

TYRANNY AND LIBERTY, RESISTANCE AND REGICIDE: POLITICAL ASSASSINATION IN JOHN GALT'S *THE SPAEWIFE*

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Abstract

Though its use declined after the Middle Ages, the chronicle long remained the genre of choice for those unsatisfied with conventional histories. John Galt, a Scottish Romantic author currently enjoying renewed critical interest, demonstrates the political applications of the chronicle, in both form and content, as a means of harnessing Britain's distant past to come to terms with the material and philosophical developments of the long eighteenth century. In particular, Galt's adaptation of the chronicle offers an alternate reading of the past in which history is not something from which society must escape, nor something uniformly primitive, but rather something to be harnessed in buttressing political systems, an expression of trust in social institutions typical of Burkean conservatism. This line of argument reveals a committed Tory who fears the potential for violence – particularly political assassination and regicide – in the post-Revolutionary era. *The Spawife* (1823) depicts a historical moment drawn from Scotland's chronicle tradition using language linking it to political circumstances of the 1820s. Just as Galt's earlier works question the purpose and efficacy of early century social unrest, so too does *The Spawife* undermine the argument for political assassination even as it leaves open an understanding of the circumstances that (mistakenly) led parties to commit such acts. Unlike the novel's proximal source text, Galt's narrative locates political justice on the side of the murdered King James I, and in so doing resuscitates Scotland's oldest textual tradition in opposition to theories of resistance that had been used to justify contemporary cases of political assassination.

Though the chronicle declined following the end of the Middle Ages, it continued to operate in the historiographic margins well into the eighteenth century. Existing chronicles, such as Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* (c. 1447 but based on John of Fordun's earlier *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*) and Andrew of Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* (c. 1420), were extensively

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republished in the period by antiquarians whose methods, though they worked at respected libraries and universities, were often incompatible with those of the cosmopolitan men-of-letters who produced Enlightenment histories, even as some of these antiquarians achieved a sort of celebrity status in their fields – or infamous derision from those outside the disciplines – on the backs of their publications. In addition to such erudite republications of existing chronicles, several popular ‘offspring’ genres inspired by the medieval chronicle appeared in its stead.¹ The Romantic novelists inherited in the chronicle a form with a significant legacy of propping up – or alternatively, pillorying – systems of political authority and power.² John Galt, a Scottish Romantic author currently enjoying renewed critical interest, demonstrates the potential political applications of the chronicle as a means of harnessing Britain’s more distant past to come to terms with the material and philosophical developments of the long eighteenth century and to arrest the era’s eroding notion of political authority.

Galt’s adaptation of the chronicle in *The Spaewife* (1823) highlights the disparity between idealistic visions of systemic progress and the struggle to preserve social cohesion amidst revolutionary upheaval. The chronicle’s relevance to questions of progress therefore aligns this study with a recent trend in Galt studies which has revised earlier assumptions regarding Galt’s views vis-à-vis progress even in such canonical works as *Annals of the Parish*.³ At the same time, this study expands the discussion to include a novel largely ignored since its publication. Ian Duncan’s claim that it constitutes a ‘rambling historical novel’ deserves some qualification; some contemporaries saw fit to heap praise on the novel as ‘the most connected and the most dramatic of all Mr Galt’s novels’ and possessed of ‘more beauties and fewer defects than any of the preceding works of the author, popular as they are’. One reviewer expressed conviction that *The Spaewife* would be ‘considered one of the best novels that has been produced for some time’, while another stated that Galt’s fictions ‘possess the golden impress of originality as freshly as any

¹ Daniel Woolf, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 57.

² For an example of the former, see Michael H. Brown, “‘I Have Thus Slain a Tyrant’: *The Deth of the Kyng of Scotis* and the Right to Resist in Early Fifteenth-Century Scotland’, *The Innes Review*, 47 (Spring 1996), pp. 24–44. Robert Dodsley’s *Chronicle of the Kings of England* (London: printed for T. Cooper, at the Globe in Pater-noster Row, 1740) exemplifies the chronicle’s potential subversion of the established order.

³ The most recent examples include Kenneth McNeil, *Scottish Romanticism and Collective Memory in the British Atlantic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), ch. 5; and Gerard Lee McKeever, *Dialectics of Improvement: Scottish Romanticism, 1786-1831* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), ch. 4.

productions of the age' and 'laid it down with the sincerest respect for Mr. Galt's talents'.⁴

Consideration of the chronicle's place in *The Spawwife* demonstrates the novel's latent conservatism, an element of Galt's writing which has only lately begun to receive the critical attention it deserves. Ian Gordon's warning to critics not to confuse the politics of Galt's central figures with those of their author is notable primarily in light of the frequency with which he has been ignored: Galt's religious and political principles are frequently conflated, particularly with regard to *Ringan Gilhaize*, published the same year as *The Spawwife*. Douglas Mack, for example, attributes to Galt the 'potentially radical subaltern/Presbyterian tradition' he sees in his Covenanter novel, while Patricia Wilson's sense of an 'informing vision' in *Ringan* results in the critic moving swiftly from the suggestion that it 'is based on the idea that abuse of authority leads to oppression' to the idea that Galt himself exalts 'the divine right of resistance'.⁵ Still other critics have seen fit to ascribe to Galt a limited, nostalgic kind of conservatism bereft of practical import.⁶ The only critic to engage deeply with Galt's medieval fictions insists elsewhere that Romantic-era popular medievalism unambiguously 'uses the Middle Ages as a way to challenge class structures rather than to justify them', a statement which hastily discounts the possibility that medieval traditions could be mobilized to achieve conservative aims in the period or that different authors might learn different lessons from the Middle Ages.⁷

Though Galt often repeated the claim that he had never been such 'a political man', the plot of *The Spawwife* reflects an author deeply invested in the politics of his era.⁸ Erik Frykman's prescription – that readers not 'disregard the fact that his literary work in the early eighteen-twenties was not merely the result of an

⁴ Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 215; 'The Spawwife; a Tale of the Scottish Chronicles', *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review*, 13 December 1823, 'Review of New Books', pp. 785–88; 807–09 (pp. 788; 809); 'The Spawwife; a Tale of the Scottish Chronicles', *La Belle Assemblée; or, Court and Fashionable Magazine*, January 1824, 'Monthly Miscellany [Review of New Publications]', pp. 33–34 (p. 33).

⁵ Ian A. Gordon, 'Galt and Politics', in *John Galt: Reappraisals*, ed. by Elizabeth Waterston (Guelph: University of Guelph, 1985), pp. 119–28 (p. 128); Mack, *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 157; Wilson, 'Ringan Gilhaize: The Product of an Informing Vision', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 8 (1981), pp. 52–68 (pp. 64–65).

⁶ Gerard Carruthers, 'Remembering John Galt', in *John Galt: Observations and Conjectures on Literature, History, and Society*, ed. by Regina Hewitt (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012), pp. 30–45.

⁷ Clare A. Simmons, *Popular Medievalism in Romantic-Era Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 6.

