Freedom as Fetish: Fraught Love of Liberty from Arbroath to 'Golagros'

By Randy P Schiff

Whether it is voiced by defiant medieval warrior-kings or by romanticized rebel patriots in contemporary film, freedom looms large in depictions of Scottishness. Scots and freedom seem to go hand in hand. Upon closer inspection, however, such stirring invocations of freedom often obscure widespread and structural *unfreedom* that is just as constitutive of Scottish identity. In considering why it emerges so ambivalently in such significant moments in medieval Scottish literature and political rhetoric, we do very well here to think of freedom as a powerful Scottish fetish.

As I shall argue today, the Scottish freedom fetish is invoked due to its double power of poetic attractiveness and political convenience. The poetic quality is obvious: what could move the heart more than the idea of a remote, rugged, and lightly populated, yet proud, country maintaining its ethno-historical independence right across the border from England's mighty military machine? Indeed, even before we can speak of Scotland proper, as far back as about 98 CE, when the Roman historian Tacitus, describing in *Agricola* the Roman encounter with resistant Caledonians, has their leader Calgacus — who is perennially, romantically, if very inaccurately, named the first Scottish voice — rally his troops by reminding them that they are the 'noblest' in Britain because they have never been slaves, and that indeed they hold the last land that is a bastion of 'liberty' in a world beset by the tyrannical Romans.[1] Anticipating John Barbour's relentless Robert the Bruce as much as Mel Gibson's impassioned, if oddly blue, William Wallace, Tacitus's Calgacus weaves freedom into the soul of both the people and the land facing the mighty, brutal, and ever-expanding Roman empire.

But the second power, that of political convenience, is equally vital in assessing Scottish invocations of freedom — and it is already there in Tacitus's uncannily proto-Scottish Calgacus reference. As scholars such as Irene Coltman Brown

demonstrate, Calgacus is most likely merely a vehicle for Tacitus's own anti-imperialist agenda: more fantastical noble savage than actual historical persona, Calgacus speaks out, really, not to rally his historical troops, but to rally readers against a brutal empire so rapacious as to ravage even the remotest and most impoverished of peoples.[2]

The fetish, of course, can be understood in multiple ways — and I am convinced that all of them converge in the particularly Scottish brand of freedom. First and foremost here is the standard anthropological model: if we understand the fetish in this fashion, as an object imbued with magical power, then freedom is revealed as it served poetically and rhetorically in late-medieval Scottish letters — as an object capable of temporarily obliterating all memory of class division. Working with Deanne Williams' wonderful description of cultural fetishes as things which enable simultaneous desire and disavowal,[3] I will argue that medieval elitist authors used the magic power of freedom to make readers temporarily forget how fractured and unfree Scotland always had been. The deep ambivalence inherent in medieval depictions of freedom — that ecclesiastical and secular elites called for freedom in defense of a system predicated precisely on the unfreedom of a large percentage of the rural underclass — is also consonant with Marxist theory's commodity fetishism, in which personal relations vanish in a world of fantastically independent objects in a faceless market:[4] here, the actual people linked to governance disappear before the market of aery, idealized freedom clichés. And the psychoanalytic model of the fetish, which sometimes presents it as the unsettling substitute for the 'normal' sexual aim and sometimes as something accompanying 'normal' love at any stage that involves obstacles or prolonging,[5] will help us unravel why a poetically attractive freedom can conceal the profound inequities grounding the social systems that nevertheless provide singular praise for this impossible ideal.

Psychoanalysis helps us explore how, even as their power was predicated on unfree labor, medieval elites who wielded the freedom fetish convinced the unfree to substitute a communal freedom for anything resembling actual individual liberty. A materialist understanding of the anthropologists' fetish will help us even more, disclosing the political motivations of such symbolic objects used by the dominant class targeted by Marxist critique.

In his important survey of 'The Idea of Freedom in Late Medieval Scotland', G. W. S. Barrow tries to resolve this contradiction about poetic freedom coexisting with acute political unfreedom.[6] Barrow asserts that the freedom invoked by those such as John Barbour or the drafter of the *Declaration of Arbroath* is intended exclusively to signify the political freedom of Scotland as an independent country or realm. We are precisely wrong, Barrow insists, to project notions of individual freedom into the freedom invoked in *The Bruce* or *The Declaration* — rather, these medieval voices refer exclusively to the freedom of a Scottish people, and not to that of individual Scots.

