, p. 6.

⁵⁴ Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974–82), II, 80–82; Sumner Ferris, 'Chronicle, Chivalric Biography and Family Tradition in Fourteenth-Century England', in *Chivalric Literature: Essays on Relations between Literature and Life in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1980), pp. 25–38 (p. 29); Elisabeth Gaucher, 'Entre l'histoire et le roman: La Biographie chevaleresque', *Revue des langues romanes*, 97 (1993), 15–30; Richard Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry*, rev. edn (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995), pp. 140–46.

⁵⁵ Ferris, 'Chronicle, Chivalric Biography and Family', p. 35.

⁵⁶ William T. Cotton, 'Teaching the Motifs of Chivalric Biography', in *The Study of Chivalry: Resources and Approaches*, ed. by Howell Chickering and Thomas H. Seller (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1988), pp. 583–610 (p. 591); Elisabeth Gaucher, 'La Chevalerie dans les biographies chevaleresques (XIII^e — XV^e siècles)', *Revue des langues romanes*, 110 (2006), 145–64.

⁵⁷ Given-Wilson, 'Chivalric Biography', p. 114; Ferris, 'Chronicle, Chivalric Biography and Family', p. 35.

⁵⁸ Foran, 'Biography, Romance and Chivalry', p. 63; Guillaume de Machaut, 'Edition critique de la *Prise d'Alexandrie*', ed. by Sophie Hardy (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université d'Orléans, 2011), lines 259–62.

⁵⁹ Given-Wilson identified the depiction of the hero 'in the context of his war-band' as a key feature of chivalric biography: Given-Wilson, 'Chivalric Biography', p. 107.

⁶⁰ Guillaume de Machaut, 'Edition critique de la *Prise*', lines 1961–86.

⁶¹ Chandos Herald, *La Vie du Prince Noir*, ed. by Diana B. Tyson (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1975), lines 573–75: 's'i furent Chaundos et Audelelé; | cils deuz eurent grand renomée, | et furent ordeignez au frayne | du Prince, sachez de certaine'.

All three poems are primarily interested in warfare and knightly deeds. Machaut's text differs in that his subject's antagonists are Saracens, not fellow Christians.⁶² While Barbour and Chandos Herald are focused on the heroic actions of their protagonists, they also make a point of recognising the virtues of their enemies as valiant Christian knights in their own right.⁶³

Like Barbour, Machaut and Chandos Herald make a point of comparing their heroes to the Worthies of romance. Chandos Herald describes Edward of Woodstock as 'the most valiant prince in the world, if one was to search the whole earth, one would not find his like since the days of Charles [the Great], Julius Caesar, or Arthur'.⁶⁴ Machaut is more poetic, depicting a scene in which the god Mars laments that his 'good and dear friends', Alexander, Caesar, Joshua, and the other Worthies, are all dead. He proposes that he and his fellow gods 'work to set up a good Godfrey [of Bouillon] and to find a man ready and able to defend his land'.⁶⁵ The gods consent and so the Christian God creates Pierre, who is showered with gifts by the Olympians.⁶⁶

All three authors emphasise the virtues and accomplishments of their heroes but none of them had complete creative freedom: they were all bound to well-known history and had to accommodate some of the less praiseworthy aspects of their subjects' lives into the heroic narrative. Barbour could not completely gloss over Bruce's murder of Comyn (2.25–49) or the failure of Edward Bruce's Irish campaign (18.175–84). Although Machaut is able to portray Pierre's murder as a martyr's death, with the king exhorting the Virgin to receive his soul with his dying breath, he was unable to omit the lurid tales of injustice and torture that marred Pierre's reign.⁶⁷ Edward of Woodstock's life lacks a heroic sequel to the Spanish campaign due to the wasting illness that consumed him in the final years of his life. All Chandos Herald can say is that he made a 'very noble end', complete with a pious confession and a farewell to his household.⁶⁸

The Bruce is a *romany*s in the sense that Barbour uses the term: it is a narrative of heroic and chivalric deeds, in which men triumph in the face of great odds. Modern critics may find that too narrow a definition but, if it is not a *romance*, it is undeniably *romantic* in form and intent. It is written in verse and was intended to both entertain, being a story both *suthfast* and *said in gud maner* (1.3–5), and to commemorate the knightly deeds of its heroes (1.17–36) who were comparable to the heroes of romance. In this it shares many key features with the emerging genre of 'chivalric biography'. This returns us to the question of whether Barbour's depiction of chivalry in his poem was in keeping with contemporary understandings of 'chivalry'.

⁶² For example Guillaum de Machaut, 'Edition critique de la *Prise*', lines 2257–497.

⁶³ For example Chandos Herald, *Vie du Prince*, lines 309–17, 1015–60. For *The Bruce* see below.

⁶⁴ Chandos Herald, *Vie du Prince*, lines 43–54: 'de plus vaillant prince du mounde | si come il est tourny a le rounde | ne qui fuist puis les temps Claruz, | Jule Cesaire ne Artuz'.