⁸ See, e.g., John Galt, *The Autobiography of John Galt*, 2 vols (London: Cochrane and M'Crone, 1833), Vol. I, p. 291.

ambition to attract attention; there was also in him the urge of a writer who feels he has something to say' – is here apposite.⁹ Galt's novel inherits from the 'sustained and reasoned social and political critiques' offered by female anti-Jacobins such as Helen Craik and Elizabeth Hamilton in the 1790s and reflects ongoing conservative 'interventions in a debate on ethics, rights and duties that were as intellectual and significant as those appearing in pamphlets, sermons, reviews and treatises'.¹⁰ The novel offers an alternate reading of the past from that most commonly associated with the Enlightenment, one in which history is not something from which society needs to escape, nor something uniformly primitive, but rather something which can be harnessed to reinforce collective institutions like the monarchy, an expression of 'trust in experience' typical of Burkean conservatism.¹¹ Put another way, the chronicles informing the novel act as emblems of the residual culture Gerard Lee McKeever argues (echoing Raymond Williams) Galt uses to cite 'the moral ambiguities inherent in a new, dominant network of macroeconomic power'.¹²

This line of argument reveals a committed Tory who fears the potential for violence – particularly political assassination and regicide – in the decades following the French Revolution, and whose works attempt to temper the subversive fervour especially prevalent in the western Lowland counties most affected by Glasgow's rapid industrialization and with which Galt was intimately familiar. Whereas Galt's more famous works like *Annals of the Parish* and *The Provost* engage with the chronicle on a formal level, *The Spaewife* examines the content of Scotland's chronicle tradition and its relevance to political trends of the 1820s.¹³

⁹ Erik Frykman, *John Galt's Scottish Stories, 1820–1823* (Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1959), p. 44.

¹⁰ Cf. Timothy Michael, *British Romanticism and the Critique of Pure Reason* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), p. 12; M. O. Grenby, 'Novels of Opinion', in *British Literature in the 1790s*, ed. by Pamela Clemit (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 160–74 (p. 171).

¹¹ Though David Hume and William Godwin differed on many points, their ideas on medieval history were largely congruent (as was their shared faith in the Enlightenment's progressive model), highlighting the Whiggish assumptions underpinning conjectural history. Hume's unqualified criticism of medieval history as 'parking of the ignorance and barbarity, which were then universal' echoes Godwin's dismissal of the entirety of English history in 'Of History and Romance'. See David Hume, *The History of England* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), Vol. I, pp. 24–25; William Godwin, 'Essay of History and Romance', in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, ed. by Mark Philp and others, 7 vols (London: William Pickering, 1993), Vol. V, pp. 296–97.

¹² McKeever, p. 151.

¹³ McNeil explores the relationship between the chronicle and Galt's fiction, yet he seems to align Galt's use of the chronicle form with the author's focus on 'the complexity of its [Scotland's] proximate past', a perspective which excludes Galt's medieval novels (*The Spaewife* and *Rothelan*), set in the distant past, from the discussion, as well as earlier works such as *Hareach* (p. 274).

The Spawife's plot, centred on the return of James I of Scotland from English captivity and the circumstances leading to his assassination by members of his own retinue, derives directly from Scottish chronicles. Walter Scott's legacy looms large over a historical novel set in the Scottish past; readers inevitably would have had the Waverley novels in mind while reading *The Spawife*, and Galt himself later regretted encroaching here on Scott's territory.¹⁴ Yet unlike in Scott's historical novels and even in Galt's own *Rothelan*, the real-life murder of James I takes centre stage, rather than forming a historical backdrop against which a fictional storyline is depicted. In this manner, even as it adopts many of the trappings of Scott's historical novels, *The Spawife* remains, to quote Duncan, 'pledged to the truth effects of reason, experience, and common sense' visible in Galt's more famous works and, at the same time, engaged in a less 'theoretical' if more concrete form of (albeit fictional) historiography.¹⁵

Just as Galt's use of the chronicle form in earlier works questions the purpose and efficacy of early-century social unrest, so too does *The Spawife* undermine the argument for political assassination even as it leaves open an understanding of the circumstances which (mistakenly) led parties to commit such acts in Scottish history. Unlike the novel's proximal source text, Galt's narrative locates political justice on the side of the murdered King James, and in so doing resuscitates Scotland's oldest textual tradition (and therefore, its past) in opposition to more modern theories of resistance.

Political Assassination in the Early Nineteenth Century

The Spawife appeared at a time when violence directed against political leaders constituted an ever-present threat across Europe. Though what Franklin Ford terms alternately the eighteenth-century 'moratorium', 'interlude', and 'surcease' from political assassination began to fall apart even before the French Revolution, the dam ruptured irrevocably in the decades following the storming of the Bastille.¹⁶ While regicide 'was nothing new to the courts of Europe', it had traditionally been carried out by those in the monarch's

¹⁴ John Galt, *Literary Life and Miscellanies* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1834), Vol. I, p. 262.

¹⁵ Duncan, p. 216.

¹⁶ Franklin L. Ford, *Political Murder: From Tyrannicide to Terrorism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 199 and ch. 9. Interestingly, Colin Kidd considers Scotland an exception, or at least variation, to the pattern sketched by Ford, but Kidd later admits that the publication record suggests that assassination remained on the agenda throughout eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scotland. See 'Assassination Principles in Scottish Political Culture: Buchanan to Hogg', in *George Buchanan: Political Thought in Early Modern Britain and Europe*, ed. by Caroline Erskine and Roger A. Mason (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 269–88 (p. 271).

inner circle, while assassination ‘surfaced as a major and, indeed, the most radical form of violent political protest in nineteenth-century Europe’. This renewed period of political murder ‘directly connected regicide to the overturning of the existing social and political order and the transferring of power to the people’.¹⁷ Opening with the *fin-de-siècle* assassination of Sweden’s Gustav III (1792) and the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette (January 1793), the bloodshed occurred at a rate ‘unmatched even during the Wars of Religion’.¹⁸ Over the course of the nineteenth century, twenty-one different royals in Europe alone were targeted for assassination or regicide, while non-royal political leaders were increasingly targeted.

The spectre of regicide soon made its way to Britain. Several domestic assassination plots were discovered in the 1790s; the king’s coach was attacked in 1795 as he made his way to Parliament and, in 1800, a veteran named James Hadfield fired a pistol at King George III in the belief that his subsequent judicial execution would bring about the Second Coming. While Hadfield’s failed attempt on the English king was explained away easily on the basis of his insanity, the 1812 assassination of Prime Minister Spencer Perceval, a man commonly attributed singular responsibility for Britain’s public policy and who effectively ‘ruled the nation’, led apprehensive politicians to search for evidence of broader conspiracies.¹⁹ Though most of the evidence corroborated John Bellingham’s testimony that he had acted alone, the event triggered immediate scenes of jubilation across London. Even before the murder, government policy had led to widespread ‘rioting and violence . . . in the Midlands and north of England’, but in the days following Perceval’s murder ‘the Midlands, Yorkshire, Lancashire and the Lowlands of Scotland would be convulsed by a wave of outrageous delight at the Prime Minister’s murder. The forces of law and order in the country seemed as powerless to contain it as those in London.’²⁰ An unsuccessful attack upon the Prince Regent’s (the future George IV’s) carriage in 1817 drove home the ongoing threat of political murder in the 1810s.