Barrow's refusal to admit personal freedom as a factor seems wrong to me — not just because it plays such a clear role in the *Bruce*, but because it obscures the process of subordinating individual to communal liberty that is key to the ethno-historical work animating these productions. That individuals who in many ways were subservient and unfree could nevertheless fight both in the name of such national freedom and against their own self-interests surely played a powerful role in keeping freedom circulating among poetic texts portraying Scottish community. R. James Goldstein, to whose magisterial *The Matter of Scotland* my analysis of exploitation and unfreedom owes an incalculable debt, does important work to show how invocations of freedom in literary works and political documents may well be both realistic and fall within Barrow's proto-nationalist understanding of freedom. Medieval Scottish chroniclers and poets, Goldstein argues, understood that ethnic identity would trump individual identity in such an unstable social and political world as was late-medieval Scotland — in effect, that countless individuals whose unfree or undervalued labor supported elite lords nevertheless would fight to be exploited by *their*, rather than by *another* king.<sup<7< sup="""> As I shall argue, this assumption energizes virtually all invocations of freedom in medieval Scottish literary history.</sup<7<>

A very late-medieval example will clarify how class interests intersect with feitishized images of a particularly Scottish freedom. The simultaneous poetical power and political convenience of freedom is made romantically clear, as I have argued elsewhere,[8] in the probably fifteenth-century *Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawane*, which survives only in Chepman and Myllar's 1509 print.[9] The lord Golagros is initially presented as one who is fiercely, perhaps even suicidally,

resistant to a predatory Arthur who arbitrarily decides that Golagros must do homage to him or face the full power of his imperial war machine. Echoing Barbour's *Bruce* by invoking his ancestors, who are said to have always held the land as free men, Golagros refuses to bow to Arthur (ll. 430-55), who eventually besieges him and oversees much bloody knightly combat.

As things begin to go badly for Golagros, he comes up with a solution that spectacularly dramatizes aristocratic privilege: when Gawain agrees to pretend to be defeated by him in front of his subjects, he arbitrarily concludes that such a generous peer must — despite all evidence — represent an equally ethical and generous overlord; Golagros then agrees to forego his freedom and become subject to Arthur (ll. 1097-1330). That such an action is hardly inconsistent with Scottish notions of freedom is clear from late-medieval Scottish history, when kings such as Alexander III did personal homage to the English king, yet clearly still saw themselves as ruling over independent lands.[10] In the case of Arthur and Golagros, and quite unlike the historical case of Edward I and his Scottish colleagues, King Arthur is so moved by Golagros's deference that he leaves him absolutely 'fre' [free], unbound by any feudal commitments (ll. 1353-65) — a fantasy ending so overdetermined as merely to highlight the ubiquity of feudal attachments in medieval political geography. Only a fetishist could read such a desired substitute as normal.

I revisit this reading of *Golagros* because it highlights how, even as freedom can poetically resonate and make us feel as if we are witnessing a proud Scottish people resisting an imperial Other reminiscent of either Roman or English brutality, it actually underscores only those free *lords* whose holdings and decisions determined most individuals' fates. As stirring as some senses of 'freedom' can be, the word 'fre' [free] also had specific class connotations — namely, those whose holdings of land were contractual and did not have restrictions on, say, movement.[11] And much as the free made up only a percentage of the peasantry, so did the 'fre' come to stand for the elite even further up the scale — the warrior elites, who were more than willing — along with their clerical supporters and propagandists — to invoke freedom even as they consolidated their own class interests.

The famous passage on freedom in John Barbour's *The Bruce*, which Goldstein has explored in a devastating analysis of the 'ideological' deployment of freedom

as a means of disguising class exploitation,[12] is a crucial case in point. In this c. 1375 work which, Sally Mapstone reminds us, is more pro-Stewart romance than historical epic,[13] Barbour, pausing from a dramatic depiction of the horrors wrought by the English occupation of Scotland through the virtual puppet-king John Balliol, offers one of the most fetishized passages on freedom in Scottish literature: 'A! Fredome is a noble thing / Fredome mays man to haiff liking. / Fredome all solace to man giffis, / He levys at es that frely levys' [Ah! freedom is a noble thing / Freedom lets a man have pleasure, / Freedom all solace to man gives, / He lives at ease who freely lives] (ll. 225-28).[14] Like Tacitus's Calgacus, Barbour praises freedom primarily by excoriating its opposite, 'thyrldome' [slavery]; after listing many of its horrible aspects he concludes that 'thyrldome' is 'weill wer than deid' — much worse than death — for it 'merrys him body and banys', whereas 'dede anoyis him bot anys' — that is, it hurts us every day, whereas death only kills us once (ll. 269-72).

