

CRUSADER WITHOUT A CAUSE:
AN EXAMINATION OF HAMLIN
GARLAND'S MIDDLE BORDER

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Hamlin Garland's own explanation for shifting the focus of his work from the Middle Border to the far West was that he had said what he had to say and moved West in response to his increasing knowledge of the new land and perception of its problems. He apparently never considered the change as evidence of literary failure or evasion of moral responsibility, although subsequent critics were to imply that it was both. Bernard Duffey went even farther. In "Hamlin Garland's 'Decline' from Realism," Duffey implied that Garland was a realist primarily because B. O. Flower offered a ready market for realism in the Arena and that he became romantic in response to other more lucrative markets¹ -- that Garland was, in short, more opportunist than reformer.

No critic, on the other hand, has examined the history of the Middle Border closely enough to determine whether the Middle Border experience which contributed to Garland's early naturalism may not also have contributed to, or even determined, his abandonment of the Middle Border as a major locale for his work. Critics have not trusted Garland's own explanation of his change sufficiently to test it against the realities of his Middle Border world, nor have they considered the consequences to that world of the swift changes in land economics brought about by the movement of farmers onto the great plains and the closing of the frontier.

Garland, both in his tales of the Middle Border and in his critical and autobiographical work, makes clear that his literary program in the years before 1895 was based upon three main premises:

1. Traditional American tales of farm life presented a world in which the fruits of the farm were enjoyed almost without labor.
2. Farmers of the Middle Border were sturdy hardworking borderers who deserved a standard of living more nearly commensurate with their courage and toil.
3. The single tax would improve the situation of American farmers
 - a. by reducing speculation and thus preventing the inflation of land prices.
 - b. by preventing large land holdings and thus creating farm communities in which there could be greater cultural growth than on lonely homesteads.

Even a cursory reading of these premises serves to suggest the dilemma in which Garland was placed. Garland could, and did, redress the balance of toil and reward in farm literature. His people are inarticulate, unable to rise above their farm origins, buffeted by heat and cold and commanded by crops and cattle. But he could not honestly obscure the fact that by comparison with the city slum dwellers these people led a favored existence. Their economic conditions were infinitely better than those of most factory workers of the same day. His protest came finally to state, not that these people were hungry, but that they deserved more rewarding lives than they led.

If Garland's objective reporting of the facts of farm life as he knew it precluded the naturalism which sees man as the pawn of a hostile environment or an impersonal economic system, he was equally barred from making these Middle Border farmers the victims of their own lusts and greed.

After all, most of the indignation in Garland's stories springs from the premise that these were decent, hardworking borderers who had earned a greater margin of ease than they had ever known. He invests the term "Borderer" with a tinge of heroism and tends to make his own family typical of Middle Border settlers. If he debased his characters he would not only calumniate his own people, he would undermine the very basis of his indignation. He could not seek for naturalism based upon the inherent evil in the human heart.

At this crisis Garland turned to Henry George's doctrine of the Single Tax. Inequality in the distribution of land and unearned increment in land values might serve him in lieu of villainy. But Middle Western farmers already knew what Garland soon learned. The Single Tax would not alleviate the position of Western farmers and might in fact worsen it.

It is important then to examine the charges which Garland could with accuracy bring against farm life as he had known it in Wisconsin and Iowa (it is well to remember that he spent only months in South Dakota and those not as a farmer) not only in order to determine how far he could use them to forward a career in naturalistic literature, but also to illustrate the futility of offering the Single Tax as a panacea.

The first settlers in Wisconsin, apart from those in the lead mining districts, were predominantly from New England and New York. These early settlers chose choice land and generally flourished. They brought with them their respect for education, and as they established a line of neat New England towns across the southern tier of Wisconsin counties they established public schools and churches on the periphery of each village square. Academies and small denominational colleges dotted the countryside. There is an occasional German name in Garland's stories of Iowa and Wisconsin, but it is rare. Green, Jennings, Bacon, Talcott, Wilbur, Brown, Miner, Morris, Moss, Pill, Burns, Deering, Ripley, Dudley, Gilman -- the names proclaim their origin even when Garland does not. At

least twice troublemakers with equally English names are identified in Garland's stories as Missourians (the Dixons in "Elder Pill" and the Yohe brothers in "The Sociable at Dudley's") to set them apart from the stock of New England origin.