¹⁷ Rachel G. Hoffman, ‘The Age of Assassination: Monarchy and Nation in Nineteenth-Century Europe’, in *Rewriting German History: New Perspectives on Modern Germany*, ed. by Jan Rüger and Nikolaus Wachsmann (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 121–141 (p. 122).

¹⁸ Ford, p. 208.

¹⁹ Andro Linklater, *Why Spencer Perceval Had to Die: The Assassination of a British Prime Minister* (London: Walker Books, 2012), p. 10, Kindle edition. See also Mollie Gillen, *Assassination of the Prime Minister: The Shocking Death of Spencer Perceval* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1972) and David C. Hanrahan, *The Assassination of the Prime Minister: John Bellingham and the Murder of Spencer Perceval* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2012).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 24; 38.

In March 1819, seven years after Perceval's assassination, August von Kotzebue – whose *History of the Germans* had been publicly burned by patriotic students in 1817 – was murdered by Carl Ludwig Sand, a theology student convinced that the dramatist and Prussian diplomat's conservative views on academic and political freedom were a danger to the nascent German Confederation. Unlike Bellingham's private grievance against the government, Sand framed his actions along virtuous lines, 'citing heroic role models of tyrannicide in the past' such as William Tell and Charlotte Corday. Coming, as with the Perceval assassination, during a period of revolutionary unrest, the immediate aftermath of Kotzebue's murder 'was dominated by a determined search for evidence of a wider conspiracy'.²¹ The subsequent attempted assassination of Carl Friedrich Emil von Ibell (a minister of the Duchy of Nassau-Usingen) in July 1819 by a member of a nationalist republican fraternity emphasized the magnitude of support for radical violence against political figures. The event garnered 'vocal admirers not only in his own country but also abroad, especially in England' – before Sand's trial, an anonymous *Memoir of Charles Louis Sand* appeared in London, 'accompanied by a *Defence of the German Universities*' and bearing an 'idealized portrait of the assassin'.²²

One year later, the Cato Street Conspiracy – though thwarted – demonstrated the persistent threat of political murder posed by radical politics in Britain. By late 1819, magistrates from central and northern England 'expected a rising' larger in scope than that which precipitated the Peterloo Massacre, which had 'convinced [Arthur] Thistlewood that the Government's days were numbered'.²³ Despite negligible chances of success, the plot's leaders intended to instigate a mass uprising against the government; Malcolm Chase notes that, in the event of success, 'the London Irish community and a number of trade societies, notably shoemakers, were prepared to lend support, while unrest and awareness of a planned rising were widespread in the industrial north and on Clydeside'.²⁴ John Stanhope insists that, despite historians' dismissal, the Cato Street Conspiracy 'belonged to an all important class of historical and political events' and claims that it 'stampeded moderate opinion so violently that it veered towards reaction and away from the path along which inevitable progress lay'.²⁵ Notably, the charge first levied against the conspirators was the attempt to

²¹ Ford, p. 215.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 216.

²³ David Johnson, *Regency Revolution: The Case of Arthur Thistlewood* ([Compton Chamberlayne, Eng.]: Compton Russell, 1974), pp. 65; 63.

²⁴ 'Thistlewood, Arthur (bap. 1774, d. 1820), Radical and Revolutionary', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/27188>> [accessed 10 February 2021].

²⁵ John Stanhope, *The Cato Street Conspiracy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), p. 8.

subvert the Constitution, rather than the intent to murder members of the cabinet, a fact testifying to the era's hierarchical threat perception, in which assassination figured not as a criminal end but rather as a means to a larger (revolutionary) end.²⁶

The significance of all three cases lies in their constituting the immediate political context in which Galt's fiction appeared. Though perhaps not the dominant tendency in British culture at the time (H. T. Dickinson notes that radicals 'had neither massive popular support nor an effective political organization capable of seizing power; whereas their conservative opponents possessed considerable power and were ready to use it'), the prospect that revolutionary unrest on the part of an extreme minority would spill into targeted political violence was nevertheless a real one.²⁷ Even where evidence contradicted claims of wider conspiracies, nineteenth-century assassinations stoked governmental (and broader societal) fears that the actions of the few represented the *will* of the many. The decades that followed the French Revolution 'were dominated by the fear that the Revolution lived on, and could break out once more at any moment'. Adam Zamoyski, who believes that the panic was, 'to some extent, kept alive by the governments of the day', observes that '[I]etters and diaries of the day abound in imagery of volcanic eruption engulfing the entire social and political order, and express an almost pathological dread that dark forces were at work undermining the moral fabric on which that order rested'.²⁸ Literature responded by becoming (in John Gardner's words) 'a vital battleground at this time where radicals and anti-radicals vied with each other to produce defining literary responses to events which seemed to have the greatest political potential'. Thus, 1819–21 'came to constitute a distinct literary period characterised by the relationship between literature and popular protests that seemed to be leading toward a Revolution'.²⁹

Resistance Theory and Political Assassination in Scottish History

Though early modern theories of legitimate resistance did not paint violence as essential, the prospect of violence was nevertheless appreciated as a given.

²⁶ 'Trial of Arthur Thistlewood, William Davidson, James Ings, John Thomas Brunt, Richard Tidd, James William Wilson, John Harrison, Richard Bradburn, John Shaw Strange, James Gilchrist, Charles Cooper (April 1820)', *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* <<https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/print.jsp?div=t18200416-1>> [accessed 10 February 2021].

²⁷ H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 271.

²⁸ Adam Zamoyski, *Phantom Terror: Political Paranoia and the Creation of the Modern State, 1789–1848* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), pp. xiii–xiv.

²⁹ John Gardner, *Poetry and Popular Protest: Peterloo, Cato Street and the Queen Caroline Controversy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 2–3.

For example, *Vindiciae, contra Tyrannos* (1579), a Huguenot treatise that appeared almost immediately in England, warns that once the laws of nations are transgressed by their leaders, 'turmoil awaits the commonwealth: from this follows the dissolution of the civil and human covenant, leading to tyranny; and from tyranny to monstrous sedition in which civil war takes root'.³⁰ Elsewhere, *Vindiciae* is even more forward in its condoning of violence against the person, as well as the administration, of the king, although critics disagree regarding the author's intention regarding the extent of the people's right to resist.³¹ Later treatises that built upon or drew from *Vindiciae*, as well as coeval texts by Marian exiles like Christopher Goodman and John Ponet, similarly countenance the execution of a sinful or criminal king.³²

Despite being written in one social context, *Vindiciae* and similar works written during the height of the British Reformations established a line of ideological enquiry regularly cited in succeeding centuries of politico-religious debate. McLaren, for example, notes that, in the end, the author of *Vindiciae* 'prayed above all else for a godly nobleman to heed his call and vindicate the kingdom of France from Valois tyranny Undoubtedly he sought to limit the right to resist in the first instance to those men who were both godly and stalwarts of the secular state'. But she considers such an argument 'superstructural' – 'at its heart this is a text that enjoins all people . . . to act on the claims of their common humanity', and she highlights how such a work, once its prescriptive solution to the imperfect monarch had settled in, influenced the theories of resistance and republicanism into the eighteenth century.³³

Yet the Scottish, perhaps to a greater extent than the English (whose traditions of resistance often relied on foreign thinkers like George Buchanan and Huguenots like the anonymous author of *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*), possessed a historical tradition which legitimated resistance against rulers who violated the social contract. Unlike earlier Scottish chronicles like Bower's

³⁰ Stephanus Junius Brutus, the Celt [pseud.], *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos: or, Concerning the Legitimate Power of a Prince over the People, and of the People over a Prince*, ed. by George Garnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 11. The work continued to appear in England for more than one hundred years, and one translation was even supposedly authored by Charles I's executioner. See Anne McLaren, 'Rethinking Republicanism: *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* in Context', *The Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), pp. 23–52 (p. 24).