⁶⁵ Guillaum de Machaut, 'Edition critique de la *Prise*', lines 45: 'mi bon et chier amy', 63–67: 'si deveriens tuit labourer | au bon Godefory restorer, | et querir homme qui sceüst | maintenir sa terre et deüst'.

⁶⁶ Guillaum de Machaut, 'Edition critique de la *Prise*', lines 69–258.

⁶⁷ For example Guillaum de Machaut, 'Edition critique de la *Prise*', lines 8243–378.

⁶⁸ Chandos Herald, *Vie du Prince*, line 4109: *tres noble fn.*

| Word | Uses | Word | Uses |
|----------------------|------|--------------------------------|------|
| Averty | 4 | Manhed(e), -heid Manly, -lie | 37 |
| Avisé, avysy | 10 | Nobil(l), Noble | 40 |
| Bald, bauld | 10 | Prowes, Prowes(s) | 3 |
| Bounté, bownté | 56 | Prys, price | 10 |
| Chevalry, Chevelry | 40 | Renoun(e), -non(e) | 23 |
| Courage | 6 | Skill | 3 |
| Curtas, -ais | 16 | Slicht | 19 |
| Deboner, -eir | 4 | Stalwart | 28 |
| Douchty | 40 | Stout | 53 |
| Empris(e), Emprys(e) | 5 | Sturdy | 41 |
| Forsy, Forsie | 1 | Subtilté, Sutelté | 14 |
| Hardy | 126 | Val(o)ur, -or | 14 |
| Hardi-, Hardyment | 19 | Worschip | 46 |
| Honest | 2 | Worthy, -ie | 113 |
| Honour, Honor | 25 | Wicht, Wycht | 73 |
| Jupart, Jupardy | 1 | Wis(e), Wys(e) | 33 |
| Large, Larges | 3 | Wit, Wyt | 25 |
| Lufand | 1 | | |

Table 1. Chivalric words in *The Bruce*

Chivalric Language in *The Bruce*

This section will examine how Barbour uses the language of chivalry to highlight his heroes' many virtues that made them worthy to be compared to figures of romance.⁶⁹ Although Barbour's use of such adjectives is 'often formulaic, repetitive and alliterative', their very repetition emphasises those qualities that Barbour and his audience found admirable.⁷⁰

The term 'chivalry' and its derivations, referring to knightly deeds or qualities, appear forty times in *The Bruce*, as shown in the table above.⁷¹ Barbour uses it in a variety of ways. One can possess chivalry (3.155). Men are described as being full of it (2.214, 2.248, 2.338, 14.518). The English garrison at Inverkip, we are told, 'lovyt fast' their comrade Philip Mowbray's 'chevalry' after he escaped an ambush (8.74–106). Having a leader who possesses chivalry comforts soldiers (14.83–84). It is the stuff of romance: Arthur conquered the twelve kingdoms of Britain 'throu chevalry' (1.549–51) and the unnamed king in the romance of Fierabras recovers holy relics from the pagans 'throu his chevalry' (3.454–62). One can also achieve chivalry (3.180, 20.15). The vanguard of the English army at the battle

⁶⁹ Tyson has undertaken a similar study of the *Vie du Prince Noir*, including a very cursory comparison with *The Bruce*. She notes that Barbour places more insistence on the virtues of prudence and cunning than Chandos Herald but does not offer any substantive conclusions about Barbour's approach to chivalry: Diana B. Tyson, 'The Vocabulary of Chivalric Description in Late Fourteenth-Century Biography', in *Barbour's Bruce and its Cultural Contexts: Politics, Chivalry and Literature in Late Medieval Scotland*, ed. by Steve Boardman and Susan Foran (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2015), pp. 119–36.

⁷⁰ K. Stevenson, *Chivalry and Knighthood*, p. 152.

⁷¹ I have distinguished this use of the word from its use as a collective noun for a body of heavy cavalry, which occurs a further 19 times in Barbour, *The Bruce*, 2.210, 2.224, 2.289, 2.406, 3.244, 4.187, 6.460, 7.511, 8.157, 8.208, 9.558, 10.716, 11.85, 11.89, 11.97, 14.150, 14.508, 15.572, 16.79.

of Bannockburn (1314) is described as full of ‘young men and joly [who] | Yarnand to do chevalry’ (11.531–32). Other characters also do chivalry (2.348, 6.12, 12.496) and win ‘gret price off’ it (1.25, 3.175).

All of the above examples have a military or warlike context. Barbour never uses ‘chivalry’ to refer to scenes of love or courteous speech. Crucially, he tells his audience on two occasions that he will not go into detail about an event because ‘gret chevalry done wes nane’ (10.816–17, 13.750–51). This indicates Barbour’s purpose in writing: to commemorate the ‘gret chevalry’ done by his heroes and to entertain his audience in the telling. That does not mean that his heroes are entirely warlike or that they are valued only for their military prowess. The subject of the poem is war and the deeds of warriors but Barbour also emphasises the other virtues they possess: courteousness, generosity, and intelligence.

