

ANTIQUARY

Did George Gillespie embellish his Notes recorded during the Westminster Assembly?

INTRODUCTION

A debt of gratitude is owed Chad Van Dixhoorn for his work producing a critical and full text of the minutes of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, as well as his other work flowing from that gift that continues to give.¹ However, it is the case in such a mammoth undertaking, with hundreds of historical personalities involved, and often the vaguest of references, that sometimes the finer details were not nor simply could not be pursued to a full and accurate detailing. For example, in editing the notes George Gillespie made during the Westminster Assembly for a new edition, this writer found more than one instance of a vague reference given in the assembly for which Dr. Van Dixhoorn offered his best stab at a resolution, that Gillespie's notes, his other works, or works by the assembly, offered paths to more correct resolutions. These and such like, are on the order of innocent mistakes. One does not have an unlimited amount of time to search out every opaque citation and sometimes there is simply not a ready resolution and a work or person cannot be identified.²

More serious, and certainly unfortunate, is when a character flaw of a prominent figure in the history of the assembly is assessed, when a little further investigation would have prevented spreading such a charge on the historical record. This is the subject for this year's entry for this regular space in *The Confessional Presbyterian*. In offering to correct a Scottish bias and embellishment to much of the history of the Westminster Assembly, Dr. Van Dixhoorn addressed the legends surrounding George Gillespie, and specifically the story of the David versus Goliath exchange that took place between the Scottish commissioner and the English Erastian John Selden, the famed Orientalist, and a member of the House of Commons delegation appointed to attend the Westminster assembly. Supposedly at the end of the exchange, Selden in defeat exclaims that all his life's work had been swept away by the arguments of the young Scotsman. The tracing of this legend, what is true, what likely is not, and its origins, have been treated elsewhere.³ However, it is in the context of discussing this legend, that Dr. Van Dixhoorn brings up a discrepancy in Gillespie's account of the assembly, where the notes of an intended reply to Selden are given at the end of one session, when it is clear

from the minutes that Gillespie actually did not speak until the start of the next session.

Gillespie places his speech after Selden's on 20 Feb. 1644 when it was actually delivered on 21 Feb.; Gillespie does not record any of the rebuttals made to Selden on 20 Feb. and it is possible that he spent the remainder of the morning framing his reply, which was delivered the first thing on 21 Feb. Mitchell notes (with some minor inaccuracies) that Gillespie's account of his own speech allows for the grammatical possibility that he was not intending to convey that he actually spoke to Selden on 20 Feb. But without the minutes, or Lightfoot's account, Gillespie's account most clearly suggests that he issued an immediate, erudite rebuttal to Selden, as Hetherington inferred.⁴

From this he concludes, "Gillespie appears to inflate the coherence and effectiveness of his own contributions, relocating his speeches in order to make conversations flow better and his contributions seem more logical."⁵ Dr. Van Dixhoorn underscores this again in his life of Gillespie in his brief biographies of the Westminster divines, dismissing Mitchell's kinder reading this time,⁶ writing, "A complex

1. Chad Van Dixhoorn, *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652*, 5 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2012).

2. Chad Van Dixhoorn's work on the minutes was a monumental task, and he had hundreds of often vague citations to try to track down, and this is not pointed out as any sort of a knock against the quality of the work overall, but simply to note and offer a few corrections. See for instances, *The Shorter Writings of George Gillespie*, vol. 3 (Naphtali Press & Reformation Heritage Books, forthcoming 2023/24), pp. 297 n2, 303, n2, n3, 311 n3, 326 n1, 341, n1, 320–321 n2, 393 n1 and 444 n3.

3. See "George Gillespie versus John Selden" in the Introductory Essays in *The Shorter Writings of George Gillespie*, volume 1 (Naphtali Press and Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), pp. 80–98.