³¹ Cf. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) and McLaren, p. 37.

³² See, for example, William Prynne, *The Sovereigne Power of Parliaments* (London: For Michael Sparke Senior, 1643), which includes extracts and references to *Vindiciae* (e.g. pp. 121–218 of the Appendix, 'The Kings of the Gentiles, Israel, and Judah').

³³ McLaren, pp. 50–51.

Scotichronicon and Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil*, largely hagiographic in their characterization of kingship and, in Bower's case, written specifically for the king's edification, the later Scottish historical tradition was responsible for historically significant formulations of resistance theory. George Buchanan's *De Jure Regni apud Scotos* (1579), written for the young James VI whom Buchanan tutored, 'stressed that kings owed their political authority to the people over whom they ruled' and suggested that '[k]ings who abused their powers by becoming tyrants could be called to account by their subjects, imprisoned, exiled, or put to death'.³⁴ While the last edition of *De Jure Regni* chronologically relevant to this study appeared in 1799, more than twenty years before Galt's novel, Buchanan's subsequent *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* (c. 1582) applied his theory of resistance to Scottish history, and a new edition appeared in Edinburgh in 1821, only two years before the publication of *The Spaewife*.³⁵ James VI's *Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) and *Basilikon Doron* (1599) were intended as rebuttals to Buchanan's philosophy; from James's perspective, 'Buchanan's theory was a formula for civil war and chaos of a kind from which Scotland, under his leadership, was just emerging. It was also, he felt, based on a misunderstanding of Scottish history as well as the country's political institutions'.³⁶ In England, Buchanan – alongside Jean Boucher and the author of *Vindiciae, contra Tyrannus* – was derided as a 'monarchomach' ('monarch eater', or king killer) by William Barclay in *De Regno et Regali Potestate* (1600), written in the wake of Henri III's assassination by a Dominican friar.

Put simply, one could not discuss political theories like resistance in post-Reformation Scotland without referencing Buchanan – a fact which made him, according to Caroline Erskine and Roger Mason, 'a totemic villain, a symbol of anarchy'.³⁷ The idea of political murder would have been of particular concern in Scotland, where Buchanan's theories of justified resistance and regicide enjoyed a long history of legitimacy. Buchanan and the Calvinist John Knox featured prominently in seventeenth-century Scottish political debates; they consistently 'provided the initial justification for righteous killing and tyrannicide in Scottish political culture' and 'although later

³⁴ W. B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 23–24.

³⁵ George Buchanan, *The History of Scotland: From the Earliest Accounts of That Nation, to the Reign of King James VI*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Printed by Michael Anderson, for James Kay, bookseller, 1821). Buchanan's *De Jure Regni* was rarely published in the eighteenth century, perhaps given its more overtly inflammatory potential amidst Jacobite unrest, but translations of Buchanan's history were published at least nine times in the eighteenth century and at least twice more in the 1820s.

³⁶ Patterson, p. 24.

³⁷ 'Introduction', in *George Buchanan*, ed. by Erskine and Mason, p. 9.

generations asserted that all true presbyterians recoiled from the abomination of assassination, the fact that these condemnations were always accompanied by slippery extenuations suggests that nobody quite believed they meant it – neither their episcopalian opponents, nor themselves'.³⁸

Buchanan's theories, however, were not influential solely within Scotland. By the seventeenth century, Buchanan was widely cited in English resistance debates, especially by Commonwealth writers aiming to defend the regicide.³⁹ Anglicans such as David Owen, in his *Herod and Pilate reconciled, Or the Concord of Papist and Puritan . . . for the Coercion and Killing of Kings* (1610), republished amidst the Civil War as *A Persuasion to Loyalty*, discussed Buchanan alongside parallel European traditions of resistance and king-killing.⁴⁰ Martin Dzelzainis argues that the 'anti-Scottish strategy' of John Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) lies in its attempt to embarrass the Scottish Presbyterians who opposed the trial and execution of Charles I 'by reminding them that the Calvinist theory of revolution [exemplified by Buchanan] was a part of their intellectual heritage'.⁴¹ Dryden similarly paints Milton as Buchanan's intellectual disciple, and one early editor of Milton's treatise labelled Buchanan 'Milton's chief debt' because Buchanan's dialogue managed to systemize the ideas that Milton may earlier have encountered in Knox.⁴² Samuel Rutherford later sought to distance Covenanter philosophy from the English appropriation of Scottish traditions of resistance, though it is likely that the English Civil War (and the Restoration) influenced subsequent debates in Scotland.⁴³

Indeed, back in Scotland these 'foundational' texts were supplemented in the latter half of the seventeenth century by 'a group of Covenanting writings justifying violent resistance to malignant uncovenanted rulers'. Works such as Sir James Stewart and James Stirling's *Naphthali* (1667) and Alexander Shields's *A Hind Let Loose* (1687) were steeped in Buchanan's defence of armed resistance against tyrants and, in the case of the latter, vindicated the assassination

³⁸ Kidd, pp. 274; 272.

³⁹ J. H. M. Salmon, *The French Religious Wars in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 18; 103–04.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴¹ Martin Dzelzainis, 'The Ciceronian Theory of Tyrannicide from Buchanan to Milton', *Études Épistémè* 15 (2009) <<https://doi.org/10.4000/episteme.705>> [accessed on 11 February 2021].

⁴² Salmon, p. 140; William Talbot Allison, ed., Introduction to *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, by John Milton (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), p. xxix.

⁴³ Paul Tonks, 'Scottish Presbyterian Piety: Samuel Rutherford and the Literature of Civil War-Era Puritanism', *Milton and Early Modern English Studies*, 17 (May 2007), pp. 127–39 (p. 135).

of Archbishop Sharp.⁴⁴ The centrality of Buchanan's ideas to these seventeenth-century political debates is reflected in the renewed condemnation by the English Parliament of *De Jure Regni* in 1664 and similar bans by Scottish authorities, as well as the work's public burning at the University of Oxford in 1683, the same year as the historically controversial Rye House Plot – alongside, it should be noted, *Vindiciae* and Milton's political works, 'as well as a host of English and Scottish books that had addressed issues of tyranny, resistance, and regicide in the intervening decades'.⁴⁵

Buchanan's theories continued to feature in the decades surrounding the Glorious Revolution. *De Jure Regni* appeared in English in 1680 as *A Dialogue Concerning the Due Privilege of Government*, printed in a cheap duodecimo edition that would have been more readily available than the refashioned folio that appeared in 1689. On trial for association with the Rye House conspiracy, Algernon Sidney admitted that he was 'not ashamed . . . to concur with Buchanan'.⁴⁶ Though never overtly advocating political assassination, John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) similarly revived 'the idea of Buchanan and other writers of the previous century, that the people had the right to resist'. Written in response to Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings Asserted* (1680) and Tory tracts reinforcing Filmer's arguments 'for non-resistance to the divinely appointed sovereign', Locke's reply advocates resistance not just against 'a bad religious settlement' but specifically 'against a bad king'.⁴⁷ Insofar as Locke's treatises aim to redeem such resistance as constitutive of – rather than a violent rip in – the political fabric of English society, Locke himself can be viewed as a relatively nonviolent inheritor of Buchanan's theories.