‘Worthy, wycht and wys’ (2.173) is a formula that Barbour uses to describe his heroes on several occasions.⁷² *Worthy* and *wycht* are the second and third most common virtues referred to in *The Bruce* (see Fig. 1). In this context, *worthy* means ‘of high value as a soldier, brave [...] honourable; of noble rank’ or ‘of high moral worth or value, attracting honour and respect’.⁷³ *Wycht* is a more explicitly martial word. Derived from the Old Norse *vígt*, it means ‘physically strong, powerful robust; mentally strong, brave, bold especially in battle’.⁷⁴ The third virtue, *wys*, is quite different: ‘possessing sound judgement, sensible, prudent, clever, skilled, competent, sharp-witted’.⁷⁵ Together these three represent the three areas in which Barbour’s heroes excel: they both win and retain honour by their deeds, they are strong in battle but are also prudent and sharp-witted. These are the three categories that will be used below to examine the other words Barbour uses to describe his characters’ virtues.

The majority of the chivalric words in *The Bruce* are *wycht* words that describe a character’s prowess and courage in battle. The word *prowess* itself is used only three times in the whole poem (9.508, 12.292, 20.240) but Barbour uses other synonyms that convey the same idea.⁷⁶ By and large the most common word he uses to describe characters is *hardy*, 126 times. It is commonly used in early Scottish verse as a term of commendation, describing someone who is ‘bold, brave, daring; stout, valiant’.⁷⁷ Related words used by Barbour include *hardiment*, *manheid*, *stalwart*, and *vasselage*. There is also an indication that these words carried honourable and noble associations. Robert Bruce laments that the three assassins sent to kill him had turned traitor: ‘for rycht wycht men all thre war thai’ (7.494).

The word *bounté* is both a *wycht* and *worthy* word. It can mean ‘excellence of character’, ‘courage’ or ‘deeds of valour’, ‘a good estate or condition’, or ‘goodness in giving; liberality’.⁷⁸ It is often difficult to tell in what sense Barbour is using it. Characters possess it (10.279, 11.425, 13.113, 14.19, 16.191). It is a key quality of good knighthood and governance. Edward Bruce kills an Englishman called Mandeville, ‘a knycht that of all Irland | was callit best and of maist

⁷² See also Barbour, *The Bruce*, 4.534, 10.278. Two of the three (usually *worthy* and *wycht*) are paired at 1.22, 1.401, 2.201, 2.263, 2.337, 6.484, 7.424, 8.266, 9.51, 10.536, 11.133, 12.495, 12.525, 12.585, 13.285, 16.163, 16.377, 17.237, 17.310, 19.78, 19.162, 19.794, 20.193, 20.374.

⁷³ *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue from the Twelfth Century to the End of the Seventeenth*, ed. by William A. Craigie and others, 12 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937–2002), xii, 309–11.

⁷⁴ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, xii, 171–72.

⁷⁵ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, xii, 229.

⁷⁶ I have not included the word *mycht* or its derivations. Barbour uses it so freely that it retains no relevance for the study of chivalry in *The Bruce*.

⁷⁷ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, iii, 52.

⁷⁸ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, i, 318.

bounté' (15.206–07). At the very end of the poem, Barbour expresses the hope that Robert Bruce's descendents will 'leid weill the land, and ententyve l be to folow in all thar lyve l thar nobill eldrys gret bounte' (20.625–27). *Bounté* is also useful: James Douglas achieved his goals while fighting in the Forest of Etrick 'throu wyt and throu bounté' (9.683). It is something that can be achieved. Robert Bruce comes to *bounté* after great hardship (2.46–48), presumably in the sense of a 'good condition'.

Like chivalry, *bounté* is occasionally used as a verb, something that a person does. Robert Bruce does 'honour and bounté' to two French knights captured from the English army at Byland in 1322, eventually freeing them without a ransom (18.537–44). Earlier in the poem, when he is ambushed by the Mac na Dorsair brothers, Robert Bruce did 'ane outrageous bounte': he threw one of his assailants from his horse, split his skull with a sword blow, and then killed another who had seized his stirrup (3.129–46). Barbour uses the same word to describe the generosity of a magnanimous victor and the feat of killing two enemies in a tight place, a clear example of the dual nature of medieval chivalry.

Turning now to *worthy* words, those concerned with reputation and honour, it should be remembered that Barbour's stated aim in writing *The Bruce* was to preserve the glorious memory of his heroes (16.534–39). Characters in the text are particularly concerned with honour. One can win honour through valour in battle (2.357, 2.400, 8.318, 14.237, 14.277). Fighting courageously can also preserve one's honour (2.341, 8.252, 11.270). Before Bannockburn, Robert Bruce tells his men: 'bott all wate ye quhat honour is, l contene you than on sic a wis l that your honour ay savyt be' (12.315–17). Fighting is not the only thing that can be done honourably. After Bannockburn, Robert Bruce ensures that all the 'gret lordis slain there are buried in haly place honorabilly' (13.672–74). One can also 'do' honour to another person. When James Douglas travelled to Seville in 1330 to carry the Bruce's heart into battle against the Saracens, he was honoured above all others by the English contingent (20.366–72).