4. *Minutes*, 1.26 n28. Hetherington, who had access to and could have stood corrected by Lightfoot's account (and in fact the editor of *Works* notes "Lightfoot places this in the session of the 21st"), does not date the Selden-Gillespie encounter, or tie it explicitly to the February 20 entry in Gillespie's notes, but he does give the subject as Matthew 18. That was the topic of debate in sessions 158 and 159, February 20, 21, 1644. All the accounts of the legend going back to Robert Fleming's written 22 years after Gillespie's death, portray Gillespie as giving an immediate reply. See *Shorter Writings of George Gillespie*, 1.86. It may very well be that, with Hetherington, that those recounting the beginnings of the legendary encounter, drew the idea of an immediate reply from the placement of his notes at the end of the session in which Selden spoke. This, along with the things Gillespie said to Patrick Simson, his cousin, who told Robert Wodrow, may be the kernel of truth around which the later embellishments were woven. *Ibid.*, p. 82–83.

5. *Minutes*, 1.26.

6. See Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its history and Standards, being the Baird lecture for 1882* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, 1897), pp 296, 297 n1.

prodigy, Gillespie humbly admitted his shortcomings in public, but improved on his performances in his private journal.⁷

There is no arguing with the fact that from a strict reading of Gillespie's notes without the benefit of the *Minutes* or Lightfoot's *Journal*, one will conclude that Gillespie answered Selden on February 20 instead of on February 21, the day he actually gave a reply. However, it will be argued shortly, that this of itself does not sustain the theory that Gillespie did this intentionally to make his efforts look better for posterity, or what have you. Rather, after examining a few instances to show a consistent pattern as far as how Gillespie used his notebook, it will be clear that vainglorious motives need not be assessed.

GILLESPIE'S NOTES

The notes which George Gillespie made during meetings of the Westminster assembly, subcommittee on the directory for worship, the Grand Committee, and other records, survive in two volumes that were part of the Advocates Library Wodrow collection, which is now part of the National Library of Scotland.⁸ The notes were transcribed by David Meek for the collected works of Gillespie published in the mid-nineteenth century.⁹

William Hetherington downplayed or at least hoped the loss was not great in noting the fact that out of between eight and fourteen volumes of notes that once are said to have existed, only this small portion transcribed had survived.¹⁰ At the time, Hetherington only knew that Lightfoot's journal survived and had been published, and did not know the minutes themselves had been preserved. The benefit of having all

three of these is in comparing them. Routinely, one account provides information the others do not. While at times Lightfoot and the minutes preserve a lot of the discussions, often they are incredibly brief.¹¹ Therefore, there is great value in having Gillespie as a third witness, and it is almost certainly a great loss that this portion is apparently all that survives.¹²

Gillespie wrote notes not only to record the debate but to write any response he intended to give while the speaker and subsequently others were speaking. He distinguishes these notes most often with "Answer" (abbreviated "ans."), or sometimes "I answered," or "I said," and less commonly "I answer to Mr. Goodwin," "I answer to Mr. Selden." Five times he has "I replied," but never uses "I reply," as Mitchell mistakenly writes, though surmising tense, e.g., "answered" versus "answer," may indicate whether the note was written before or after he spoke.¹³ Gillespie's usual practice is to jot down answers point by point, and then make use of his notes when he had the opportunity to speak subsequently in a session. Sometimes, as in Session 306, he marshals all his "answers" in one speech at the end of the session.¹⁴ Other times Gillespie wrote fuller notes of intended replies to a speaker's arguments, but more often wrote a point made by the speaker, such as Thomas Goodwin, and immediately write "answer," and give sometimes just the briefest of note for a mental reminder for any reply, and continue jotting down the speaker's points and brief answers till the speaker finished, perhaps continuing writing his answers while others stood to speak before he himself did so. Or, it may be the case that he made his notes for replies once the speaker finished, which may also explain why he does not record some of the speakers, because he was preparing notes for his own reply. Whatever the case, when he was called on and recognized to

7. *Minutes*, 1.120.

8. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Wodrow Papers, Wodrow MSS, octavo 5, no. 1 (Wod. Oct. V, ff. 1–184); Wodrow MSS, quarto 72, no. 2 (Wod. Qu. LXXII, ff. 45–82). The octavo volume has notes from February 2, 1644 to May 14, 1644 (ff. 1–108r), and September 4, 1644 to January 3, 1645 (ff. 117–177), and additional records (ff. 178–184). The quarto is an abstract of the octavo, lacks the notes from September 4 onwards, and ends with notes on the subcommittee for the directory. There is an 18th century copy of the octavo volume, made for historian David Dalrymple, "Notebook entitled 'the Question of the Presbytery Stated February the 2nd 1644,' alternately titled in another hand 'Minutes of the Westminster Assembly,' by Mr. George Gillespie for Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes." 215 leaves. NLS MS.25387.