Despite Locke's *a priori* nonviolent advocacy, however, his political opponents viewed his writings as equally pernicious or dangerous as more openly violent political tracts. The prospect remained that resistance to tyranny would necessitate violence and, in some cases, political murder, and some readers in the Revolutionary era blamed him for the instability of the 1790s. John Bowles, for example, 'a barrister turned pamphleteer' in Pitt's pay who helped organize the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers and wrote an assault on Paine's *Rights of Man*, accused Locke's theories of government of 'producing that combination of anarchy and oppression, which has assumed the name of Jacobinism'. 'The

⁴⁴ Kidd, p. 274. See also John Coffey, 'George Buchanan and the Scottish Covenanters', in *George Buchanan*, ed. by Erskine and Mason, pp. 190–93.

⁴⁵ Kidd, pp. 273–74; McLaren, p. 25.

⁴⁶ Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government* (London: Printed, and are to be sold by the booksellers of London and Westminster, 1698), p. 7.

⁴⁷ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485–1714: A Narrative History*, 2nd edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 298.

system of Mr. Locke', Bowles writes, 'and the other assertors of natural equality, respecting the origin of Government, is not more repugnant to nature and history, than hostile to the happiness of mankind':

This system, which, in a few years, has ravaged one half of Europe, is lineally descended from the principles taught by Mr. Locke, respecting the Source of Power, and the Natural Liberty and Equality of Man. The Digests of that system, the Revolutionary Constitutions of France, are evidently nothing else than exemplifications of those principles; and thus Whiggism, as far, at least, as it can be identified with the principles in question, is the parent stock of Jacobinism.⁴⁸

By the mid-1790s, Mark Goldie notes, 'Locke was, with Rousseau, blamed for the American and French disasters, and, with Voltaire, for the peril now faced by Christianity'. His legacy was debated in Thomas Hardy's 1794 treason trial, and by 1815, 'Locke's portrait was taken down from Christ Church hall', his alma mater.⁴⁹

Conservative attempts to discredit Buchanan (and his legacy) in the eighteenth century demonstrate the continuing threat posed by the sixteenth-century humanist. A chapbook, widely attributed to the Scottish (Jacobite) chapbook writer Dougal Graham, appeared at regular intervals following its initial publication in 1777.⁵⁰ The work – which depicts Buchanan as James VI's fool and paints him alternately as a drunk, a country bumpkin, and a regular target of ridicule – aims to undermine Buchanan's authority by spreading 'the natural offspring of the more elaborate libels written and spoken against him immediately after his death'.⁵¹ The chapbook proved popular following the French Revolution – at least three editions were printed in 1790 alone (Stirling, Preston, and Edinburgh), and by the Battle of Waterloo at least eight more editions had appeared (in the original three cities plus Falkirk, Newcastle, Glasgow, Gateshead, and Penrith). A few more editions appeared by the early 1820s, and the chapbook continued to be reprinted well into the mid-nineteenth century.

⁴⁸ Mark Goldie, *The Reception of Locke's Politics*, 6 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), Vol. IV, p. 346 and John Bowles, *The Retrospect* (London: printed for T. N. Longman, Paternoster-Row; and sold by J. Hatchard, 173, Piccadilly; and by L'Homme, New Bond-Street, 1798), reproduced in Goldie, Vol. IV, pp. 347–64 (pp. 360–61).

⁴⁹ Goldie, Vol. I, pp. xxxviii–xxxix.

⁵⁰ *The Witty and Entertaining Exploits of George Buchanan, Who Was Commonly Called, the King's Fool* (Glasgow: printed and sold by J. and J. Robertson, 1777).

⁵¹ George Macgregor, *The Collected Writings of Dougal Graham, 'Skellat' Bellman of Glasgow*, 2 vols (Glasgow: Thomas D. Morison, 1883), p. 60.

Just as Colin Kidd notes that, to the opponents of Scottish Presbyterianism, the earlier series of works ‘from Knox and Buchanan to Shields appeared to constitute a coherent and consistent canon of Scots Presbyterian political theory’, so too must Locke’s later Whig arguments – renewed by post-Revolution Radicals – have appeared a dangerous (if English) intellectual successor to the relatively unbroken history of Scottish openness to regicide.⁵² The threat posed by the prospect of violence directed against the monarch and his government, much like the terror occasioned by the spectre of revolutionary violence discussed above, would have caused conservatives like Galt consternation, both in the immediate historical moment of the Revolutionary Wars and again in the years 1819–21 following the events of Peterloo and the Radical War.

Though a Scottish Presbyterian noted for the pride he expressed in his Covenanting ancestry, John Galt also identified as a political conservative, albeit a moderate sensitive to the damaging effects of party tribalism. He was an active reader and contributor to the Tory-supporting *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, a circumstance which would have (ironically) brought him face-to-face with Buchanan’s legacy given that the latter’s portrait graced the periodical’s cover as a symbol of Scottish patriotism and identity despite the complexity of his philosophical legacy. While Galt objected to the purging of offensive texts from the Greenock Library at the height of the French Revolution, Galt’s *Autobiography* makes clear that, though a principled objection, it was not the result of any personal ‘democratic principles’.⁵³ On the contrary, Galt volunteered for the local militia and helped to raise an additional corps of volunteer riflemen at a time when, elsewhere in Scotland, protests instigated by the United Scotsmen against conscription resulted in the Massacre of Tranent. Galt’s defence of the radical press brought Godwin’s *Enquiry* to his attention:

Never pious catholic was more astonished at the effrontery of Luther’s Commentary on the Galatians, than I was with the contents of that book. I described it to Park as of the most diabolical kind; and what rendered it to me the more obnoxious was, it seemed wonderfully true and many of the things in it.

While Galt admits that he could not immediately refute Godwin’s arguments, he ‘yet was sure that they were wrong, and that there was some instinctive

⁵² Kidd, p. 274.

⁵³ Galt, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, p. 40. Frykman leaves Galt’s politics unstated, which erroneously suggests that the author identified with the texts’ revolutionary principles (p. 40).

principle of morality which was earlier exercised than reason', an opinion of which he, years later, became convinced.⁵⁴

The Spaewife

Understood in this context, the interest in assassination which characterizes *The Spaewife* reflects the political climate in which it was written and published. The novel's displacement of early nineteenth-century social distress in a representation of medieval political murder underlines the dark underbelly of Jacobinism and similarly rooted cultures of resistance. In particular, the sympathy expressed for James I in *The Spaewife* opposes the political program of Buchanan's *De Jure Regni* and its intellectual descendants.

