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# The Bottle Imp

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Back to the Future – *The Bruce* and its relevance to the 21st-century reader

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John Barbour, often called the father of Scottish literature, is perhaps not as familiar to readers as he deserves to be. His epic poem *The Bruce*, which appeared in 1375, is Scotland's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* rolled into one. It contains gruesome set pieces concerning siege, battle and violent death and, if the wanderings of Bruce around Scotland are rather less fanciful than the peregrinations of Odysseus around the Mediterranean, they are still full of varied episodes. It also makes strong statements about Scottish identity, freedom and leadership.<sup>1</sup>

*The Bruce* is an important work for a number of reasons. Conceived and written in the same century as many of the events which it describes, the poem must in large part reflect eye-witness evidence of the political and social mores of the time. It is therefore important as a historical document. As a literary achievement, it is notable for its length and scope. Although some passages are undoubtedly more engaging than others, this in some measure may be due to changing tastes. As a record of the language of the period it is invaluable, even although the extant manuscripts date from the succeeding century. The Cambridge MS of 1487 and the Edinburgh MS of 1489 form the basis of the printed editions, of which the earliest was commissioned by Henry Charteris and printed by Robert Lekpreuik in 1571. Although, according to the McDiarmid and Stevenson edition, the Edinburgh MS tends to be more reliable in preserving the older forms of the language, it is always necessary to bear in mind the possibility of deliberate or inadvertent "modernising" by scribes. Without having a larger number of MSS for comparison, it is impossible to say what liberties have been taken with spelling and metre or even in mistaken attempts to reconstruct illegible or misunderstood passages. Nevertheless, *The Bruce* has served *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* very well in enabling the

editors to date a large number of words as being already current in Scots in the late 14th century. The dictionary, as part of the Dictionary of the Scots Language, is available online at [www.dsl.ac.uk](http://www.dsl.ac.uk) and is an essential companion for a new reader of Barbour.

This article is not intended for the dedicated medievalist who has already chewed and digested *The Bruce* in its entirety. Rather, it is aimed at inquiring scholars of Scottish literature who would like to venture outside their comfort zone. There is no denying that there are some barriers to the modern reader. The metre is backward looking, even for the 14th century. This is an accentual metre. There are four stressed syllables per line and the number of unstressed syllables is variable. Often, two stressed syllables occur together and now and again stresses are separated by as many as three unstressed syllables. So Huntand as all his awn war with six syllables need not be regarded as a metrically short line.

Variable stress is also a feature, one frequently found in Chaucer as in the line from "The Friar's Tale": *In divers art and in diverse figures*. In Chaucer, the requirements of iambic tetrameter are met by the option of variable stress. In *The Bruce*, the regularities of an accentual-syllabic metre do not apply and the need for variable stress most often arises in order to have the rhyme fall upon a stressed syllable. Personal names are not excepted. Logane and Douglas are among the names which allow this flexibility. This accentual metre recalls an earlier tradition of oral composition but *The Bruce* lacks anything more than a hint of the formulaic half lines on which oral poets relied heavily. Barbour is definitely rooted in literary rather than oral composition. In spite of this, the poem does not really live until the cadences fall upon the ear with almost hypnotic effect.<sup>2</sup>

Spelling in *The Bruce* is highly variable with a confusing distribution of w, v, and uu. So we find both Douglas and Dowglas as well as wtraeous and chewalry and Eduuard. However the quh spelling, where modern Scots would have wh, sch for modern Scots sh and y as an alternative to th are easy to get accustomed to. As for the rest, the simple expedient of reading out loud makes most of the words which the spelling disguises instantly recognisable.

Some of the vocabulary is obsolete although such terms as can still be relished on the tongue; umbecast is a splendid word for "consider", with a feeling of all angles and aspects of a problem being examined. Wageouris or "mercenaries" is perfectly transparent, perhaps more so than its modern equivalent. But,

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dangerously, there are a lot of “false friends”, seemingly familiar words with unfamiliar meanings such as *maturyte* in the sense of “caution”. Other words are surprisingly modern; *tutilling* still adequately represents the sound of a horn.

In fact, Barbour’s *Bruce* is a remarkably liberating text for the modern writer and speaker of Scots. The range of spelling options have been narrowed somewhat since the 14th century, but Barbour, like Chaucer and Shakespeare, demonstrates that fixed spelling rules are not the *sine qua non* of literature. Even the grammar and idiom of Barbour help to resolve some linguistic insecurities. Modern speakers can sometimes be heard to swither over for to or the simple to in the sense of “in order to”. They might be comforted to know that for to is Barbour’s preferred construction and it remains perfectly acceptable in Modern Scots. Among some Modern Scots purists, there is a desire to expunge forms which are shared with English. The use of *went* as a past participle has come in for criticism because the Scots verb *gae* (unlike English *go*) has a perfectly regular weak past tense and past participle *gaed*. For some reason, these language extremists are uncomfortable hearing *went* in a Scots context. It was good enough for Barbour: “Ye tother part to Anwyk is went” and you can’t have a better pedigree for a word than that. The poem itself is an expression of the freedom of the poet to write in his own language in a high epic style, breaking new ground in Scots literature in the same way as many of our Scots writers are doing today. The themes of national identity, leadership and freedom have a pressing relevance to modern times and bear reading with one historical and one modern eye.

I hope this short description of the poem has tempted you, if not to read the whole poem, at least to dip into it. The opening of book one which extols the joy of reading non-fiction is worthy of study; the posthumous adventures of Bruce’s heart are a cracking good read; and the passage on freedom, also from book one, should be committed to memory. Scottish literature starts here.

## Endnotes

- 1 The well known passage on Freedom is now conveniently available for classroom use in *The Smoky Smirr o Rain*, a wide-ranging anthology of Scots edited by Matthew Fitt and James Robertson (Itchy Coo, 2003). The full poem is available in the scholarly edition by M. P. McDiarmid and J. A. C. Stevenson. (Scottish Text Society 1980-5).
- 2 A reading from *The Bruce* by A.J. Aitken is available on the Scotsoun CD *Pronouncing Older Scots* available from [www.lallans.co.uk](http://www.lallans.co.uk). The passage is taken from the twentieth and last book, “Quhen yat the gud king beryit was”, and tells how Douglas undertook his dead sovereign’s instructions to take his heart to the holy land. This episode is a convenient length for classroom study and bears comparison with the later version (1482) narrated by Richard Holland in *The Buke of the Howlat*, included in P. Bawcutt and F. Riddy’s edition of *Longer Scottish Poems 1375-1650* (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1987).



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