



Epic Portrayal of the Scottish Icon: Margaret Holford’s *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk*¹

Margaret Holford’un *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk* adlı Eserinde İskoç İkonunun Destansı Tasviri

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Abstract

Margaret Holford (1778-1852) was an English poet, translator, and novelist who continuously published her works between the years 1809 and 1838. Although Holford can be considered as a prolific writer in the early nineteenth century, her works do not find a place in today’s canon and she has become one of the forgotten women poets of the Pre-Victorian period. In *The Wallace; or, the Fight of Falkirk*, she recounted the last days of William Wallace who was a Scottish patriot and a Guardian of Scotland. This article aims to analyze Holford’s poem as an example of an epic poem since she employs the characteristics of the epic genre in her work. The analysis of Holford’s work provides an important insight into the issue of women’s participation in the male-dominated epic genre. Although it was believed that women were not capable of writing epic poems in terms of their lack of formal education and intellectual capacity, there was a small group of women poets who produced long heroic poems in the early nineteenth century and Holford was one of them. From this vantage point, the fundamental purpose of this study is to show to what extent Margaret Holford’s poem epitomizes the epic genre. In a broader perspective, the paper aims to underline the contributions of Holford, who has been pushed to the margins for more than two centuries, to women’s writing.

Keywords: Margaret Holford, *Wallace; or, the Fight of Falkirk*, epic, woman poet, Pre-Victorian period.

Öz

Margaret Holford (1778-1852), eserlerini 1809 ve 1838 yılları arasında sürekli olarak yayımlayan bir İngiliz şair, çevirmen ve romancıydı. Holford on dokuzuncu yüzyılın başlarında üretken bir yazar olarak kabul edilebilecek olsa da eserleri bugünün kanonunda kendine yer bulamadı ve Viktorya öncesi dönemin unutulmuş kadın şairlerinden biri oldu. Holford, *The Wallace; or, the Fight of Falkirk* adlı eserinde İskoç vatansever ve İskoçya Muhafızı olarak bilinen William Wallace’ın son günlerini anlattı. Bu makale, destan türünün özelliklerini barındırdığı için Holford’un eserini bir destan örneği olarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Holford’un eserinin analizi, erkek egemen destan türüne kadınların katılımı konusuna önemli bir bakış açısı sağlar. Örgün eğitimden ve entelektüel yeteneklerden yoksun

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oldukları varsayıldıkları için kadınların destansı bir şiir yazamayacakları düşünülse de on dokuzuncu yüzyılın başlarında uzun kahramanlık şiirleri üreten küçük bir grup kadın şair vardı ve Holford da onlardan biriydi. Bu açıdan bakıldığında, bu çalışmanın temel amacı, Margaret Holford'un eserinin hangi açılardan destan türünün bir örneği olduğunu göstermektir. Makale, daha geniş bir perspektiften, iki yüzyılı aşkın süredir bir kadın şair olarak ihmal edilen Holford'un kadın yazınına yaptığı katkılarının altını çizmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Margaret Holford, *Wallace; or, the Fight of Falkirk*, destan, kadın şair, Viktorya Öncesi dönemi.

Introduction

Margaret Holford was such a prolific writer that she continuously published her works throughout the early nineteenth century. Between the years 1808 and 1838, she published two poetry collections, two major poems, a novel in three volumes, two translated prose works, and a collection of hymns. Interestingly, Holford stayed in the shadows although she greatly contributed to nineteenth-century English literature by her publications which were produced in a wide spectrum of genres. Among her works, *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk* held a significant place in her literary career since it was praised and acknowledged by the critics of the literary magazines of her time such as *The Literary Panorama* (1810), *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1810) and *The Quarterly Review* (1818). Moreover, Holford's *Wallace* was republished in America and one of the American reviews, namely *The American Review* (1811) commented on the republication of Holford's poem as follows: "It is the production of a lady—'Miss Holford' and exhibits very uncommon powers, both of fancy and versification. We are happy to find that it has been republished in this country, and can, with great confidence, recommend it to our reader" (Anonymous, p.175). Evidently, her poem acquired overseas fame after it was published.

Although Holford's *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk* went through two editions in England, it did not grant her long-lasting fame and soon after its publication, the poem was forgotten by the reading public. Furthermore, Holford's poem failed to draw the attention of contemporary readers as well as contemporary scholars. It is interesting to see that her second acclaimed poem, *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem* received the attention of scholars such as Adeline Johns-Putra² and Elisa Beshero-Bondar³. On the other hand, only Judith Bailey Slagle (2012) gives a large place to the analysis of Holford's *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk* in her book *Romantic Appropriations of History: The Legends of Joanna Baillie and Margaret Holford Hodson*. Although her poem stayed in the shadows for centuries, *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk* can be regarded as an important literary work that signaled the Medieval Revival of the Victorian period with its iconic medieval protagonist and its references to certain historic events of the Middle Ages. In the poem, Holford recounted the last days of William Wallace who was a Scottish warrior later attributed the title of "the Guardian of Scotland" and since then, William Wallace has been acknowledged as the freedom fighter for the Scottish nation. Most importantly, Holford writes *Wallace* in a heroic mode. Although she calls her poem a metrical romance in the subtitle and the preface, the poem does not meet the basic characteristic of the genre of romance such as its focus on the personal adventures and concerns of a specific knight. On the contrary, Holford's protagonist Wallace does not fight for his personal benefits but for his country (Scotland) and nation. In her poem, Holford tells the story of Sir William Wallace by employing many essential epic devices such as *in medias res*, an invocation to the Muses, the catalogue of the warriors, supernatural elements, and also, the protagonist of the poem can be accepted as an epic hero. In this regard, this article will analyse Margaret Holford's *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk* in terms of its epic characteristics so as to show that though Holford was pushed to the margins as a woman poet in the first decades of the nineteenth century, her contribution to the nineteenth-century English literature is quite noteworthy with her poem written in a heroic mode.