A surprising number of the young people in Garland's stories attend a seminary or college. Milt Jennings goes to Rock River as do Talcott and Radbourn. Stacy, the preacher of "A Preacher's Love Story," is a theological student who is looking for a school to teach for a term or two. Albert Lohr has been at Madison and expects to return after taking the spring term off to work as a book salesman. Stella Welch, whom he meets and marries in "A Stop-over at Tyre," has also attended school at Madison for two years, but left after her father's death. Morris, of the story "The Owner of the Mill Farm," is a college student at Beloit. Lily Graham had attended the seminary at Rock River and, of course, Rose Dutcher graduates from the University of Wisconsin. The list is testimony, first to the esteem in which higher education was held, and second to a community which was sufficiently well off to support the system of academies which flourished on the Middle Border. All in all, despite church schisms, boys' quarrels and an occasional contest of strength among the harvest hands, it was as homogeneous, stable and law abiding a group of borderers as the country has seen.

There was another kind of settler, even in Iowa, but Garland himself distinguishes his group from the other. In the article in which he tells of first reading The Hoosier Schoolmaster he explains, "We did not know where the Hoosiers lived, but we understood them. They were somewhat like the folk who lived over on the Little Cedar, sort of backwoods people, but we felt in Ralph Hartsook something very like our own teacher."²

Garland, in retrospect, says of his farmers, "Money was hard to get -- we always had plenty to eat, but little in the way of luxuries."³ His stories bear out the observation. None of Garland's Middle Border characters goes hungry. Their clothes are often without grace -- which Garland resents -- but they are also without holes. Children's shoes may be "clumsy" affairs, but there are no children in Garland's stories who are kept home from school because they have no shoes. Garland comes finally to deplore the manner in which the simple but plentiful food is eaten. In "Up the Coolly," Howard, who has escaped from the farm, returns and sees a reflection of his own youthful table manners in those of a boy eating honey at dinner.

At that age, Howard thought, I must have gripped my knife in my right hand so, and poured my tea into my saucer so. I must have buttered and bit into a huge slice of bread just so, and chewed at it with a smacking sound in just that way. I must have gone to the length of scooping up honey with my knife-blade.⁴

On his own return to Osage in Son of the Middle Border, Garland is revolted by the fact that men come to their noon dinner "in their shirt sleeves, smelling of sweat and stinking of the stable";⁵ though, as he recalls, his own family had always come directly to the table from the fields.

The houses of the Middle Border seem small and poor to Garland's eyes, but it is not the deficiencies of construction to which he objects. On his return to the West from Boston Garland says,

[I] studied the land, musing upon its distinctive qualities, and while I acknowledged the natural beauty of it, I revolted from the gracelessness of its human habitations. The lonely box-like farmhouses on the ridges suddenly appeared to me like the dens of wild animals. The lack of color, of charm in the lives of the people anguished me.⁶

Most revealing of Garland's attitude toward the homes of his characters, however, is the episode from "Up the Coolly" in which Howard returns to the Middle West and finds his brother's house "a small white story-and-a-half structure, with a wing set in the midst of a few locust trees."⁷ He went to bed to "toss about on the hard straw filled mattress in the stuffy little best room,"⁸ and "looked around the little room, clean enough, but oh, how poor! how barren! cold plaster walls, a cheap washstand, a wash set of three pieces, with a blue band around each; the windows rectangular, and fitted with fantastic green shades."⁹

In imagination he sees his own room by contrast:

He could see the olive walls, the unique copper and crimson arabesque frieze (his own selection), and the delicate draperies; an open grate full of glowing coals, to temper the sea winds; and . . . a landscape by Enneking and an Indian in a canoe in a canyon by Brush¹⁰

What Garland was leading in the Middle West was a cultural crusade. It was a lost cause both practically and literarily. Garland allied himself with the Central Art Association, which sent exhibitions of paintings to grace unlikely Middle Western towns, but that was really all he could do. Even if a farmer made money -- and Jennings, for instance, was obviously comfortable financially -- he could not go to Chicago for the theatre season. He was tied to his cows and his crops, a condition which continues to endure among farmers.