If we recall Williams' insight that fetishes always enable simultaneous desire and disavowal, then we can find social inequality haunting Barbour's encomium. Much as, for Louise Olga Fradenburg, the poetic power of James I's *Kingis Quair* fuses 'desire and the law', yoking freedom to its opposite, so does Barbour's fetishized freedom emerge as 'harmonized' with its dialectical opposite.[15] When Barbour defines freedom through its opposite — for 'thus contrar thingis evermar discoveryngis off the tother ar' (ll. 241-42) — he notes that the 'thrill' [thrall] 'has nocht his' [has nothing] for all is 'enbandounyt' to [at the disposal of] his 'lord', and those enthralled to such lords also are not 'sa mekill fre'— so free — as to have 'fre wyll to leyve or do / That at his hart hym drawis to' [free choice to leave (alone), or to carry out, that which his heart inclines him to] (ll. 243-48). While the feudal structure current in Barbour's Scotland is already invoked by the term 'lord', the references to the 'thryll's' holdings not being his own and to his inability to, say, move whenever he wants, could describe precisely those unfree peasants who helped constitute the estates held by secular lords — and also, Barrow and Goldstein remind us,[16] by such ecclesiastical elites as Barbour, whose rents depended upon just the sort of thralldom disavowed at the same time as individual — not national — liberty is invoked. The fetish thus both reveals and conceals. Even if the poetic power of Barbour's fetishized freedom temporarily obliterates class differences as readers marvel at sublime praise for a people's freedom, reading fetishism into freedom ensures that the essentially abject labor

of the rural underclass can potentially be heard.

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As is well known, the most famous translated words of the Declaration — that 'it is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedo — for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself'[19]— is adapted from the work of the Roman historian Sallust. It is not surprising that, in fashioning such a stirring statement of intense and insistent Scottishness, the author or authors of the *Declaration* had access to Sallust: as J. R. Philip shows, Arbroath Abbey boasted a very substantial library and so may well have contained copies of the first-century BCE Roman historian's work, while excerpts from Sallust were, moreover, frequently found in medieval Latin school texts.[20]

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realm of tense ambivalence existing right alongside the seductive poetry: whereas contemporary reception of the *Declaration* assumes an enduring and abstract freedom, freedom is just one of the many kinds of spoils that can be won by rebels in the world of Manlius and Catiline — it is something you can take and wield by force, much as the 113 continuous kings of Scots posited by the *Declaration* can be assumed to have won and held their positions by such force as Robert the Bruce brought to bear mdash; chillingly — throughout a Scotland every bit as unstable as Catiline's Rome. That which was disavowed — not just unfree labor upon which feudal power is grounded, but also the realm-wide violence of civil war that was the chaotic backdrop to Bruce's rise — is there, if we look for it, in precisely the same space where poetically seductive freedom makes us so conveniently, fetishistically forget all else.

References & Further Information

[1] Tacitus, *Agricola*, trans M. Hutton and R. M. Ogilvie, Loeb Classical Library, rev. ed., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970, 30.1-5 [pp.80-81].

[2] See Irene Coltman Brown, 'Tacitus and a Space for Freedom', in *History Today* 31.4 (1981): pp.11-15.

[3] Deanne Williams, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.16.

[4] See Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, transl. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), p.165.

[5] See Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1962). pp.42-44.

[6] G. W. S. Barrow, 'The Idea of Freedom in Late Medieval Scotland', in *Innes Review* 30 (1979): pp.16-34.

[7] R. James Goldstein. *The Matter of Scotland: Historical Narrative in Medieval Scotland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), pp.50-53.

[8] My discussion here draws on my previous analysis in Randy P. Schiff, 'Borderland Subversions: Anti-Imperialist Energies in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Golagros and Gawane*', in *Speculum* 84.3 (2009): 613-32, and in Randy P. Schiff, *Revivalist Fantasy: Alliterative Verse and Nationalist Literary History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), pp.100-27.

[9] All references are from *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawane*, ed. Ralph Hanna III (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 2008).

[10] See Barrow, 'Idea of Freedom', pp.19-20.

[11] See Hanna, ed., *Golagros*, p.102.

[12] See Goldstein, *Matter of Scotland*, pp.162-67.

[13] See Sally Mapstone, 'Scotland's Stories', in *Scotland: A History*, ed. Jenny Wormald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.304-34

[14] Text and translations from John Barbour, *The Bruce*, ed. and trans. A. A. M. Duncan (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997).

[15] Louise Olga Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament: Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p.131.

[16] See Barrow, 'Idea of Freedom', p.17; and Goldstein, *Matter of Scotland*, pp.163-64.

[17] Edward J. Cowan, *'For freedom Alone': The Declaration of Arbroath*, 1320 (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008).

[18] See Dauvit Brown, 'The Declaration of Arbroath: Pedigree of a Nation', in *The Declaration of Arbroath: History, Significance, Setting*, ed. Geoffrey Barrow (Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2003), pp.1-12.

[19] *The Declaration of Arbroath*, ed. and trans James Ferguson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), p.9.

[20] See J. R. Philip, 'Sallust and the *Declaration of Arbroath*', in *Scottish Historical Review* 26 (1947): pp.75-78.

[21] See Cicero, *Orations: In Catilinam I-IV, Pro Murena, Pro Sulla, Pro Flacco*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. C. Macdonald, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

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(c) The Bottle Imp