Barbour himself discusses the nature and value of *worschip* in *The Bruce*. *Worschip* means 'honour', 'renown', or 'worthiness, prowess or valour (chiefly in battle)'.⁷⁹ Barbour places this discussion after Robert Bruce's defence of a ford against two hundred men (described above), declaring that 'worschip is a prisit thing' (6.327) because it causes men to be loved if it is consistently pursued. It has two extremes, 'fule-hardyment and cowtarty' (6.339–40). True *worschip* is the 'mene betuix tha twa' (6.349), when a man is neither too rash nor too cautious in his deeds. 'For hardyment with foly is vice l bot hardyment that mellyt is l with wyt is worschip' (6.357–59). Robert Bruce's action at the ford exemplifies this. His 'wyt' recognised that the ford was narrow enough for a single man to hold, his 'hardyment' gave him the strength to face so many alone (6.361–70). It is this emphasis on the need for both physical prowess and prudent insight that has led some scholars to claim that *The Bruce* is an anomaly in medieval chivalric literature.⁸⁰

Barbour regularly uses certain words to emphasise his heroes' cleverness and cunning in warfare. The word *avisé*, meaning 'prudent' or 'careful', is a trait ascribed to both James Douglas (1.302) and Robert Bruce (8.385).⁸¹ Barbour uses it to describe Robert Bruce's decision to dig earthworks before Bannockburn (11.355–80) and a commander's ability to deploy his forces effectively (2.274, 2.347).

⁷⁹ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, xii, 299–301.

⁸⁰ Cameron, 'Chivalry in Barbour's *Bruce*', pp. 18–21; Kliman, 'Significance of Barbour's Commoners', pp. 110–11.

⁸¹ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, i, 152.

'Wit' and its derivations have a similarly broad usage. At Bannockburn, Thomas Randolph's division defends itself *wittily* against the English vanguard (11.601). Robert Bruce is *wytty* at the end of the battle because he holds his army together against an English counterattack (13.437–39). *Wit* can also mean insight. In a later engagement, seeing the Scots feigning flight to draw his men into an ambush, the English commander John Hainault comments: 'yone folk ar governyt wittily' (19.471). Robert Bruce is described as *witty* when he recognises a group of assassins sent to kill him (7.134).

The use of the word *sutelté* in *The Bruce* is particularly interesting. It has a range of meanings: 'craftiness', 'ingenuity', 'a trick, stratagem', or 'cunning or ingenious workmanship'.⁸² In *The Bruce* it is used to refer to the specialist skills of a military engineer (17.240, 17.662–71) and a silversmith (20.315) but also to stealth and deception in warfare. James Douglas seeks to take Roxburgh Castle in 1314 by *sutelté*, not open assault (10.361). Thomas Randolph's stealthy seizure of Edinburgh castle that same year, compared to Alexander's capture of Tyre (see above), is also described as a *sutelte* (10.540). Describing his plan to attack a group of sleeping enemies, Robert Bruce tells his men:

For werrayour na fors suld ma
 Quheter he mycht ourcum his fa
 Throu strenth or throu sutelté
 Bot that gud faith ay haldyn be (5.85–88)

The use of deception and stealth in *The Bruce* and whether they should be considered chivalrous will be discussed below. For now it is enough to say that Barbour made a point of describing the prudence, cunning and strategic acumen of his heroes, not just their courage and raw strength.

There is a final category of chivalric words not covered by the formula *worthy, wycht and wys*. They can be grouped under the heading of 'courtly' words. Although the poem has very few courtly or ritual scenes of the kind common to chivalric literature, and no significant female characters, Barbour does stress his heroes' courtliness and generosity on several occasions. *Curtais* and its derivations appear on sixteen occasions.⁸³ James Douglas is described as greeting Robert Bruce by bowing 'ffull curtasly' (2.154). Robert Bruce's decision to halt his army to allow a laundress to give birth is described as 'a full gret curtasy' (16.293). *Curtais* also has overtones of magnanimity and generosity. At the parliament of August 1320, when Robert Bruce permitted Ingram de Umfraville to dispose of his Scottish lands and go into England as a protest against the execution of David Brechin, it is described as 'curtassy' (19.125). The related word *larges* appears three times, in connection with James Douglas (1.363), Thomas Randolph (10.293), and Robert Bruce (20.234).⁸⁴

Barbour uses the language of chivalry to highlight his characters' strengths and virtues. In keeping with the poem's subject, he most frequently uses words to emphasise their prowess and strength in battle but he does not neglect their other achievements. He shows a concern with their honour and reputation, both as warriors and as men of worth. He describes their prudence and cunning in warfare and their generosity, both to their followers and to their defeated foes.