The events of *The Spaewife* take place before Scotland's tradition of resistance had taken root. It is also, not incidentally, the novel in which Galt appears most indebted to the medieval chronicle, a genre (as will be discussed further below) exemplified largely by patriotic conservatism and unequivocal support for the monarchy: the novel's title page openly declares its connection to the older textual form, identifying the story as a 'tale of the Scottish chronicles'.⁵⁵ In addition to its chronicle subtitle, the novel's narrator repeatedly displays his familiarity with medieval sources. At the beginning of the novel, he remarks that the motive of King Robert II's estrangement from Elizabeth Mure (one of the distal causes of the internecine strife depicted in the novel) is mentioned 'neither in the histories of the time nor in the chronicles of the kingdom' (1: p. 2).⁵⁶ Conversely, at the end of the novel he glosses over the torture and execution of James's murderers with the claim they require 'no recital here' given their already firm presence in the 'adamantine page of history' (3: pp. 258–59).

The author's claims of omniscience with regard to the novel's source texts is not entirely fabricated: the end of the novel's third volume features ten appendices of historical material (3: pp. 269–315), textual excerpts drawn from medieval Scottish chroniclers such as Andrew of Wyntoun and humanist scholars like Hector Boece, as well as the *Full Lamentable Cronycle of the Deth and False Murdure of James Stewarde*.⁵⁷ The latter work (frequently

⁵⁴ Galt, *Autobiography*, Vol. I, p. 42.

⁵⁵ John Galt, *The Spaewife: A Tale of the Scottish Chronicles*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1823). Future references to the novel will appear parenthetically in the text.

⁵⁶ Galt's narrator here either lies or unknowingly reveals his ignorance of the textual record, a fact discussed further below.

⁵⁷ Several scholars have pointed out Galt's frequent struggle to fill the era's standard three-volume novel; the inclusion of the historical appendices could very well constitute an underhanded attempt to fill the novel's final volume, just as a majority of *Rothelan's* (1824) third volume is composed of unrelated material. Yet Galt's decision to include the entirety of *The Deth* and its relevance to the era's politics suggests more than just the cynical

referred to as *The Dethe* by modern historians, a convention this study will henceforth adopt), a twenty-nine-page chronicle translated into English by John Shirley within a decade of the events it describes, had already been published twice in Scotland before it appeared in Galt's novel, and it would be published a third time before Galt's death – though after the release of *The Spaewife*.⁵⁸ It constitutes 'the longest and most detailed contemporary account' of James's murder and is the sole source for certain facts included in the novel (such as Robert Graeme's attempted arrest of James, depicted at the end of Volume I) as well as for the depiction of Atholl's role as one of mere 'passive complicity'.⁵⁹

While modern scholars, largely in agreement in attributing English provenance to *The Dethe*, still debate the chronicle's historical dependability, the work was already controversial when Galt was writing *The Spaewife*.⁶⁰ John Pinkerton supposed it of Scottish origin, but the unnamed editors of the *Miscellanea Scotica* demurred, arguing that internal evidence suggested English authorship and emphasizing that no Scot would have referred to the king of England as his 'maister'.⁶¹ Despite Galt's allusive subtitle and the narrator's claims of familiarity with the medieval sources, the novel at first glance seems to accord with *The Dethe*'s simplistic rendering of James's assassination, an affair shrouded in ambiguity and whose significance was hotly debated already in contemporary accounts. The affair 'provoked more contemporary accounts than any other event in fifteenth-century Scotland', writes Michael Brown, while Roberto Weiss notes that '[f]ew events have produced narratives so different from each other as the assassination of James I of Scotland'.⁶² Yet while Galt's debt to *The Dethe* is overt, the presence of certain elements in the novel's depiction indicates that Galt may have also drawn

exploitation of a printing loophole—at least one reviewer felt the appendices lent the novel 'additional value'. See *Literary Chronicle*, p. 808.

⁵⁸ References to the chronicle will appear parenthetically via corresponding page numbers in Vol. 3 of *The Spaewife*.

⁵⁹ Brown, 'Tyrant', p. 24; Michael H. Brown, "'That Old Serpent and Ancient of Evil Days': Walter, Earl of Atholl and the Death of James I', *Scottish Historical Review*, 71 Parts 1 and 2 (April–October 1992), pp. 23–45 (p. 24).

⁶⁰ Roger Mason considers its authenticity 'dubious' as a result of its attempt to articulate a genuine theory of resistance, something he believes post-dates Scotland's chronicle era. Michael Brown, on the other hand, finds its justification of tyrannicide 'radical' but echoed by events elsewhere in Europe at the time and part of a 'live issue, a topic of paramount importance in both the theory and reality of political life'. See Mason, 'Kingship, Tyranny and the Right to Resist in Fifteenth Century Scotland', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 66, Part 2 (October 1987), pp. 125–51 (p. 143); cf. Brown, 'Tyrant', pp. 24–25.

⁶¹ *Miscellanea Scotica* (Glasgow: John Wylie, 1818), Vol. II, p. 2.

⁶² Brown, 'Tyrant', p. 26; Roberto Weiss, 'The Earliest Account of the Murder of James I of Scotland', *The English Historical Review*, 52 (July 1937), pp. 479–91 (p. 479).

from other historical sources; these texts conveyed disparate, often conflicting representations of the events of 1437, and therefore required the author's mediation to paint a coherent picture of the fifteenth-century regicide. The novel therefore reflects the contested nature of the past and the uncertain textual inheritance of modern works, something Galt seems unperturbed by in his conscious inclusion of *The Dethe*.

At the same time, Galt's positioning of *The Dethe* in the novel's appendices lends the controversial chronicle a pride of place denied to the other textual sources which depict James's murder. The decision is significant when one considers how Galt alters the narrative's perspective on the regicide to contrast with that of the lone historical source from which the novel could verifiably have originated. In particular, *The Dethe* is notably more ambivalent – and even downright hostile – towards the assassinated James I. Though the chronicler gestures toward lamenting James's murder, he recounts (as the belief of the king's own people) that his execution of the Albanies resulted more from a 'covetise of thare possessions and goodes, thane for any rightfult cause', that he suffered an 'unsacionable and gredi avarice', and that he constituted 'a tyrannous prynce, what for the outrageous impositions . . . upon his poure subjects and peple', circumstances alleged by the conspirators but largely de-emphasized or brushed aside in Galt's novel (3: p. 288).