² In her *Heroes and Housewives: Women's Epic Poetry and Domestic Ideology in the Romantic Age (1770-1835)*, Adeline Johns-Putra (2001) discusses Holford's *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem* as one of the epic poems published in the Romantic period.

³ Elisa Beshero-Bondar (2011) reads Holford's *Margaret of Anjou: A Poem* as a "Gothic Romantic epic" (p.115) in *Women, Epic, and Transition in British Romanticism*.

Holford's Choice of the Scottish Hero, William Wallace

Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk is written in canto format and it consists of five cantos. Briefly, Canto I can be seen as an introduction to the characters and the events of the poem. Holford introduces her characters and she tries to set the tone of the poem. In Canto II, Holford narrates the preparations for the Fight of Falkirk and Canto III sheds light on the English ruler Edward III and his knights. In other words, in this canto, Holford shows the perspective of the English authorities. In Canto IV, the author narrates the time just before the battle and then the battle scene between the Scottish and English sides. In her last canto, Holford gives the accounts of the last days of Wallace who flees from the English authorities. William Wallace was a significant historical figure for Scotland and its people since he was the one who vehemently fought for the freedom of his country. Wallace and his men led the Scottish rebellion against Edward I, and he gained a famous victory over the English army at the Stirling Bridge. Later, he was given the title of the Guardian of Scotland (Murison, 2003, p. 89). Despite being known as the Guardian of Scotland after the victory of Stirling, William Wallace was declared as an outlaw by the English authorities after he was defeated at the Fight of Falkirk (Mackay, 2007, p. 245). Choosing William Wallace as a protagonist as an English-born poet was notably unexpected and controversial. Although Wallace was idealized by the Scottish people, his image from the perspective of the English was not as positive as the one from the Scottish perspective. Holford was aware of the fact that she was putting herself in a difficult situation since William Wallace was a debatable figure of the Middle Ages, and his life could be interpreted according to two viewpoints: the English and the Scottish. According to the English authorities, Wallace was an outlaw who caused great trouble for the authority of the English crown. Moreover, Wallace was labeled as a public robber in the records of English chronicles. He was even compared to Robin Hood, and an English commentator called Wallace “the Scottish Robin Hood” in his chronicle (Grant, 2007, p. 101). On the other hand, Wallace was a symbol of a true leader and a fighter of freedom who tried to save Scotland from the tyranny of England in the eyes of the Scottish people. As a result, Holford's treatment of her subject was so important in that she had to portray Wallace either from an English perspective or a Scottish perspective. However, she did not fully reflect either the English or Scottish perspectives. She openly declared in her preface to *Wallace* that she would not insult the Scottish nation nor would she portray them as inferior to the English. In order to show the Scottish nation's ambition and military intelligence, Holford referred to the Scottish history in regard to their victories in the preface and said: “It is not ‘by boeing’ that the Caledonians have obtained their very high character for military glory; it was not ‘by boeing’ that Abercrombie won the battle of Alexandria” (1809, p. viii). It is plausible to assert that Holford did not fully adopt one approach to her poem since she portrayed Wallace as a true leader and the savior of the Scottish nation and at the same time, she praised the English crown and authorities. Holford tries to show both the perspectives of the English and Scottish sides, but it is clear that her pro-English attitude takes precedence over her pro-Scottish attitude. As Slagle (2010, p.122) points out, the exclusion of William Wallace's punishment by the English authorities proves that she chooses to tell Wallace's story from the English perspective so as to protect herself from the harsh attacks which might come from the critics of her time. However, it can also be argued that the exclusion of his trial and punishment by the English might be the result of Holford's heroic mode which is apparent in the poem. She might have deliberately excluded what happens after the defeat of Wallace since in traditional epic poems, the concentration is on the heroic deeds of the hero. In other words, the death of a hero is self-evident since it is known that an epic hero generally dies in the end. So, it is not necessary to include the death scene in the poem. Although Margaret Holford ends the poem with Wallace's defeat, her main aim is to pay tribute to Wallace's bravery and consistency in his cause. Hence, it is not necessary to include his punishment in the plot.

In the preface of *Wallace*, Holford explained the reason behind her choice of the protagonist in detail and her words were significant to understand her motives in writing the poem in a heroic mode. Margaret Holford began her preface by declaring that she would never ask for the mercy of the public for her work. She was conscious that her poem might receive harsh criticism and censure from the public and she openly claimed that “supplication only adds mortification to the punishment, which it seldom, if ever,

averts” (1809, p.vii). She asserted that if she begged for mercy, it only added humiliation to her punishment and she wrote that at the end of her journey, there were two possibilities for her: great happiness or shame. Holford also touched upon her choice of the protagonist and subject matter in the preface as follows:

It is of little consequence to the reader whether or not the author of Wallace loves England and England’s constitution and king; but it is of much consequence to the author’s private feelings to declare, that no deficiency in *native* attachment directed to the choice of a subject. (emphasis in original) (1809, p.viii)