⁸² *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, x, 118–19.

⁸³ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, i, 790: 'courteous, of good manners or breeding'.

⁸⁴ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, iii, 560: 'liberal in giving or in expenditure; generous, open-handed, munificent'.

Chivalry and Chivalric Deeds in *The Bruce*

The Bruce is a poem about war and warriors. Its heroes are knights and much of the action is violent. Describing the Scottish sieges of Norham and Alnwick in 1327, Barbour says: 'apert eschewys oft maid thar war | and mony fayr chevalry | eschevyt war full douchtely' (20.14–16). The poem is a catalogue of this sort of *fayr chevalry*, especially stories of a few men overcoming many. Barbour declares that three *poyntis* of war will be prized for evermore: James Douglas defeating ten thousand men with fifty, Edward Bruce defeating fifteen hundred with fifty, and the French knight John de Soulis defeating three hundred with fifty (16.493–522). The story of Robert Bruce overcoming a gang of assassins singlehanded is repeated four times, with only minor alterations (3.93–146, 5.523–658, 6.571–674, 7.79–232). In this, at least, Barbour adhered to a conventional understanding of chivalry. Physical prowess was the key virtue in medieval chivalry, the quality that knights prized above all others, so to focus on deeds of prowess in his narrative is unquestionably chivalrous.⁸⁵

It is somewhat surprising to find that, in a poem about a national struggle against a foreign invader, Barbour does not ignore the valorous deeds performed by the enemy. *Fayr chevalry* is *fayr*, regardless of who does it. Giles d'Argentan, Edward II's bodyguard at Bannockburn, is called 'the thrid best knyght perfay | that men wyst lyvand in his day' (13.321–22).⁸⁶ Two English knights, Thomas Ughtred and Ralph Cobham, attack the Scots alone at Byland. Cobham, Barbour says, was known as 'the best knyght of all that land' but, when he fled where Ughtred was taken prisoner, Ughtred was 'prisit our him' (18.390–436). Two French knights are also captured in the same encounter. Robert Bruce receives them 'as frendis' because they fought for the English, not because of 'wreyth na ivill will', but because their 'gret worschip and bounte' would not allow them to avoid battle (18.527–36). In *The Bruce*, the values of chivalry, and the respect for those who embody them, are international.

Emphasising the strength and virtue of their enemies only enhances the reputation of Barbour's heroes but there is more at work here than simple poetic exaggeration. By emphasising the international nature of chivalry in his poem, Barbour elevates his subjects to the status of international heroes. Robert Bruce and his followers are not just Scottish heroes: they are to be admired alongside Arthur, Charlemagne, or Godfrey of Bouillon, as paragons of the international code that was chivalry.

As mentioned above, the lack of female characters in *The Bruce* has led some critics to declare it to be neither romantic nor chivalrous. Yet love and service to ladies do feature in *The Bruce* and in unquestionably chivalric form. John Webiton, an English knight slain defending Douglas Castle in 1307, is found with a letter from his mistress, promising that he could ask for her love and service if he could defend the castle for a year (8.488–99).⁸⁷ Purdie claimed that Barbour was 'cheerfully indifferent' to Webiton's fate and that the incident serves as an example of how Barbour sought to distance his text from pure romance, where such love service was common.⁸⁸ This is an anachronistic interpretation, based more on modern distaste for such seemingly-irrational behaviour than textual evidence. Barbour does not criticise

⁸⁵ Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 129–49.

⁸⁶ According to Walter Bower, D'Argentan was acclaimed as the 'third best knight' of his day by Edward II of England's chief herald, surpassed only by Emperor Henry VII and Robert Bruce. Duncan theorises that Bower may have taken this acclamation from Barbour, however: Barbour, *The Bruce*, p. 496.

⁸⁷ For historical examples of this kind of love-service, see Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 212–13.

⁸⁸ Purdie, 'Medieval Romance', p. 70.

Webiton for recklessness, as he does Edward Bruce, or for any other failing. It is far more likely that Barbour thought that this story was an example of *fayr chevalry* that his audience would appreciate.

The Scots also perform love service in *The Bruce*. Shortly after Robert Bruce's defeat at Methven (1306), his queen 'and other ladyis fayr and farand' (2.517) join him at Aberdeen and accompany the army into hiding. Barbour compares them to the women who helped undermine the walls of Thebes in the *Roman de Thèbes* (2.531–50). He praises love because it allows men to make light of suffering (2.523–30).⁸⁹ While hiding in the hills, Barbour highlights the role James Douglas played in hunting for the ladies, bringing them venison or fish (2.573–81).

Bot off all that ever thai war
 Thar wes nocht ane amang thaim thar
 That to the ladyis profyt was
 Mar then James of Douglas (2.585–88)

We see here an example of Barbour turning a difficult fact, Robert Bruce's exile and privations in the wild, into something chivalrous: a chance for James Douglas to display his worth by serving the ladies. In *The Bruce*, what could have been a shameful episode is elevated to the status of a *romany*s.

