ASSASSINATION AS POLITICAL EXPRESSION IN JOHN GALT'S THE SPAEWIFE

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ABSTRACT:
John Galt's The Spaewife intricately weaves together themes of tyranny, liberty, and political violence, positioning regicide not merely as a plot device but as a potent form of political expression. This paper explores how Galt uses assassination to articulate the tensions between oppressive rule and the human desire for self-determination. Set against the backdrop of early Scottish history and infused with romantic nationalist sentiments, the novel dramatizes the moral ambiguity of political murder within a broader philosophical framework of justice and resistance. Through a close reading of key scenes and characters, this study examines how The Spaewife reflects 19th-century anxieties surrounding authority, revolution, and the legitimacy of rebellion. The paper argues that Galt reconfigures historical narrative into a commentary on the ethics of power and the complexities of violent resistance, ultimately portraying political assassination as a tragic but sometimes necessary response to tyranny.

INTRODUCTION

The early 19th century witnessed a surge in literary engagement with themes of nationalism, rebellion, and the moral dilemmas of political violence. Among the many writers who contributed to this intellectual landscape, John Galt stands out for his historical fiction, which often blends political commentary with narrative dramatization. The Spaewife (1823), one of Galt's lesser-studied works, delves into the moral and political intricacies of regicide during a period of national turmoil in ancient Scotland. The novel presents a compelling exploration of resistance against tyranny and the justification of political assassination as a means of restoring liberty and justice.

At the heart of The Spaewife lies a philosophical tension: can the killing of a tyrant ever be morally justified? And if so, under what conditions? Galt crafts his narrative around this question, employing historical fiction not only to entertain but also to probe the ethical foundations of political action. His depiction of assassination as a form of political resistance challenges conventional notions of heroism and villainy, inviting readers to consider the thin line between rebellion and treason, patriotism and crime.

While political assassination is a recurring motif in historical and literary discourse—from Julius Caesar to Macbeth—Galt's treatment is uniquely situated within the cultural and political climate of post-Enlightenment Britain, where debates over governance, revolution, and civil liberties were still fiercely contested. The novel reflects a Romantic sensibility, infused with Scottish nationalist overtones and a fascination with moral ambiguity, which lends depth to its political narrative.

This paper seeks to analyze The Spaewife as a literary meditation on tyranny and liberty, examining how Galt uses political assassination not merely as a dramatic event but as a vehicle for broader philosophical inquiry. By situating the novel within its historical context and exploring its narrative strategies, this study aims to uncover the ideological underpinnings of Galt's vision of resistance and the contested ethics of political violence. Through this lens,

The Spaewife emerges as a richly layered text that speaks to enduring questions about power, justice, and the human cost of freedom.

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-sie`cle 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 Scoticarum 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':

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 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 outrageus imposicions ... 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:

CONCLUSION

John Galt's The Spaewife offers a compelling and morally complex portrait of political assassination, not as an isolated act of violence, but as a symbolic and strategic expression of resistance against entrenched tyranny. By situating his narrative within a historical context

steeped in national upheaval and cultural identity, Galt interrogates the boundaries between justice and vengeance, loyalty and betrayal, law and moral conscience. The regicide at the heart of the novel is not merely a dramatic climax—it is a philosophical statement that reflects the author's nuanced understanding of political power and the ethical consequences of defying it.

This study has illustrated how Galt's portrayal of political violence resists simplistic moral categorization. Instead, The Spaewife invites readers to grapple with the uncomfortable truth that liberty sometimes emerges from bloodshed and that the fight for justice may demand the sacrifice of innocence. Galt does not glorify violence, nor does he reduce political assassination to villainy; rather, he presents it as a tragic but, at times, necessary response to despotism.

In an age still haunted by the aftermath of revolutions and imperial domination, Galt's work remains relevant. It provokes important questions about the cost of freedom, the legitimacy of resistance, and the human capacity for moral choice in times of political crisis. The Spaewife thus stands as a profound literary exploration of the age-old tension between tyranny and liberty—one that continues to resonate in contemporary political discourse.

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