On the contrary, the novel effectively lionizes the soon-to-be murdered James, whose depiction lends him a tragic-heroic quality lacking in *The Dethe*. Calling off the siege of Roxburgh amidst growing civil unrest, James rejects his queen's entreaties that he flee to the relative safety of Edinburgh and travels instead to Perth; whereas elsewhere in the novel events and speeches are drawn from existing sources, the author here invents a speech that highlights the king's bravery in the face of treasonous conspiracy:

It has ever been accounted at best a great weakness in any man to live in the dread of death. In a king it were dishonour. From the first hour of my restoration, I have ever deemed myself a glittering mark placed on high, and exposed alike to the secret shafts of malice and the arrows of open war. I shall not, therefore, swerve from any purpose, merely because in the execution I may be demanded to render payment of that debt which, sooner or later, I must pay. The true man thinks not of dying, but only of living to good effect; as for myself, I hold death but as a task before which every other, whether of business, affection, or of honour, should be first attempted; and I do persuade myself that he will die best who lives not in the reverence of so common a custom of our nature as death. (3: pp. 151–52)

The two accounts of the assassination itself also differ markedly from one another. Whereas Galt's narrator emphasizes the treasonous aspect of James's

murder, from the twice repeated ‘Treason! treason!’ resounding through Blackfriars Abbey to the narrator’s exclamation that the act constituted the ‘cause for the tears of nations’ (3: pp. 248 and 257), the medieval chronicler paints the plot as an act of resistance, an immanently reasonable response to which the conspirators were forced by ‘the Kynges tyranye . . . and also of the gredi covatise that he oppressid and enpovertid his comonalte’ (3: p. 289). The chronicler in *The Dethe* describes the murder scene in gruesome and almost humiliating detail, including elements not recounted in other medieval accounts of the assassination. His account of the king’s attempted escape – original to *The Dethe* – describes the king entering a drainage hole ‘adowne lowe beneth amongis th’ ordure’ and repeats the word ‘privy’ thrice in a single sentence to emphasize the filthiness in which the king meets his end (3: p. 299). In this chronicle’s retelling (uncorroborated by other sources), once discovered in a compromising position, James pleads for mercy and a final opportunity for confession (3: p. 301). *The Dethe* notes that, rebuffed, James pleads again for mercy ‘with a pitous voyce’ and offers half the kingdom, ‘and much other good’, to spare his life, though his assailants again refuse him and murder the king in cold blood (3: p. 304).

The Dethe’s depiction of James I’s assassination as a prudent act of resistance is unusual – even unique – when analysed with reference to Scotland’s medieval historical tradition. Though it was perhaps the most prominent account of the affair available to readers in the early nineteenth century, it is, at the same time, unrepresentative of Scottish traditional attitudes toward kingship and regicide during the chronicle era, a circumstance which supports those historians who insist that it is instead of English provenance.⁶³ For example, Bower’s *Scotichronicon* revolves exclusively around ‘the royal office in Scotland, regarding it as the focus and guarantee of the realm’s good health’. While Bower’s work sometimes offered constructive criticism of the monarchy, ‘he never came close to advocating resistance to an unjust ruler which would culminate in deposition or regicide’; for the author of *Scotichronicon*, ‘treachery, especially against a king, was identified as “the worst of all vices”’.⁶⁴ Roger A. Mason similarly argues that the right to resist was interpreted in a far more limited fashion in fifteenth-century Scotland, and that chroniclers and political thinkers were more wary than their sixteenth-century peers of supporting the overthrow of monarchs or resisting their rule because of lessons learned from the power vacuums of fourteenth-century Scotland. With the exception of *The Dethe*, medieval Scottish chronicles provide no evidence, Mason writes, that

⁶³ See n. 60.

⁶⁴ Brown, ‘Tyrant’, p. 27.

theories of resistance, deposition and tyrannicide ever figured more than marginally in the political thought of fifteenth century Scots. Rather, these sources testify to a political ideology as conservative as it was patriotic and one in which the idea of resisting the crown—far less deposing a king—was stated (if at all) in only the most hesitant and ambiguous of terms.⁶⁵

Mason further suggests that these medieval chroniclers ‘quite deliberately’ avoided ‘espousing those theories of resistance and tyrannicide for which in the sixteenth century, through the writings of John Mair, John Knox and George Buchanan, Scotland was to become notorious’.⁶⁶ Galt’s depiction of the murder, therefore, redeems King James from his pathetic, tyrannical depiction in *The Dethe* and exemplifies instead the Scottish chronicle’s traditional support for the monarchy.

The Dethe likewise stamps the king’s failed escape with an almost fated (and at the same time absurd) quality. As the plotters make their way to the king’s chambers on the night of his assassination, the chronicler notes that James might well have escaped but for having paved over a ‘litill square hole’ leading out of the privy only three days earlier because his tennis balls kept falling into it (3: p. 299). The chronicler avers that had the king held out any longer, his servants and citizens of Perth might ‘by sume fortune’ have managed to save his life; instead, ‘[f]ortune was to hym adverse’ (3: p. 303). In contrast, Galt’s narrator adopts a comparatively minimalist approach in its detail of the murder, instead exclaiming ‘what pen, even were the endeavour willing, can depict the horrors of that night? Sudden images of guilt and blood are all whereof the imagination hath grasp’ (3: p. 257). When he does proceed with his depiction of the murder, he first recounts the crushing of Catherine Douglas’s arm (an element elided in *The Dethe*) and the queen’s unsuccessful attempts to shield the king. The act of murder reiterates the king’s bravery, from his successful dispatch of two assailants with his bare hands to his final cold stare at Robert Stuart, a look which ‘for a moment withered the blow’, even as Robert Graeme kills him (3: p. 258).

The attempt to refute the justification of regicide at times leads the novel’s narrator to prioritize political stability over literal historical truth. In the novel’s introductory chapter, the narrator sacrifices historical verisimilitude by offering a spurious claim that the details of Robert II’s marriage to Elizabeth Mure appear ‘neither in the histories of the time nor in the chronicles of the kingdom’ (1: p. 2). In actual fact, Robert’s problematic, consanguine union with Elizabeth Mure (like James I’s murder) had long been the subject of historical writing. The ‘disputes and confusion surrounding the marriage and

⁶⁵ Mason, ‘Kingship’, p. 126.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

succession never quite went away', writes James Shapiro, who speculates that the lost play *Robert II*, commissioned by the Admiral's Men in 1599 and probably performed but never printed, presented an unflattering perspective of James's ancestry through which James could be shown to descend from a union 'tainted (but for a papal decree) by illegitimacy and incest'.⁶⁷ Interest in the marriage extended well into the eighteenth century: Walter Goodall's 1759 edition of *Scotichronicon* included a sixteen-page Latin dissertation on the subject, unreproduced in the 1769 English translation of Goodall's introduction.⁶⁸ Ignorance of the historical record is not entirely a legitimate defence for Galt's narrator, and the narrative's glossing over of the marriage constitutes the clear obfuscation of an unsavoury truth, one which may have gone undetected by the majority of Galt's readers but which several of the novel's reviewers noted.⁶⁹ The novel's perfunctory handling of the marriage redirects attention away from evidence contained in the medieval chronicle of the Stuarts' genealogical weaknesses towards a broader political question regarding resistance and royal prerogative.

While the novel is set in medieval Scotland and deals overtly with the James I's assassination, the narrator couches the fifteenth-century plot of *The Spaewife* in language more suited to Galt's own nineteenth century. Before the trial of the Albany Stuarts, the Earl of Atholl complains to his wife that the 'demonstrations of rebellion which so distract the country' result more from deficiencies in James's rule than any action by the Albanies:

He makes his power felt by its pressure; and bears himself onward in the establishing of laws, which, by being written, he regards as superior to the fluctuating wisdom of common opinion, without considering whether the spirit of the age goes along with him. He is like a war-ship, that sails in unknown waters, reckless of the sands and shoals that may be concealed beneath the waves, and of the sunken wrecks that lurk unseen around, prompt as it were with destiny and peril. (1: p. 241)

The depiction of James by the Albanies as a tyrannical leader deaf to popular opinion covertly links the unrest of fifteenth-century Scotland with the volatile political landscape of Galt's era. The mention of a 'spirit of the age', a concept 'gaining serious hegemony in the British public sphere at just this

⁶⁷ James Shapiro, 'The Scot's Tragedy and the Politics of Popular Drama', *English Literary Renaissance*, 23 (Autumn 1993), pp. 428–49 (p. 445).