9. *Works of Mr. George Gillespie*, The Presbyterian's Armoury (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1844–46).

10. Wodrow wrote in 1707 that six octavo volumes of notes on the assembly survived, while later in 1722 he commented that between 12 and 14 volumes still remained in the hands of Gillespie's grandson, a minister of the Church of Scotland. See *Shorter Writings*, 1.43–45, and the original preface to the notes following this preface. The number six is given in Robert Wodrow *Analeceta: or, Materials for a History of Remarkable Providences; mostly relating to Scotch Ministers and Christians*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: for the Maitland Club, 1842–1843), 1.160.

Elsewhere in *Analeceta*, James Stirling recounts that Gillespie simply had several little notebooks of notes on the assembly (*Analeceta*, 3.112). The number of 12 or 14 is given by Wodrow in a letter in 1722, for which see *The Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow*, Volume 2 (Edinburgh: Printed for the Wodrow Society, [1843]), p. 661.

11. John Lightfoot appears to have wearied of the lengthy debates as time progressed and falls to summarizing what took place in his *Journal* of the proceedings. He often complains of the long speeches of Goodwin and Nye. Also, he frequently was away at Great Munden, Hertfordshire, where he was rector, a position to which the assembly had appointed him.

12. For instance, see January 2, 1645, where Gillespie's notes provide the only and thus valuable record of that session's activities. "Notes of the Westminster Assembly," October 17, 1644, in *Shorter Writings of George Gillespie*, vol. 3, p. 458.

13. Mitchell, *ibid.* "The manuscript Minutes coincide with Lightfoot's *Journal* in assigning Gillespie's speech not [to] the session of 20th but to that of 21st February. In Gillespie's own Notes it is introduced at the close of the account of the former session with the words, "I reply," not I replied, and may simply embody a brief outline of the reply he was to make on the following day."

14. See "Notes of the Westminster Assembly," October 17, 1644, in *Shorter Writings*, vol. 3, p. 449, n1, n2.

Speak, he rose and would give a detailed point by point rebuttal.¹⁵ Sometimes though, as with the reply to Selden, and on other occasions, he for various reasons was not afforded opportunity to speak. In that case, he wrote out a fairly full reply taking up the end of his notes for that the session, which he actually used in a speech at the start of the next session. In other instances, he was able to reply similarly in the next session or at least make some use of the notes in a later session.¹⁶ However, often it is not clear from examining Lightfoot and the minutes, whether he had opportunity to speak. Because the minutes and Lightfoot are far from exhaustive, it is more likely he did speak along the lines of his intended “answers,” unless something makes it clear that he did not (the question was called, etc.). In such unclear instances, whether he did or he did not actually get to speak, the notes give us at the very least the outlines of his intended reply to various speakers.

There are some imperfections or at least questions that arise from Gillespie’s notes of the assembly. In a couple of instances, the notes under one date actually belong under another,¹⁷ and there are occasions of misdating.¹⁸ Also, Gillespie has what are styled *memorandum* sprinkled throughout his notes. It appears that the term is applied rather broadly to anything he wished to mark or highlight, including things said in the assembly debates,¹⁹ or, more commonly, comments on or a clarification about something that occurred in the assembly,²⁰ or in two instances at least, to mark notes for speaking that apparently were not used in the assembly that day but were at least partially used in later sessions.²¹