Holford knew that her Englishness was going to be criticized and questioned by the public after the publication of her poem, and apparently, she desired to clarify her aim and feelings about the subject. At the end of her preface, Holford discussed her main aim in writing *Wallace*. She called the Scottish people “our countrymen” and “fellow-subjects,” and she continued by saying that “it is time to throw aside Macklin’s malignant caricature [of the Scottish people]” (1809, p.viii). She referred to Charles Macklin (1690-1797), an Irish dramatist and actor, who was notorious for his portrayal of the Scottish people in his play, *The Man of the World* (1793). His play was declined to be performed on stage since Lord Chamberlain believed that his satire of the Scottish was too cruel and extravagant but Macklin refused to change either his plot or characters. His main motive was to show that the Scottish people were dangerous and selfish (McGirr, 2007, p. 165). Holford also knew about Macklin’s representation of the Scottish and she proposed that they should abandon this negative portrayal of the Scots, and the English society should see the Scottish as their brothers and sisters. She ended her preface as follows: “Cold, taciturn, and deliberate as the Scot may seem, put a pen or a sword into his hand, and he shall strike fire with it” (1809, p.viii). Obviously, Holford tried to erase the negative representation of the Scottish nation. Though pro-English attitude dominates the poem, Holford assumes the role of a mediator between England and Scotland by appreciating the efforts of both sides.

Holford’s pro-English attitude can be clearly seen in the opening poem of *Wallace*. She dedicates her poem to one of her female friends, Miss Gertrude Louisa Allen. Her dedication poem consists of six nine-line stanzas and the sixth stanza explicitly contains nationalistic feelings:

Yes! For mine eyes first open’d on the day
In England! Gem and glory of the west;
Where the light minstrel pours the unbidden lay,
Untremulous, untrampled, unoppress’d,
Pours from a free, a proud, a happy breast!
Home of the exile! Mother of the brave!
England! Among the nations singly bless’d!
O’er the wide world whose arms are stretch’d to save,
Whose silver throne stands fix’d, amid the eternal wave! (1809, p.iv)

In the first two lines of the stanza, Holford refers to the fact that she is born in England and she describes her country as the “Gem and glory of the west.” In the seventh line, she implies that England is the only nation that is blessed by God. In the last two lines, Holford suggests that England’s power covers the whole world and its authority cannot be destroyed by anyone or anything. Her description and symbolisation of England can be regarded as nationalistic, and these nationalistic reflections can be found in the whole poem. In the final stanza of the opening poem, Holford expands her nationalistic metaphors by referring to George III who was the king of Britain in her time. In this stanza, Holford (1809) praises the king and she calls him the English nation’s father, friend, sovereign, and king: “Hail George the Good! Our sovereign, and our friend!/ Hail Christian king! Thy people’s father, hail!” (p.v). She also expresses that when the king sends his soldiers to battle and they fight for the king, God also helps those soldiers:

“and when they fight for thee, ’tis heaven directs the blow!” (p.v). Holford clearly puts forward that God is on the side of their Christian king and with the support of God, they could not be defeated by anybody.

A Romance or an Epic?

By entitling her poem as a metrical romance, Holford showed that she was influenced by the growing number of publications of romances in her time. The first decades of the nineteenth century can be regarded as the golden age of metrical romances. Many authors tried their hands in this genre and large numbers of metrical romances were published. In Stuart Curran’s (1990) words, “The first decade of the nineteenth century found its actual center in the revival of romance, both as a scholarly and creative endeavor.” (p.133) Especially, Sir Walter Scott’s romances were greatly read by the public and his success granted him the labels of, as Michael C. Gamer (1993) rightly puts it, “the primary reviver and the marketer of the metrical romance at the beginning of the nineteenth century” (p.523). Furthermore, it was generally accepted that the medieval revival of the Victorian period was initiated by Sir Walter Scott whose romances paved the way for the great interest in the Middle Ages⁴. As a result of the popularity of his romances, many poets of the early nineteenth century took Scott as a role model for their poems. In other words, they imitated his metrical romances and Margaret Holford was one of them⁵. In this respect, *The Literary Panorama* (1810) claimed that Holford’s *Wallace* was written “in an imitation of Mr. Scott’s poetry [*Marmion*]” (p.413) but no document existed in regard to the fact that Holford confirmed the influence of Scott on her as a result of a scarcity of knowledge about Margaret Holford’s life⁶. Yet, it is revealed in one of the letters of Joanna Baillie⁷ that Holford sent a copy of *Wallace* to Scott so as to receive his opinions about it⁸. All in all, it is evident that the romance craze of the early nineteenth century affected also Margaret Holford even though she did not heavily use romances’ generic qualities in *Wallace*.

Margaret Holford (1809) commented on the genre of her work in the preface and she stated that “Wallace is a metrical romance, founded, indeed, on history” (p. vii). However, her poem does not meet the basic characteristics of romances. As Cuddon (1991) puts it, “romances were works of fiction, or non-historical. In the 13th c. a romance was almost any sort of adventure story, be it of chivalry or of love” (p. 758). In romances, personal adventures of a knight were told and the events in romances took place in unreal settings or exotic lands. From this vantage point, when Holford’s *Wallace* is taken into consideration, her poem cannot be classified as an example of a romance since Holford does not write the personal adventures of a knight but she is telling the story of William Wallace who represents his nation and Scotland. It can be claimed that Holford sheds light on the heroic actions of the Scottish hero. Moreover, Hermann Fischer (1991) states that “when a historical personality is made the hero of a

⁴ Interestingly, Sir Walter Scott was even blamed for his role in people’s growing interest in medieval life and culture by Mark Twain in his book *Life on the Mississippi*. Twain (1950) commented that “Sir Walter Scott is probably responsible for the Capitol building; for it is not conceivable that this little sham castle would ever have been built if he had not run the people mad, a couple of generations ago, with his medieval romances” (p.332) and he calls the effects of Scott over people as “the Sir Walter disease” (p.375).