⁶⁸ Walter Goodall, 'De nuptiis Roberti Senescalli Scotiae atque Elizabethae Morae Dissertatio', in *Scotichronicon* by Walter Bower, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Robert Fleming, 1759), Vol. I, pp. 1–16 (separate pagination).

⁶⁹ *Literary Chronicle*, p. 785 and 'Art. IV. *The Spaewife*', *Monthly Review, or, Literary Journal* (May 1824), 19–28 (p. 19).

moment', further links Atholl's critique of James with the early nineteenth century, particularly the criticism levied against the monarchy by Percy Bysshe Shelley (who pioneered the term prior to the 1825 publication of Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age*).⁷⁰ Given *The Dethe's* 1818 publication by a Glasgow-based antiquarian periodical, it is also distinctly possible that Galt had already begun to cogitate on *The Spaewife* before Peterloo and the Radical War, even if he only managed to complete the novel in 1823. Galt's novel was not even the first time James I's assassination had been used to comment covertly upon later events – Tobias Smollett struggled to stage *The Regicide* (1749) because theatre directors believed it to be subversively sympathetic to the exiled Stuarts in the aftermath of the latest Jacobite Revolt.

Some reviewers echoed Galt's anachronistic rendering of medieval Scottish history, though one reviewer's distaste for *Ringan Gilhaize* (reviewed simultaneously) leads him to conflate his readings.⁷¹ The praise offered by William Jerdan's *Literary Gazette*, which applauded the novel's 'tolerable fidelity to the history of those rude and unhappy times when a regicide of bloody atrociousness was preceded by the struggles of a barbarous nobility, the executions of many high persons, and a display of all those fierce passions in the high, lawlessness in the low, and ignorance and brutality in the entire mass which deformed Scotland for centuries', indicates the stakes of a novel focused on resistance and regicide.⁷² Jerdan witnessed Spencer Perceval's assassination and helped to detain Bellingham; his paper's attempt to draw a clear line under the violence of the Middle Ages does not seem, therefore, entirely warranted.

One last intertextual referent serves to illustrate the novel's displacement of nineteenth-century politics into a narrative of medieval assassination. At one point, Hector MacAllisner, a member of the fictitious Glenfruin clan, laments the 'English king's new laws' in a manner more resonant in a Scotland ravaged by the Clearances than the novel's own chronotope: 'We shall soon be all fireside sloths like the Lowlanders . . . I fear, I fear that the hearty days of rugging and rieving are gone – that the age of lawyers and warders has come – and the glory of the Highlands is departed for ever!' (2: p. 278). Throughout the novel, *The Spaewife's* narrator adopts a largely stereotyped, prejudicial attitude toward the Highlanders, and Hector's statement seems at first glance a facetious commentary on Highland culture. A simple reading of

⁷⁰ James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 32.

⁷¹ *Monthly Review*, p. 26; 'Art. III. *The Spaewife*'; *British Critic* (March 1824), pp. 233–44 (p. 240).

⁷² '*The Spaewife*', *Literary Gazette*, and *Journal of the Belles Lettres* (20 December 1823), pp. 804–06 (p. 805).

Hector's remarks suggests a link with Atholl's earlier criticism of James's tyrannous policies. It is unlikely, however, that Galt intended to glorify lawlessness, and the remark also suggests (transhistorically) that the analogous 'tyranny' so lamented in Galt's own time was simultaneously responsible for the flowering of the country's mercantile class. It is instructive that, despite Hector's misgivings, he and Nigel Glenfruin, the clan chief's son, labour (successfully) to prevent the latter's father from 'rushing into any treasonable danger' – and later express horror at the king's murder (3: p. 181 and chs 23–24). The episode suggests the narrative's sympathy with the Highlanders' sense of dispossession coupled with a disavowal of political extremism.

Though humorously rendered, Hector's remark also adapts two prior encomia to medieval society. The first is Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen* (1771), translated by Scott in 1799 (Alice Chandler believes it may have contributed to Scott's identification with feudal values): 'Lock your hearts carefully as your doors. The age of frankness and freedom is past – that of treachery begins. The worthless will gain the upper-hand by cunning, and the noble will fall into their net'.⁷³ Edmund Burke adapted Goethe in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), lamenting that 'the age of chivalry is gone.—That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever'.⁷⁴ Goethe's play demonstrates an awareness of 'the limitations of the Middle Ages—their turbulence and their brutality', but, 'like many later medievalists, he fears that certain values of the human spirit have died with feudalism'.⁷⁵ In borrowing Goethe's language, already weaponized by Burke to lament the French Revolution (particularly the execution of Marie Antoinette), Galt links his own work with this tradition of conservative medievalism.⁷⁶ Without trying to paper over the 'turbulence' and 'brutality' of the past, *The Spaewife* depicts the violent and unpredictable consequences of the recourse to political radicalism.

Conclusion

The reading of Galt's *The Spaewife* through the lens of political assassination accords with Colin Kidd's sense of George Buchanan's continuing centrality

⁷³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in *Poetical Works*, trans. by Scott, 12 Vols (Edinburgh: Printed for Robert Cadell; London: Whittaker, 1833–34), XII, p. 561.

⁷⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 76.

⁷⁵ Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 28–29.

⁷⁶ James Diedrick also links Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* to these conservative laments for the passage of chivalric society. See Diedrick, 'Dialogic History in *Ivanhoe*', in *Scott in Carnival*, ed. by J. H. Alexander and David Hewitt (Aberdeen: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, University of Aberdeen, 1993), pp. 280–93.

to Scottish political culture in the nineteenth century. After a relative retreat during the Scottish Enlightenment, whose adherents tried to disavow or ignore Scotland's violent Presbyterian past, the Scottish debate over assassination principles 'achieved its highest profile in Scottish culture during the early 1820s' when a series of Scottish novels – including Galt's own *Ringan Gilhaize* (1823) – revived Presbyterian political theories including 'the issue of godly assassination'.⁷⁷

The beginning of the novel, and the claims made by James's opponents, lead the reader to suppose that the result of the novel will be a criticism of the king and a justification of his assassination. Yet the editorial intervention carried out in *The Spaewife* suggests the rejection of the narrative propagated by *The Dethe*, which excused and lionized James's assassins, and of the theories cultivated in George Buchanan's *De Jure Regni* and *History of Scotland*. Galt's novel retreats from the Buchananite version of Scottish identity with its emphasis upon resistance to royal encroachments and instead draws upon an even older tradition of passive loyalty to the throne. Though adopting the form of the modern (nineteenth-century) novel, *The Spaewife* hearkens back to this earlier historical tradition, the medieval chronicle, in its repudiation of Buchanan's revolutionary theories. Such genuinely Scottish works, like *Scotichronicon*, though widely dismissed as primitive by leading figures of the Enlightenment, could be marshalled to counter claims that Scottish history uniformly justified assassination and to defend a British monarchy under attack in the tumultuous early decades of the nineteenth century.

⁷⁷ Kidd, p. 271.