Religion and religious language are of peripheral concern in *The Bruce*.⁹⁰ Consequently the religious dimensions of chivalry are not dwelt upon, except at the very end of the poem. As he lies dying, Robert Bruce repents of the innocent blood he has spilled (20.177–81). He laments that he will be unable to go on crusade to make atonement, so instead one of his followers is chosen to carry his heart into battle against the Saracens (20.182–99). It is clear that Barbour did not consider the Wars of Independence an adequate substitute for a crusade but as a factor that prevented Bruce from taking the cross.

A critical question in *Bruce* scholarship is whether Barbour's portrayal of chivalry is in keeping with contemporary values. Particularly controversial is the Scots' repeated use of deception and ambush.⁹¹ In this Barbour was being faithful to history. Following his defeat at Methven Robert Bruce was forced to flee into the wild with the remnant of his following.⁹² According to the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, Robert Bruce, 'knowing that he was unequal to the king of England in strength as much as fortune, declared to his men that it would be better to move in arms against out king secretly than to contend for his right in open battle'.⁹³

Barbour's treatment of this 'secret' warfare is largely positive. In keeping with his celebration of men who possess *wyt* and *sutelte*, he delights in tales of deception and cunning.

⁸⁹ For a similar sentiment in a contemporary chivalric work, see Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry: Text, Context, and Translation*, ed. by Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 118–22.

⁹⁰ Schwend, 'Religion and Religiosity', p. 208.

⁹¹ Cameron, 'Chivalry in Barbour's *Bruce*', pp. 14–22; Kliman, 'Idea of Chivalry', pp. 490–92; Purdie, 'Medieval Romance', p. 73; Given-Wilson, 'Chivalric Biography', p. 116.

⁹² Thomas Gray, *Scalacronica, 1272–1363*, ed. by Andy King, Surtees Society, 209 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), p. 56: *qi emboterent le dit Robert de Bruys a tiel meschef qil ala a pee par lez mountez et de ile en ile, et a la foitz a tiel meschief, qe auscun foitz ne auoit nuly od ly, qar com tesmoignent lez cronicles de sez gestis*.

⁹³ *Vita Edwardi Secundi*, ed. by Wendy R. Childs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 24: 'Robertus enim de Brutz, sciens se tam ex uiribus quam ex fortuna sua regis Anglie imparem, decreuit sibi magis expedire contra regem nostrum arma latenter mouere quam in bello campestri de iure suo contendere'. See also Geoffrey W. S. Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland*, 4th edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,

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When Bruce perceives that Perth cannot be taken by 'strenth or mycht [...] he thocht to wyrk with slycht' (9.351–52). The Scots openly withdraw from the siege, then return under cover of night to scale the walls with ladders (9.353–454). James Douglas also launches many ambushes against his enemies. In 1308, when he returned to Douglasdale to claim his heritage, Barbour notes that:

[...] he wes wys
And saw he mycht on nakyn wys
Werray his fa with evyn mycht
Tharfor he thocht to wyrk with slycht (5.267–70)

Douglas secretly gathers those men still loyal to him, then surprises the English garrison in church on Palm Sunday, massacres them, and seizes the castle (5.271–428). Campaigning in England, James Douglas declares to Thomas Randolph, who proposes attacking a much larger English force, that 'it war na outrage | to fewar folk aganys ma | avantage quhen thai ma to ta' (19.306–08).

The use of trickery also has negative connotations in *The Bruce*. At Methven, Aymer de Valence's decision to attack Robert Bruce despite giving his word not to fight that day is described as 'slycht', opposed to 'mycht' (2.326–29). On two occasions Robert Bruce is challenged by other characters about his use of deception. First Aymer de Valence challenges him to a pitched battle at Loudon Hill (1307), saying:

[Bruce's] worschip suld be mar,
And mar be turnyt in nobillay,
To wyn him in the playne away
With hard dintis in evyn fechtynge
Then to do fer mar with skulking (8.136–40)

Bruce reacts angrily to this message because 'Schyr Aymer spak sa heyly' (8.143) but nonetheless accepts the challenge. On the second occasion, he is confronted by his nephew Thomas Randolph. Admonished by his uncle for refusing his allegiance, Randolph responds:

Ye chasty me, bot ye
Aucht better chastyt for to be,
For sene ye werrayit the king
Off Ingland, in playne fechtynge
Ye suld pres to derenyhe rycht
And nocht with cowardy na with slycht (9.747–52)

On this occasion Bruce responds that it may come to 'playne fechtynge' before long but he still rebukes Randolph for his 'proud wordis' and has him imprisoned until he knows 'the rycht and bow it' (9.753–58).