⁵ At the time, Scott’s imitators became targets of severe criticism and Lord Byron (1846), who was one of the most influential Romantic poets, commented on Margaret Holford and other women poets who imitated Scott as follows: “Scott found peculiar favour & imitation among the fair sex. There was Miss Holford, and Miss Mitford, and Miss Francis; but with great respect be it spoken, none of his imitators did much honour to the original” (p. 811).

⁶ For further biographical information about Margaret Holford, see Dürükoğlu (2019, pp. 1-6).

⁷ Joanna Baillie was a Scottish playwright whose fame reached its peak at the end of the eighteenth century. Sir Walter Scott praises Baillie by calling her “the immortal Joanna” (as cited by Krueger, 2003, p. 17). Baillie and Holford formed a close friendship which lasted during their lifetimes.

⁸ Sir Walter Scott sent a letter to Baillie in 1810 in regard to Holford’s poem: “Her *Wallace* is really very fine – It will not please Scotch folks because Wallace is one of those characters that get beyond the reach of poetry, which when applied to them is apt to fail in a certain degree for the reasons which Johnson applies to sacred poems” (as cited by Eriksonas, 2011, p. 123).

romance, the emphasis is not on his historical mission, of which only the legendary aspects remain, but on his individual problems (in particular those relating to love and adventure)" (p. 28). However, in Holford's poem, the focus is not on the individual problems but on the national problems since William Wallace in the poem tries to save his nation from the English rule. Her poem is closer to the epic genre than romance with its traditional epic devices and its portrayal of Wallace as an epic hero. It should also be noted that Holford gives place to the individual adventures of Wallace in the last canto. It is seen in Canto V that David, the page of Wallace is actually his disguised wife Agnes, and the moment she reveals her real identity can be accepted as the only romantic scene of the poem. Yet, when the whole poem is taken into account, Wallace's personal adventures do not constitute the main narration of the work. As a result, it is more correct to categorise Holford's poem as an example of an epic poem.

Margaret Holford's epic style as a woman poet is another problematical aspect of the poem since epic has always been regarded as the territory of male artists. As Jeremy Downes states (2014), "epic is men's way of making up for the fact that they are not women" (p. 13). As a result, women were excluded from the epic genre since it was believed that they were not capable of producing a true epic because of their lack of formal education. The critics also knew that writing an epic was a toilsome duty for many writers and they claimed that women writers were not endowed with this talent. This strict division of female and male writers in terms of writing an epic was the result of the patriarchal ideology. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was assumed that women belonged to the private sphere, and their participation in the public sphere was restricted by this ideology. On the other hand, men belonged to the public sphere as opposed to women in general. In this regard, Susan Stanford Friedman claims (1986) that "[e]pic norms- public, objective, universal, heroic- coincide with western norms for the masculine. [...] [T]he epic hero is traditionally male, his heroic qualities are masculine, and the ordeal he faces is a masculine agon" (p. 205). Friedman further states that "the epic has been the last bastion among poetic genres for women to approach" (p. 205). In addition, W. Macneile Dixon puts forward (1912) that "the chief business of an epic is war" (p. 99). As Friedman and Dixon elaborate on the issue, the problem for women poets was that war, battle, and fighting were all related to the public sphere in which women were not allowed to take active roles. So, the epic genre was regarded as off-limits for women writers. Besides, since women were not allowed to receive a formal education, it was believed that they could not be successful in writing epics. Before 1850, "[g]irls, even aristocratic ones, were particularly likely to receive little or no schooling, and women's literacy rates were consequently lower than men's" (Steinbach, 2005, p. 173). In terms of the higher education of women, the English women did not have the opportunity to be accepted to the universities until "the University of London was granted a charter by Queen Victoria, allowing it to introduce the 'Special Examination for Women' in 1867 ('The Day That Changed Women's Education', n.d.). Susie Steinbach expresses (2005) that the "[a]cceptance of the idea of women students, by the general public as well as by universities, was a slow process because most saw the higher education of women as a direct challenge to the status quo" (p. 187). Their educational background played a significant role while the critics were making excuses in regard to women's inability in writing epics. Paradoxically, women writers wrote epic poems in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries more than ever. Adeline Johns-Putra (2001) shows in her study that "the actual number of epics written by Romantic women poets is between twenty to thirty poems" (p. 15) which reveals that women writers began to show and prove themselves in the epic genre. It can be argued that Holford was aware of the fact that the title of the epic was a daring choice for women writers when the nineteenth-century patriarchal ideology was taken into consideration. As a result, she might have deliberately used the subtitle of a metrical romance in order to protect herself from severe criticisms of the critics of her time.

Analysis of *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk* in terms of its Epic Characteristics

Margaret Holford's *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk* embodies many essential components of epic poems such as *in medias res*, invocation to the Muses, a catalogue of warriors, supernatural elements, and the device of disguise. Additionally, her poem is based on real historical figures and events. This aspect of the poem also complements Holford's epic style since epic poetry "with its reference to real historical

events (even though these are padded out with mythology or legendary material) and closeness to reality in its portrayal of the simple details of outward life [...] is realistic as far as the subject matter is concerned” (Fischer, 1991, p. 28). Holford chooses a subject that depends on certain facts and records in both Scottish and English histories. Also, her characters such as William Wallace and King Edward I are real historical figures that can be regarded as the notable characters of the Middle Ages.

