

REGICIDE AND RESISTANCE IN JOHN GALT'S THE SPAEWIFE: THEMES OF TYRANNY AND LIBERTY

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ABSTRACT:

The chronicle remained the preferred genre for those dissatisfied with traditional history for a long time, despite a drop in popularity following the Middle Ages. John Galt, a Scottish Romantic writer who is currently experiencing a resurgence of interest from critics, illustrates how the chronicle can be used politically, both in terms of form and content, to help Britain reconcile the material and philosophical advancements of the long eighteenth century with its distant past. Galt's adaptation of the chronicle, in particular, provides a different perspective on the past, one in which history is not seen as something that society must flee or as universally primitive, but rather as a tool to be used to support political systems, a sign of Burkean conservatism's faith in social structures. This line of reasoning exposes a devout Tory who is afraid of the possibility of bloodshed in the post-Revolutionary period, especially political assassination and regicide. The *Spaewife* (1823) uses terminology connected to the political climate of the 1820s to represent a historical event taken from Scotland's chronicle history. The aim and effectiveness of the social unrest of the early 20th century are called into question in Galt's previous writings; similarly, *The Spaewife* casts doubt on the case for political murder while providing insight into the conditions that may have wrongly encouraged some groups to carry out such crimes. Galt's story, in contrast to the novel's closest source text, places political justice on the side of the assassinated King James I, reviving Scotland's oldest literary tradition in opposition to theories

of resistance that had been used to defend political assassination cases in the present.

I. INTRODUCTION

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 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-a-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 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 Spaewife* 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 Spaewife*.

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 Spaewife* 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 eighteenth century was not merely the result of an 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

The *Spaewife*’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 Spaewife*, 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 Spaewife* 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 Spaewife* 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 *Spaewife* 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 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.

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 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 '[l]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.

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 politicoreligious 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 *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 postReformation 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 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 *Naphtali* (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 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 Priviledge 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 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':

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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 Dethe and False Murdure of James Stewarde*.⁵⁷ The latter work (frequently 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 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 rightfull cause', that he suffered an 'unsacionable and gredi avarice', and that he constituted 'a tirannous prynce, what for the outrageous imposicions ... upon his poure subjects and people', 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:

II. CONCLUSION

Interpreting Galt's *The Spaewife* from the perspective of political assassination aligns with Colin Kidd's understanding of George Buchanan's ongoing significance in nineteenth-century Scottish political culture. A number of Scottish novels, including Galt's own *Ringan Gilhaize* (1823), revived Presbyterian political theories, including "the issue of godly assassination," and the debate over assassination principles "achieved its highest profile in Scottish culture during the early 1820s" after a relative retreat during the Scottish Enlightenment, whose proponents attempted to deny or ignore Scotland's violent Presbyterian past.⁷⁷

The opening of the book and the assertions made by James's adversaries give the reader the impression that the book would end with a critique of the monarch and a defense of his murder. However, the editorial intervention in *The Spaewife* proposes rejecting the notions fostered in George Buchanan's *De Jure Regni and History of Scotland*, as well as the narrative promoted by *The Dethe*, which lauded and justified James's murderers. Galt's book departs from the Buchananite interpretation of Scottish identity, which places a strong focus on opposition to royal intrusions, and instead looks to a longer-standing custom of submissive allegiance to the monarch. *The Spaewife* rejects Buchanan's revolutionary views while adhering to the format of the contemporary (nineteenth-century) book, therefore paying homage to an older historical tradition—the medieval chronicle. Such authentically Scottish works, such as *Scotichronicon*, could be used to refute assertions that Scottish history consistently

justified assassinations and to support a British monarchy that was being challenged in the turbulent early nineteenth century, despite being widely disregarded as archaic by prominent Enlightenment figures.

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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.
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).