Garland, of course, could have exaggerated the hardships of life on the Middle Border -- and in many respects he did, which results in an odd disproportion between his indignation at the life his people led and the actual discomforts they suffered. He was indignant really with the conditions of life everywhere except in upper and middle class urban homes, as he himself confesses in A Son of the Middle Border.

The reader may interrupt at this point to declare that all life, even the life of the city is futile, if you look at it in that way, and I reply by saying that I still have moments when I look at it that way.¹¹

In this mood he attacks not specific evils but the whole complex of biology and society which results in people growing old and disillusioned.

I perceived beautiful youth becoming bowed and bent. I saw lovely girlhood wasting away into thin and hopeless age. Some of the women I had known had withered into querulous and complaining spinsterhood, and I heard ambitious youth cursing the bondage of the farm. "Of such pain and futility are the lives of the average man and woman of both city and country composed," I acknowledged to myself with savage candor.¹²

This anger that the world will not bend to one's will, that one's youthful dreams are never realized, appears as the theme of "Before the Low Green Door," in which Matilda Bent, dying, remembers her happy girlhood and contrasts her dreams with her subsequent life.

It would seem that Garland by his own successful escape from the Middle Border was conditioned to seek out dissatisfaction, although he recognized that some of his old friends were contented with their lot. On his return to Osage after six years in Boston he could write:

. . . the girls who had once impressed me with their beauty had taken on the airs of village matrons and did not interest me. If they retained aspirations they concealed the fact. Their husbands and children entirely occupied their minds.¹³

Garland thus finds himself combating phantoms much of the time. He can emphasize the hardships of toil, of climate, of poverty, but he cannot bring himself to exaggerate the evil qualities in his characters themselves and make his borderers the victims of their own natures or of man's injustice to his fellow man. When he exclaims, "Nature is not to blame. Man's laws are to blame,"¹⁴ he indicts not specific laws but a far off nebulous law of things as they are, despite a reference in the same paragraph to Henry George and William Morris. The Single Tax would not make it unnecessary for a farmer to curry horses or milk cows, and even Henry George had never implied that his tax might halt the processes of human aging. If Garland were to be effective in tracing man's inhumanity to man he would have to bring his accusations nearer home.

Who, then, are the villains in Garland's Middle Border works? There isn't a thoroughgoing villain in the lot. The judge in Jason Edwards who might have been treated as a villain is not; and when, in "Among the Cornrows," Seagraves visits Rob Rodemaker's claim, there is the following casual colloquy which apparently refers to the same judge:

". . . How's things in Boomtown?"

"Oh, same old grind."

"Judge still lyin'?"

"Still at it."

"Major Mullens still swearing to it?"

"You hit it like a mallet. Railroad schemes are thicker'n prairie chickens. You've got grit, Rob. I don't have anything but crackers and sardines over to my shanty, and here you are making soda-biscuit."¹⁵

It is impossible to see a villain in a man treated simply as an interesting specimen of local color.

In Main Travelled Roads, Butler, the owner of the farm Haskins buys in "Under the Lion's Paw," is really only an approximation of villainy. McElderry in his preface to Main Travelled Roads recognizes "the basic pattern of a legalized injustice, a calculated meanness, that goes against common sense and common decency."¹⁶ But Garland has been careful to write of Butler,

He was not ready to foreclose; indeed he had the name of being one of the "easiest" men in the town. He let the debtor off again and again, extending the time whenever possible.¹⁷

Moreover, Haskins is sent to Butler by Council, who as an established member of the community, must have been familiar with Butler's reputation. One must, therefore, assume that Butler's reputation was good and that his act in raising the price of the farm was either a rare capitulation to greed or an act not generally viewed as reprehensible.

The Kinneys of "A Branch Road" are selfish, contentious and bullying, and in the last analysis they, together with Julia Peterson's father and perhaps Nina Haldeman's mother, are the least attractive characters Garland includes in that volume. But the Petersons and Haldemans are foreigners whose chief sins are their failure to conform to Yankee ways, and even Ed Kinney is said by Agnes to have been kind and to have given Agnes' mother a home until her death. Ed is thus linked with Sim Burns, and the "weak but goodnatured" Walter Bent, as men who are insensitive to the needs of a woman's nature. In Moccasin Ranch the same insensitivity in Will Burke results in his wife's unfaithfulness and elopement with Rivers; while Lucretia Burns, after a period of withdrawal into herself, is accorded the status of "Prairie Heroine" for once more taking up the burden of her life, though with a penitent and somewhat softened husband. Actually the only really vindictive and brutal character is the husband in "The Owner of the Mill Farm" who appears in Wayside Courtships.