It is possible to interpret Valence and Randolph's challenges as the voices of conventional wisdom, challenging the Bruce's underhand behaviour and setting him on the road to Bannockburn, where he finally achieves his right in *playne fechtynge*. Yet it is Thomas Randolph who captures Edinburgh Castle for Bruce by scaling the walls at night, an act described by Barbour as requiring 'slycht' (10.520). *The Bruce* is not neatly divided into two halves, pre-Bannockburn *skulking* and post-Bannockburn *playne fechtynge*. The Scots continue to employ ambushes and other deceptions (for example 15.11–64, 16.335–401). Robert Bruce himself

defends the use of such deceptions: it does not matter whether a warrior overcomes his enemy through force or trickery, so long as ‘gud faith ay haldyn be’ (5.88). Read in this light, it becomes clear why Valence’s deception at Methven is condemned but Bruce’s ambushes are not: Valence broke his word not to attack until the morning.

Even a cursory reading of medieval chronicles will reveal that medieval combatants were willing to employ all manner of tricks and stratagems to defeat their enemies.⁹⁴ This does not mean that idealistic chivalric literature acknowledged such ruthless pragmatism, however. Scholars from Kliman onwards have assumed that Barbour was unusual for recognising the reality of warfare in a way that ran contrary to the glamorous ‘chivalric ideal’. Yet this assumption is undermined by evidence from other texts. Contemporary military and chivalric writers described stratagems as legitimate in times of war. Honoré Bouvet (*d.* 1410), in his *Arbre de batailles*, declared that: ‘according to God and according to the Scripture I may defeat my enemy by ingenuity or by deception without doing sin, once the war has been judged and declared and ordered between him and me, and I have given him defiance’.⁹⁵ This parallels Bruce’s statement about keeping *gud faith* with one’s enemies. Stratagem was also sanctified by ancient and authoritative texts such as Vegetius’ *De rei militari* and Frontinus’ *Strategemata*. Although it is uncertain whether these texts were used as sources of practical advice in the Middle Ages, they were widely copied, translated and adapted into other works on warfare and chivalry.⁹⁶

Admiration for cunning was not just restricted to theory. In the early thirteenth century, the Anglo-Norman poet who composed the verse biography of William Marshal (*d.* 1219) had Henry II of England praise the Marshal as *corteis* (courtly; a worthy man) for suggesting a stratagem to deceive Philippe II of France: Henry was to pretend to disband his army then secretly reassemble it and attack when Philippe did not expect it.⁹⁷ If this had been considered dishonourable, the poet would have changed or omitted it altogether, as he did with other inconvenient events in the Marshal’s career.⁹⁸

An admiration for cunning can also be found in other, more overtly literary texts. In Wace’s *Roman de Brut*, composed for the court of Henry II of England, the Trojan leader Brutus (and supposed ancestor of Wace’s royal patron) is depicted luring his enemy into a trap in order to save his own men. Wace declared: ‘one must use trickery and cunning to destroy one’s enemy, and to rescue one’s friends one must enter great danger’.⁹⁹ The *Roman de Thèbes*,

⁹⁴ For a detailed study of this neglected subject, see James W. Titterton, ‘Trickery and Deceit in Medieval Warfare, c. 1050–1320’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2019).

⁹⁵ Honoré Bouvet, *L’Arbre des batailles*, ed. by Ernest Nys (Brussels: Muquardt, 1883), p. 143: ‘selon Dieu et selon l’escripture je puis vaincre par engien ou par barat mon ennemy sans faire pechié depuis que la guerre est jugiée et notifiée et ordonnée entre lui et moy et que je l’ay défié’.

⁹⁶ For the use and reception of Vegetius and Frontinus in the Middle Ages, see Richard Abels and Stephen Morillo, ‘A Lying Legacy? A Preliminary Discussion of Images of Antiquity and Altered Reality in Medieval Military History’, *Journal of Medieval Military History*, 3 (2005), 1–13; Christopher Allmand, ‘A Roman Text on War: The *Strategemata* of Frontinus in the Middle Ages’, in *Soldiers, Nobles and Gentlemen: Essays in Honour of Maurice Keen*, ed. by Peter Coss and Christopher Tyerman (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), pp. 153–68; Allmand, *The ‘De re militari’ of Vegetius: The Reception, Transmission and Legacy of a Roman Text in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sydney Anglo, ‘Vegetius’s *De re militari*: The Triumph of Mediocrity’, *Antiquaries Journal*, 82 (2002), 247–67.

⁹⁷ *History of William Marshal*, ed. by Anthony J. Holden, Anglo-Norman Text Society, Occasional Publications Series, 4–6, 3 vols (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 2002–6), line 7800.

⁹⁸ See David B. Crouch, ‘Biography as Propaganda in the *History of William Marshal*’, in *Convaincre et persuader: Communication et propagande aux xii^e et xiii^e siècles*, ed. by Martin Aurell (Poitiers: CESC, 2007), pp. 503–12.