Holford’s use of *in medias res* which is a literary convention of the epic genre can be accepted as one of the indicators of her epic style. *In medias res* is the Latin term having the meaning of ‘into the midst of things’ and it “refers to the epic convention of beginning not at the earliest point of the story but with the action already under way” (Greene, Cushman, 2016, p. 102). She begins to tell her story just before the battle of Falkirk. However, before this battle, many conflicts and fights have occurred between Wallace and the English authorities. It is not told to the readers how Wallace and his men succeeded in coming to such a position before Falkirk.

In addition to *in medias res*, Holford’s poem, *Wallace; or, The Fight of Falkirk* deploys another epic device which is an invocation to the Muses. At the very beginning of the poem, Holford invokes:

Dark Spirit of the Northern lay,
Hear from thy misty mountain, bleak and cold!
Pour on my sight long ages pass’d away!
Shew me the deeds of old!
With thy unutterable spell
Bid this adventurous breast to swell! (p. 2)

Invocation to the muse generally appears at the beginning of epic poems and Holford also refers to her muse at the beginning and end of each canto (p. 35, p. 181, p.183). The use of the invocation in epics can be traced back to the oral tradition. As Roland Greene and Stephen Cushman (2016) elaborate, “in Greek oral tradition, the invocation was a prayer, overheard by the audience, offered at the start of each performance to the Muse or Muses, patron deities of the professional singer. [Later], the convention was retained in literary epic” (p. 102). By invoking the Muse, poets ask for inspiration and assistance while writing their poems. In this regard, Holford refers to her muse at the beginning of her epic to show the grandeur of her task as a poet. In order not to fail in her task, Holford expects the help and necessary inspiration from the “Spirit of northern song!” (p. 2)

After Margaret Holford begins her poem with the traditional devices of the epic genre, she prepares the scene for the introduction of her hero, William Wallace. By looking at Holford’s treatment of her protagonist, it can be suggested that she aims to characterize Wallace as an epic hero because he meets the basic characteristics of an epic hero such as his superiority in terms of his courage and strength, his consistency in his cause, and his limitation which is related to the heroic paradox. In Classical epics, “the heroes are high-ranking personalities — kings, dukes and aristocratic commanders of armies; and these are often even shown to be descended from gods or goddesses” (Fischer, 1991, p. 21). For centuries, this generic depiction of an epic hero continued to be used by the poets but it lost its validity in time because the essential requirement of the nobility of a hero was the extension of classical culture. In this regard, it offered a narrow point of view to the concept of an epic hero. However, with the decay of the classical culture and its effect on literature, as Herman Fischer argues (1991), the notion that “the hero of an epic [...] have to be a model character in the world ‘opened up’ in the work” (p. 22) begins to be accepted. For example, “If this is a republic, he will not have to be a monarch, nor even a nobleman. If it is barbaric, the manners of the court will not be required” (Fischer, 1991, p. 22). So, the classical representation of an epic hero leaves its place to a man who has not come from a noble family. At this juncture, Holford reflects this change that took place in the epic genre. Although Wallace does not belong to a noble family, the poet depicts Wallace as a noble person by saying that “Wallace! Thy bold unruffled brow/ Speaks the calm of a

noble mind” (p. 16)⁹. The background of Wallace’s family is not presented by the poet but Holford writes that Wallace’s way of approaching the subjects resembles a noble person’s approach and this proves that Wallace does not have noble blood but is of noble character. In other words, Holford shows that her protagonist is not noble in blood but noble in deeds.

An epic hero is superior to the others in his society. In other words, he is not an ordinary man, he performs extraordinary deeds, and he has extraordinary courage and strength. It is generally accepted that an epic hero’s physical strength resembles no one and sometimes an epic hero is shown as a superhuman but he is also aware of the fact that he is a human being. This consciousness about his limitations is related to one of the essential characteristics of an epic hero: having a heroic paradox. Frederick Turner (2017) comments on this aspect of an epic hero as follows: “He is on the very edge of the human world, human but beyond human, above and beyond the call of duty” (p.69). Although an epic hero is depicted or shown as superhuman in terms of physical strength, he is conscious of the limits of his body. Margaret Holford also chooses to show her protagonist as almost superhuman:

The left arm from each manly breast
With hairy targe the dart repress;
The right but struck the hapless foe,
Nor needed descend with second blow;
For wherever the brave Macpherson led,
The raven still hover’d o’er his head,
And whenever his clan in battle stood,
The dark bird look’d for a feast of blood. (p. 7)

The poet writes that when Wallace attacks his enemy, he can kill anyone with only one blow and even ravens know that there will be a feast of blood after Wallace confronts his foes.

Consistency of character is another important characteristic of the epic hero. As Aristotle (1997) puts it, even if the poet aims to show the hero’s inconsistency, “still he must be consistently inconsistent” (p. 28). An epic hero should be determined in his actions from the beginning to the end, and he should never deviate from his cause. At this point, Margaret Holford aims to depict Wallace as a calm person and she suggests that nothing and no one can change or affect his calmness and consistency:

Mid the bursting flame, or the midnight flood,
‘Mid horror’s wildest scene,
When the brooks of thy country are swollen with blood,
Unshaken, thy soul still holds her mood,
And thy brow is still serene!” (p. 16)