On the other hand, Garland's Middle Border tales are full of instances of human sympathy and kindness. Haskins may have suffered from Butler's meanness, but the Haskins family had been taken in at Council's farm, fed

and housed, given advice and seed corn -- given aid unmerited and unsolicited, which made it possible for Haskins to rent, and ultimately to buy, a good farm. In "God's Ravens," the entire community of Bluff Siding accepts the Bloom family, cares for Robert in his illness, brings food and provides both economic and moral support. The Jennings family keeps a neighborly watch over Daddy Deering and his aged wife, and reconciles William Bacon and his daughter after her marriage to Lyman Gilman. After an angry impulse in which the residents of Bluff Siding storm Sanford's house and find him ill, they fail to press criminal charges against him and unite in supporting the store which his wife opens. And in "The Return of a Private," although the unnamed renter has proved dishonest, the Widow Gray is a source of sympathy and strength to her young neighbor. Weary Mrs. Markham, waiting for her ungentlemanly husband, is invited in for tea by Mrs. Hall though the two women have never met before. Even Jason Edwards, after his stroke, is taken into a neighbor's home and nursed back to such health as he is capable of attaining.

Garland, if anything, emphasizes the capacity of these people to aid each other through the crises of living on the Border. After all, these are his people. He can make some of them mean, petty, grasping, but he cannot indict them as a group for cruelty and calculated injury to their fellows without indicting himself and his family, for he identifies himself with these people at every turn in his autobiographical volumes. Even the titles A Son of the Middle Border and A Daughter of the Middle Border proclaim this identification. He knew the accents of their speech and the quality of their lives, and in consequence created his most authentic characterizations in such people as Council, Widow Gray and William Bacon. But he could not make their lives sordid enough to compete with the developing naturalism of Stephen Crane and Frank Norris. Neither could he point to legislation which would effectively alter the lives of the Middle Border farmers, for as he wrote in 1917, "There is no escape even on a modern 'model farm' from the odor of the barn."¹⁸

The more closely one examines the history of the Middle Border, the more difficult it becomes to reconcile Garland's Single Tax activities with his personal experiences or with the content of those stories and novels which seem to have been designed as Single Tax arguments. It is probably significant that his greatest emphasis upon the efficacy of the Single Tax occurs in his earliest works, "Under the Wheel," Jason Edwards and Main Travelled Roads. It is also significant that even in these works he fails to make the contents of the plots support the Single Tax doctrine. The action of the stories remained faithful to conditions as Garland knew them, while the Single Tax argument was arbitrarily superimposed upon the action and not integrated with it. Jason Edwards, an Easterner and ex-wage earner, might appropriately believe that the Single Tax would correct the economic conditions of the West, but Garland, as Jason Edwards' creator, should

have known that although Western farmers may have wished the power of the railroads curbed, they did not wish to have all speculation in land erased.

The Garland family history neatly illustrates the statement of Richard Hofstadter that "Rising land values in areas of new settlement tempted early liquidation and frequent moves and made of the small entrepreneur a land speculator."¹⁹ In a single generation Richard Garland had converted 160 acres in Green's Coulee, Wisconsin, into almost a thousand acres of South Dakota wheatland. Hamlin Garland himself homesteaded in South Dakota. The two hundred dollars with which he finally went to Boston was derived from that homestead. In what is probably the best novel Garland ever wrote, The Moccasin Ranch,²⁰ he depicts, without a hint of reproach, the settlement of newly opened land in South Dakota by people who, with one or two exceptions, intend to found fortunes, but not families, upon it. Yet the same means which would curb land speculation by railroads would curb land speculation by independent farmers and small townsmen. In consequence, as Samuel F. Hayes states, "Farm spokesmen had not been friendly toward the philosophy of Henry George that inspired many labor leaders; George's Single Tax, instead of reducing the tax burden as rural reformers wished, would throw it exclusively on owners of real estate."²¹ That Garland was aware of the potential hardship of the Single Tax upon American farmers is proved by his largely neglected article "The Single Tax in Actual Application,"²² which was an examination of a New Zealand land tax designed to discourage land speculation. The article includes an implied criticism of the inflexibility of single tax adherents when Garland writes of the New Zealand law, "It is not precisely the single tax -- probably the single tax men will consider that its greatest fault -- but its work of checking land speculation and breaking up huge estates is admitted."²³ Basically the New Zealand law was a land tax under which the first \$15,000 of improvement was exempt from taxation. Garland saw it as an application of George's principle, since the law made it difficult to hold land out of use and made improvement easy by exempting it from taxation. But Garland immediately went on to propose a modification of the single tax.