⁹⁹ Wace, *Roman de Brut: A History of the British*, ed. by Judith Weiss, rev. edn (Exeter: Exeter University Press,

which Barbour refers to in his own text, features an incident in which the besiegers lure the garrison out from the castle of Montflor by feigning flight.¹⁰⁰ Even the pioneer of Arthurian romance himself, Chrétien de Troyes, depicted his heroes employing guile to achieve their goals. In *Cligés*, the hero Alexander has his troops disguise themselves with their enemies' shields in order to infiltrate Windsor Castle.¹⁰¹ Far from being an exception, tales of cunning ruses were an established, if marginal, element of chivalric literature.

Chivalry, in *The Bruce*, consists largely of brave deeds done by knights in battle. They are to be remembered and praised, regardless of who did them. They may be deeds of strength, done in pitched battle, or deeds of skill and cunning, such as an ambush or stealthy assault on an enemy stronghold. This appreciation of *slycht* does not mean that Barbour's text is not chivalric or that his understanding of chivalry was a radical departure from established values. Chivalric literature before and after *The Bruce* could and did celebrate cunning alongside boldness.

Conclusion

The Bruce is both chivalrous and romantic, although it does not fit neatly into modern conceptual categories. Barbour possessed limited creative freedom in writing his poem. Certain inconvenient facts, such as the murder of Comyn and the failed Irish campaign, were too well-known to be wholly redacted from his narrative. Barbour's task as a poet was to take the complex, morally-ambiguous history of Robert Bruce and recast it in a romantic style, presenting his subject in the most heroic, chivalrous manner possible.

When Barbour writes of *chevalry*, he means primarily the hard business of fighting. This is how men win, retain, and demonstrate their honour, the public estimation of their personal worth, summed up in words like *bounté* and *worschip*. Yet Barbour's heroes are not brutes, valued only for their ability to crack skulls. He takes care to emphasise their mastery of the other virtues that make up a *worthy* knight. They are generous, magnanimous to the defeated enemy, and open-handed to their followers. They also possess a gentler side. Robert Bruce condescends to halt his whole army out of concern for a washerwoman. The fearsome James Douglas devotes himself to fishing and hunting to serve the ladies in the wild.

Some of the details may stretch credulity but there is a healthy streak of practicality in Barbour's narrative: not every problem is resolved with a pitched battle. When a superior English force besieges Berwick, Robert Bruce orders Douglas and Randolph to harry northern England to draw the English forces away (16.500–21). Characters who neglect to use strategy to gain an advantage are criticised (12.454–76, 12.546–60, 16.119–42, 16.246–58, 18.28–58). Barbour laments that Edward Bruce did not possess his brother's *mesur* (9.665) but let pride and stubbornness bring about his untimely death in battle (18.175–84).

It is in this context that we must read the Scots' use of guile and deception in *The Bruce* and Barbour's approval of their 'secret warfare'. This kind of fighting may not seem honourable by modern standards, but if one defines chivalry according to Barbour's own standards, as the great and valorous deeds done by knights, then ambush and deception can be interpreted as

2002), lines 363–66: 'boisdie e engine deit l'en faire | pur destrure son adversaire, | e pur ses amis delivrer | deit l'en en grant peril entrer'.

¹⁰⁰ Purdie, 'Medieval Romance', p. 72.

¹⁰¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligés*, ed. by Stewart Gregory and Claude Luttrel (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), lines 1827–37.

chivalrous. The business of knights, the 'chivalry', was warfare. To master the skills of war, one needed more than a strong right arm, one needed intelligence and cunning too.

Barbour attempts to cast his protagonists, particularly Robert Bruce and James Douglas, as chivalric heroes comparable with the Nine Worthies. Occasionally the mask slips. Bruce commits sacrilege by murdering Comyn before the high altar. He and his followers must flee into the wild hills like outlaws, without horses or even shoes (2.513). This is the tension between history 'as it was' and history as Barbour wishes to portray it. Some facts he ignores, such as Robert Bruce doing homage to Edward I of England. Others he interprets as romantic episodes. James Douglas provides venison, a noble dish, for the ladies in the wilderness. Bruce compares his plight to that of romantic heroes. The murder of Comyn is incorporated into the grand narrative arc, and with the benefit of hindsight Barbour could interpret it (and Bruce's subsequent hardships) as the downturn of fortune's wheel, preparing for the upturn that would culminate in Bannockburn and the establishment of the Stewart dynasty (13.635–83).

It is important that we take chivalry seriously as a vital and dynamic force in medieval culture, not simply dismiss it, like Antonia Gransden, as 'a veneer on a basically violent and often barbaric society'.¹⁰² Barbour's understanding of the terms *romanys* and *chevalry* may differ from modern scholarly definitions but that does not invalidate them or make him 'anti-chivalry'. In studying *The Bruce* we learn not only 'what happened' but what contemporaries thought about it, namely the qualities they admired in men and the deeds they thought worth remembering. We gain a valuable insight into the dreams and aspirations of the medieval warrior class: not just how they thought the world was, but how they thought it should be.

¹⁰² Gransden, *Historical Writing*, II, 60.