The poet underlines the fact that even in the most difficult and troublesome situations, William Wallace never loses his temper and courage. Apparently, he is willing to continue his fight no matter what he experiences in his life. In the above-mentioned lines, his devotion to his cause and determination are emphasized by the poet. As Holford underlines in many passages of the poem, he is the one who will save Scotland from the tyranny of the English. In Canto II, even the visions of the sorcerer do not frighten Wallace and he is ready for his fate: “Oh! Fate! He cried, ‘prepare thy worst,/ Thy malice I defy!/ For of Scottish men, the best and first,/ Shall Wallace live or die!” (p.69). In Canto IV, Wallace also does not lose his determination nor does he retreat although the Scottish side loses the chance of victory since their number decreases against the foe: “While his feet were wash’d in kindred blood!/ But now they are vanish’d, one by one;/ He calls his friends, his friends are gone,/ And in the field of death Wallace seems left alone!” (pp. 162-163). Since Wallace cannot find his friends on the battlefield, he realizes that all his

⁹ All the quotes from Holford’s *Wallace, or; The Fight of Falkirk* will be taken from the 1809 edition and page numbers will be taken into consideration while referring to the original text.

comrades have been slain by the English forces. Although Wallace knows that he is losing his fight against the foe, he is still proud and stern, and he stands cold and grim. Holford still depicts her protagonist as a strong leader who does not lose his courage although he is defeated on the battlefield: “Wallace wept not, his burning brow/ Was all too proud and stern to know/ The soft relief of nature’s flow!/ No, Wallace wept not--- cold and grim” (p. 175). He knows that the fate of his country and people depend on him and his determination in this battle fosters the heroic idealism of the poem since he would rather die than give up his cause.

Additionally, in the poem, it is highlighted that Wallace’s coming is prophesized in the tales of wonder, death, and fear:

Such Wallace was, ---and many a year
Ere he had spirit, form, or limb,
They say, that voice of gifted seer,
‘Mid tales of wonder, death, and fear,
Had prophesied of him! (p. 17)

The prophecy of Wallace’s coming is a significant contribution to Holford’s poem since it is a well-established epic device. In epics, prophecy “may be given by a god or by one who is divinely endowed with an understanding of signs and portents, with knowledge of fate and the future” (Moore, 1921, p.100). In the above-mentioned lines, it is told that Wallace’s prophecy is heralded by the gifted seer. It can be suggested that Holford’s courageous Wallace, who is prophesized by stories, has come to break the chains of bondage of the Scottish nation. Wallace’s actions and deeds are inspiring for his group, society, and nation. He is fighting heroically for his cause since the fate of his nation rests on his shoulders. All of these depictions of Wallace in Canto I serve to create an epic hero.

Holford strengthens Wallace’s heroic portrayal by using the supernatural forces in Canto II as a way of showing her hero’s fearless soul. In traditional epics, the supernatural agency can be included in the narration. Epic poets generally add gods and goddesses to their plots, and Holford follows the epic tradition by employing the supernatural elements in the poem. She combines supernatural and gothic elements in Canto II which can be regarded as the most gothic canto of the whole poem. Before the introduction of the gothic scene, in Canto II, Graeme tells what he sees in his vision related to Wallace:

Oh, Wallace! What a scene was there!
Memory e’en now recoils with fear;
Half drown’d in seas of Scottish blood,
And struggling mid the horrid flood
Our mangled thousands lay. (p.42)

Holford prepares her readers for the gothic scene by setting the tone through Wallace: “Unreal forms abused my mind,/ Unreal voices fill’d the wind,/ Each howling blast that swept the sea/ Brought some mysterious tale to me” (p.65). Then, a ghost appears on the side of Wallace and he is talking to it. After the ghost scene, Wallace and the wizard Warlock have a conversation, and Wallace wishes to learn whether he is going to win or lose the battle. To put it another way, he wants to learn his destiny. Another prophecy comes from Warlock that Wallace’s end is near and his bones shall never find peace:

Thy bones shall have
A wandering and unquiet grave;
No stone shall mark thy place of rest,
No sod shall cover thy mouldering breast;
In dust thy corse shall never lie. (p.67)

Margaret Holford refers to the punishment which was given to Wallace by the English authorities. This stanza by the wizard is the only reference to the punishment of Wallace since Margaret Holford excludes Wallace's trial from her poem and she inexplicitly adds Wallace's punishment to her poem. The foreshadowing of the future failure at the battle and the reference to Wallace's end can be regarded as essential components of the creation of the heroic ideal in this heroic poem as he continues to fight although there is no hope.

Furthermore, the death of an epic hero is also another significant aspect of epic narratives. It is generally observed in epics that an epic hero always faces death and he is aware of the fact that death is an inevitable part of his destiny. The way an epic hero dies also gives messages to its reader. In Classical epics, there is "the heroic good death" (Miller, 2002, p.121) and the hero welcomes death without any fear. However, in *Wallace*, Holford subverts this 'heroic good death' and Wallace in the poem dies because of treachery. According to Dean Miller (2002), the death of the hero because of treachery "violates the code of heroic solidarity or attacks some associated bond (like family or marriage)" (pp. 125-126). Heroic solidarity is also another essential characteristic of epic poems and "it is often seen in military heroes who jeopardize (and sometimes knowingly sacrifice) their lives to protect their comrades, and in a larger sense, their countrypeople's [sic] way of life" (Kraft-Todd and Rand, 2017, p. 61). In Holford's poem, Menteith's treachery to his friend Wallace violates the code of heroic solidarity. The sense of solidarity and friendship which are supported in the first four cantos are subverted in the last canto with the treacherous plot of Menteith.