At the same time it is worth the while of the single tax men to consider the matter of an exemption in connection with the introduction of the single tax among American farmers. It would need to be a small exemption, say \$750 or \$1000. In some states it could be \$1000. The case would then stand. The farmer would pay no taxes on his improvements, and no taxes on his land values until these values rose above \$1000. Let him also remember that improvement value is exempt; it is merely the site value which must exceed the thousand dollar limit.²⁴

This recommendation for an exemption is an almost certain indication that Garland was aware that land values were rising and that the farmers of the Middle Border were large landholders. Even a \$1000 exemption, small as it seems to our eyes nearly seventy years later, meant that a quarter section (the standard homestead unit of 160 acres) purchased at the standard government price of \$1.25 an acre, could increase more than five-fold in value before it became taxable.

Turning to Garland's fiction, one finds no such explicit cavil with single tax doctrine, but neither does one find any effective demonstration that land speculators were a decisive factor in the woes of Western farmers. The two works most obviously designed as attacks on unearned increments in land value are the short story "Under the Lion's Paw" from Main Travelled Roads, and the novel Jason Edwards. Of the two, the short story is the more effective. A farmer rents land with the understanding that he may buy it at the end of three years. He works hard, makes improvements costing \$1,500 and is infuriated to learn at the end of three years that the purchase price has been increased commensurate with his improvements. The plight of the farmer is at least as much a consequence of his incredible naivete in a simple business arrangement as of the unfortunately legal greed of the owner. The Single Tax is inapplicable here because the value of the improvements is not subject to tax in any case.

But if a moment's sober thought invalidates "Under the Lion's Paw" as a sermon on the evils of unearned increments in land value, the novel Jason Edwards requires even less thought before rejection. It is true that the theme of unearned increment is reiterated.

Walter Reeves' editor gives him an example of it in Boston, and Jason Edwards himself imputes the failure of his farm venture to the fact that once he arrived in Boomtown he learned that the railroad and speculators controlled all the land along the right of way. Only by moving thirty miles from the railroad could Edwards take up land as a homesteader. The result was that Edwards chose to remain close to town and buy land, even though the decision meant that he would have to mortgage his land immediately. But Garland so stacked the cards against Edwards that the reader is never convinced that cheap land would ever have made any real difference in the Edwards family economy.

In the first place Jason is too elderly a man to be undertaking the work of a new farm. In the second, his failure is at least equally chargeable to drouth, disease and finally to the violent summer storm which once more ruins the crop and is directly responsible for Jason's stroke. In the third place the Edwards family was better off than many of its neighbors because Alice was teaching school and thus provided a small cash income which most homesteaders did not have. The most direct attack on speculators in this novel comes in the comic interlude in which Judge Balsler attempts to sell young Walter Reeves a town lot or even a "tree claim." The

Judge is a thoroughgoing rascal, not unrelated to Colonel Sellers, though unlike Sellers the Judge has no faith in the grandiose mirages which he conjures up for the neophyte land buyer. He is not, however, depicted as a villain, and the force of his dishonesty is dissipated by the mood of the scene in which he appears -- it is all too obviously a scene transferred from the play version of the story and intended as comic relief. Thus while one feels a great deal of moral indignation infusing the novel, it never achieves any effective focus.