In traditional epics, the choric element is another essential component of the story. In Tillyard's words (1966), an epic poem should be choric, that is to say, "the epic writer must express the feelings of a large group of people living in or near his own time" (p. 12). Margaret Holford constantly makes references to the cry of the Scottish people in the first canto and Wallace appears at the head of his people since Scotland and its people need help:

Who has not heard old Scotland's wrongs
Appeal to the vengeful sky,
When the cry of a nation's thousand tongues
Was ruin, and skaith, and misery?
When Sorrow sate in the wasted glen,
And lifted her voice, and wept in vain,
O'er the grizly heaps of slaughter'd men,
Which scatter'd their native plain. (p. 4)

In another stanza, the poet again refers to the cry of Scotland and its people in order to highlight the sufferings of the country:

A king in chains--- a trampled land,
Our chiefs, a pale, desponding band;
A people, wrong'd, despoil'd, bereft,
Nor courage, zeal, nor honour left!
Who heard the nation's dying cry?" (p. 24).

It can be understood from the quotations that the whole country is crying for help. Holford tries to show that the Scottish nation summons a hero who will save them from misery and bad faith. These references to the Scottish people and their struggles illustrate the choric elements of the poem. Furthermore, the magnitude of the hero's action is also highlighted by Holford since the future destiny of Scotland depends on the actions and decisions of William Wallace. To put it another way, Holford makes use of a heroic subject matter in the poem. Hermann Fischer (1991) asserts that "as the hero is standing the test of trials [...] in the interest of something over and above his individual concerns, then [heroic subject matter] may be said to be an essential characteristic of the epic genre, one of its inherent components throughout the

ages” (p. 16). After the references to the Scottish nation, Wallace is introduced by the poet in Canto I, and it is suggested that he is going to save his nation. The poem states that the whole universe heard the cry of the Scottish nation and “[t]hen Wallace, like a storm-cloud rose,/ And roll’d back ruin on her foes,/ And the soul of the spoiler fear’d!” (p. 6). Holford describes Wallace by using a simile and comparing him to a storm-cloud so as to draw an analogy between the destructive force of a storm-cloud and Wallace’s unstoppable rage against his foes. The next stanza introduces Wallace as someone who has a bold heart and he has come from an iron race. Evidently, Holford tries to depict a leader who is a powerful and authoritative figure.

Other well-known formal epic devices are also employed by Holford. In Canto I, Holford lists all the Scottish leaders who are going to assist William Wallace in the battle of Falkirk and her way of listing these clans resembles the catalogues of warriors, ships, and armies, and in traditional epics; epic poets generally include the names of warriors and armies in their narratives. With the epic catalogues, “the singer displays his memorizing skills and impresses the audience” (Gaertner, 2001, p.299). It is a common device to glorify the heroes and to immortalize them in classical epics. Canto I sheds light on the night before the battle of Falkirk and Holford refers to the clans of Macdowall, Duncan, and Scrymgeour. It can be asserted that Holford aims to commemorate and immortalize those clans since they help Wallace in his fight. She also proves her knowledge about medieval Scottish history by referring to them.

Holford’s conscious attention to language and style is also noteworthy because she is employing the high style and various stylistic devices of the epic. Holford uses an elevated language and there are similes, metaphors, and kennings in her poem. Kenning is one of the figures of speech which is generally used in skaldic verse and “it is a device for introducing descriptive colour or for suggesting associations without distracting attention from the essential statement” (Cuddon, 1991, p.443). For example, in Canto I, there are several examples of kennings such as “the iron shower” (p.12) which refers to the rain of arrows, and “a day of blood” (p.31) which means the day of the war. She also uses many similes throughout the poem which enrich the language of the work. For instance, in Canto IV, Holford describes the approaching band of soldiers by stating that “[t]hey come like the swell of a mighty stream,/ All glistening beneath the summer beam” (p. 124). Moreover, in Canto III, in order to highlight Wallace’s bravery, Holford writes that “[h]e shrank not as the chill night-wind/ Came bleak from the northern sea” (p. 79). At the time, she was criticized by the critics of *The Quarterly Review* (1818) because of her use of high language:

The rude warriors of Scotland, in the thirteenth century, talk of following their general ‘even to the misty borders of eternity; of ‘enamoured fates’; and of ‘the souls that darkened their vital beam.’ To put such language into the mouth of such characters seems little less incongruous than to superinduce some portions of a birth-day dress on one of the savage figures of Salvator Ross. (p.67)

Although this criticism is provocative and insulting for the Scottish, the reviewer tries to underline that not all the characters have to use such an embellished language in epic poems. In other words, the critic suggests that it is not realistic to use such language for all the characters. However, the critic’s comment is not in accordance with the purpose of epic. Holford is writing to glorify the deeds and character of William Wallace who is responsible for the future of his country and people. In this respect, there is grandeur in Wallace’s actions in regard to his cause. As Tillyard (1966) also puts it, “the writer of epic must use words in a very distinguished way” (p.6). Since there is a lofty manner in the poem, it is very suitable to employ such language, and it is a common practice of epic poets to use high style.

In Canto IV, another epic convention is brought into focus by the poet: the single combat. In epic poems, the narrator generally makes use of single combats as a narrative technique since “they [aim to] satisfy their listeners by depicting heroic knights winning the day through hand-to-hand combat” (Rogers, 2010, p.26). In this canto, an inevitable war is about to start between Wallace and the English. The two armies confront each other on the battlefield and the English army begins to attack without hesitation. However, the Scots do not attack first: “Yet Wallace bids his steeled band/ All mute and still as the sea-

rock stand,/ Tho' bold the ocean wave rages against the strand" (p.127). Again, Holford describes Wallace as an agile, strong, and keen leader in the middle of the battle. Then, the poet tells how the two forces fight each other, and many single combat instances take place between the English lords and the Scottish fighters such as Clifford and Graeme (p.143), and Warwick and Crauford (pp. 154-155). As Clifford Rogers (2010) underlines, these fights which occur between the two sides increase the credibility and reality of medieval warfare and the realistic details attract the attention of the readers (p.26). Once again, Holford shows that she is acquainted with the knowledge of epic tradition by using certain epic devices successfully.

It is important to analyze the last canto in detail since Margaret Holford uses another epic device which is the disguise of a character. In Canto V, Holford reveals the function of Agnes who disguises her real identity as the page of Wallace. After the war, Wallace and his page David (Agnes) escape from the English forces. Wallace now is a fugitive. Wallace and David arrive at the place of Menteith who will betray Wallace at the end of the poem. Wallace is resting and feasting without any doubt of Menteith's friendship. On the other hand, his disguised wife Agnes is comfortable neither physically nor mentally. She believes that something evil is going to happen to them. Later, it is revealed that his friend Menteith poisons Wallace during the feast and when Wallace drinks from "the sleep-juice in his bowl" (p. 217), he immediately falls asleep. While Wallace is sleeping, Agnes realizes that the enemy is approaching their chamber, and finally, Agnes reveals her real identity to her husband:

"Wallace, awake!—Oh! Sleep not now!
Wallace, awake, awake!
Thy Agnes calls!—Oh! From thy brow
These treacherous slumbers shake!"
In vain she calls, she raves, she weeps. (p.219)

Later, Agnes begs Menteith for Wallace's life in tears but Menteith ignores her. At the end of the canto, Wallace dies because of the treachery of his friend and Agnes also dies because of despair and sadness.

There are many examples of disguised gods, goddesses, and mortals in Classical epic poems¹⁰. Apparently, by using the device of disguise, Margaret Holford shows her knowledge about this convention. The disguise of a character holds a significant place in plots since it creates suspense and curiosity, and at the end of the narrative, this hidden personality is revealed so as to end the conflicts and confusion. M. C. Bradbrook defines and comments on the element of disguise as follows;

I should prefer to define disguise as the substitution, overlaying or metamorphosis of dramatic identity, whereby one character sustains two roles. This may involve deliberate or involuntary masquerade, mistaken and concealed identity, madness or possession [...] [Disguise] may need a cloak or false beard, or it may be better translated for the modern age by such terms 'alternating personality. (As cited by Hyland, 2016, p.9)

Margaret Holford's disguised Agnes can be included in the category of "concealed identity" since she deliberately hides her real self so as to be with her husband, Wallace. However, Holford does not reveal the function of Agnes totally because she is not actively involved in the plot until the last canto, and this raises a question about the function of Agnes. However, Agnes who disguised herself as a page can be regarded as a significant contribution to epic narrative because, in epic poems, women are generally pushed to the margins. However, by putting Agnes in the male territory, as Judith Bailey Slagle (2010) states, Holford "[for]ges a connection between history and romance [...] [she] connects the poem to a

¹⁰ Warren Smith (1988) asserts that since the gods and goddesses consistently intervene in the mortal world as can be observed in Homer's the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, they "need to take on human form to soften the differences [between them and the humans] when they pass into the mortal realm" (p. 161). Also, the mortals in epic poems disguise themselves on certain occasions. For instance, Odysseus disguises himself as a beggar when he returns to Ithaca.

female audience” (p. 120). Also, as Robert Crawford (2014) points out, the cross-dressing of Agnes inspired other writers and Jane Porter, for instance, used this convention in her Wallace fiction (p. 106). Most importantly, it can be argued that the female voice, which is traditionally silenced in epic narratives, is brought into the focus in the final part of Holford’s narrative. In other words, the male hero’s voice is silenced by the poet and Holford lays bare the turmoil and agony of Agnes by focusing on her final efforts to save her husband, Scotland’s hero who is going to be “stretch’d in fetters on the ground” (p. 227). When Agnes’s final attempts to save Wallace from the hands of Menteith are taken into consideration, it can also be suggested that Agnes acts heroically although she is aware of the fact that it is not possible to save Wallace. In this regard, before she ends her poem, Holford pays tribute to the disguised Agnes’s bravery and heroic endeavors in the last canto.

Conclusion

It is remarkable that Margaret Holford successfully writes *Wallace; or, the Fight of Falkirk* in the mode of epic poems although she does not receive a formal education. In the poem, she employs many traditional epic devices such as *in medias res*, the invocation to the Muses, a catalogue of warriors, and supernatural qualities. Furthermore, her protagonist William Wallace reflects many essential elements of the epic hero. It should be highlighted that Holford does not write a Classical epic poem but her effort in portraying William Wallace’s defeat gloriously and heroically is quite noteworthy. Also, she is very cautious about not being a target of the harsh criticisms of her age. Although she makes use of certain epic conventions, she does not choose to entitle her poem as an epic poem. It should be noted that the epic genre is a male-dominated domain that prevents many women poets from writing in a heroic mode or they hide their names and epic intentions in their works¹¹. As a result of this anxiety of genre, women poets refrain from making high claims in the epic tradition. This situation is also apparent in the case of Margaret Holford. Though *Wallace* epitomizes the epic tradition in many aspects, her work fails to draw the attention of the critics and the reading public which is the result of the prejudices about women writers’ lack of ability in producing epics. All in all, the lack of formal education and patriarchal prejudices did not prevent Holford from composing her poem in a heroic mode. Her self-assured attitude in the preface written for *Wallace* points out that Holford does not submit to the patriarchal ideology and its limitations on women writers. By using the essential epic devices skillfully and successfully, she proves her knowledge about the male-dominated epic genre.

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¹¹ Holford also published the first version of *Wallace; or, the Fight of Falkirk* anonymously.

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