The effectiveness of Jason Edwards is further impaired by Garland's contrast of East and West. The scenes in the Boston tenement section permitted Garland to exploit naturalistic techniques on conventional naturalistic subjects. He does it well, so well, in fact, the reader is never convinced that, by comparison with the old life, Jason Edwards and his family are not better off in Boomtown. In Boston the Edwards family was trapped by declining wages and increasing rents. Edwards was in despair at what would happen to the family if he became unable to work. It moved from crowded tenement to crowded tenement surrounded by noisy, dirty neighbors. Alice had already assumed that she would have to aid in supporting her family in Boston. In Boomtown, Alice did supplement the Edwards family income, but the simple economic fact remains that despite the mortgage the Edwards family was better off in Boomtown simply because it owned something to mortgage, and if holding land was profitable to speculators, owning land, which rose in value by virtue of the fact that the prairie sod was broken and a house built, would also be profitable to the Edwards family. It was true that they had merely substituted the vagaries of the weather for the greed of an employer as obstacles to earning a living, but even this exchange they might count an ultimate gain, since the harshness of the climate was intermittent and the greed of the employers and landlords was certain.

The result is that the first half of the book, by its very effectiveness in depicting the cruel lot of the common factory worker, undermines the effectiveness of the second, or Middle Border, half.

Garland had expected the Single Tax to act not only to curb rising land prices -- an effect that farmers already in possession of any land at all rejected, and which by its basic terms would make farmers the heaviest tax-paying segment of the population -- but also to reduce the size of Western farms, or at least permit people to settle contiguous acreages and thus recreate the farm communities of the states east of the Mississippi. As the agricultural frontier moved from the tall grass prairie of Iowa onto the short grass prairie and high plains, it became apparent that the new land was imposing its own conditions upon settlement. This was land suitable chiefly for dry farming, which required that large tracts lie fallow each year. To be economically practical, these dry land farms required much larger acreages than the diversified farms of the Mississippi River Valley.

As mechanization of farm production increased, so did the minimum acreage which would repay the investment in farm machinery. The land itself defeated Garland's expectations.

Finally, certainly in the years following 1890, and the very years in which Garland was turning from Middle Border tales to the far West, the issue of the Single Tax ceased to have any relevance for Garland's Middle Border. The land was in private ownership, the pattern of settlement was established and the Single Tax could no longer be expected to effect any real change in land use patterns already established. In addition, with the closing of the frontier, land prices everywhere were clearly destined to rise with the increasing population. If farmers had not been Single Tax enthusiasts ten years before, they were certainly not going to become so at this time.

Garland, when he chose to abandon the Middle West as the scene of his literary work, may well have been tempted by the hope of increased sales to be made by exploiting the Western scene. But he must also have been aware that the Middle Border, as he had known it, was history. He could fight for the Single Tax in the East where its promises still seemed genuine. He could increasingly see his Middle Borderers as heroic figures advancing the frontiers, but unless he returned and relearned the nature of farm problems and farm communities, he no longer had a subject. In a real sense the Middle Border failed Garland by becoming history while he was still in mid career.

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Footnotes:

¹ Bernard L. Duffey, "Hamlin Garland's 'Decline' from Realism," American Literature, XXV (March, 1953), 69-74.

² Hamlin Garland, "Books of My Childhood," Saturday Review of Literature, VII (Nov. 15, 1930), 347.

³ Hamlin Garland, Son of the Middle Border (New York, 1938), 20.

⁴ Hamlin Garland, "Up the Coolly," Main Travelled Roads (New York, 1922), 68.

⁵ Garland, Son of the Middle Border, 364.

⁶ Ibid., 356.

⁷ Garland, Main Travelled Roads, 51.

⁸ Ibid., 57.

⁹ Ibid., 58.

¹⁰ Ibid., 58.

¹¹ Garland, Son of the Middle Border, 367.

¹² Ibid., 365.

¹³ Ibid., 362.

- 14 Ibid., 363.
- 15 Garland, Main Travelled Roads, 88.
- 16 B. R. McElderry Jr., Preface to Main Travelled Roads (New York, 1956), xv.
- 17 Garland, Main Travelled Roads, 135.
- 18 Garland, A Son of the Middle Border, 34.
- 19 Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (New York, 1955), 40.
- 20 First published serially in the Chap-book under the title "Land of the Straddle-bug," 1894-5.
- 21 Samuel F. Hayes, The Response to Industrialism 1885-1914 (Chicago, 1957), 33.
- 22 Hamlin Garland, "The Single Tax in Actual Operation," Arena, X (June, 1894), 56.
- 23 Ibid., 52.
- 24 Ibid., 56.