According to Robert Baillie, while there was some disorderliness in how speakers were chosen, the prolocutor recognizing the speaker whom the members most loudly called for next, once recognized he was allowed to speak as long as he liked.²² In some instances, this either may not have been strictly true, and a speaker paused, allowing some replies before continuing, or, if this rule was sacrosanct, there are some incongruities in Gillespie’s account that are difficult to reconcile.²³ As to these imperfections, the obvious first must be stated, that Gillespie was not clerking for the benefit

of the Westminster assembly but making notes for his own use. There is not the same level of completeness nor accuracy expected compared to a clerk’s work. Judging from the added subtitles alone, it seems clear that his notebook was primarily to record the debates on topics he thought important to the goal of uniformity of worship and church government between England and Scotland, for which he was there to contend with his fellow Scottish commissioners.²⁴ But add to this the inability to record everything even if one were not at the same time crafting replies to speak, and imperfections and incongruities are no doubt to be expected that cannot always be reconciled with the other two accounts, which are far from complete records as well.

DID GILLESPIE REARRANGE HIS NOTES TO MAKE HIMSELF LOOK BETTER?

While the solution to this question has already been forecast, as answered by how Gillespie used his notebook, it remains to address the question more directly and with a more careful examination. Did Gillespie alter his notes of this answer to Selden and other speeches to make his role appear more important or more impressive, or rather than that vain exercise, was the notebook functioning as he intended it?

It is instructive to compare his entry for February 20 to Lightfoot’s *Journal* more fully than just to observe the out-of-sequence placement of Gillespie’s reply to Selden.²⁵ Lightfoot begins with intelligence concerning a request to send someone to answer a Baptist in Hertfordshire and an order from the House of Lords to hasten their work, which sparked a debate. Then Calamy reintroduced the subject of the meaning of *ecclesia* from the previous day, which sparked a debate between the Presbyterians and Goodwin and Nye, which devolved into a discussion of church censures. Just before Selden spoke, Calamy and Goodwin had a back and forth exchange over excommunication, ending with Calamy stating, “This church in Matthew 18 signifies a church consisting of more congregations than one; for that this is the common signification of the word

15. There are many examples of this, but for one, see the brief note for March 1 and the longer record of the speech in the minutes, “Notes of the Westminster Assembly, in *Shorter Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 319, n4, 320.

16. See “Notes of the Westminster Assembly,” in *Shorter Writings*, vol. 3, February 9, p. 282, September 20 (session 289), p. 413, March 7, with possible answer on March 11, p. 329.

17. See March 6/5, p. 323, and March 6, *ibid.*, p. 327.

18. This errors may have existed originally, or they may have been misread by the author of the later copy, or the transcriber of the copy, Mr. Meek, may have misread the text. See March 12–14, 1644, *ibid.*, pp. 332ff.

19. See *ibid.*, p. 434.

20. See *ibid.*, pp. 417, 455.

21. See *ibid.*, pp. 385, 440.

22. Robert Baillie, *Letters & Journals*, in *Works*, vol. 13 (Edinburgh: Ogle, 1841–42), 2.108–109. Cf. *Minutes*, 1.49.

23. See for instance, “Notes of the Westminster Assembly,” in *Shorter Writings*, vol. 3, page 288.

24. The notes no doubt could have aided the Commissioners when corresponding with their church back in Scotland. It was also useful for bringing up prior points Gillespie made that no speaker had answered. See for example, September 20 (Session 289) referring to the prior session of September 19, “Notes of the Westminster Assembly,” in *Shorter Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 410–415.

25. See John Lightfoot, “The Journal of the Proceedings of The Assembly of Divines, from January 1, 1643, to December 31, 1644,” in *Works*, volume 13 (1824), pp. 163–168.

in Scripture.” To which Rutherford then said, “The many arguments brought against the proposition have not spoken to it; for though it be granted that particular congregations may excommunicate, yet doth it not conclude against dependence upon the presbytery.” At this point, Selden spoke up and gave the Eraſtian opinion on censures. Then Nye spoke with “arguments he used to prove that ‘there is no power over another power,’ and these he dilated exceeding long as he useth to do: and was about to proceed to shew that there is no necessity; when he was taken off as speaking nothing to the question, but he would not be taken off: and would not be convinced that he was besides order; whereupon there was some heat, and it was called to try it by vote; but the Lord Say and others gainsaid it,—so that it was declined: and so we adjourned.”²⁶

In his notes, Gillespie begins only with a summary of Calamy’s statement, omitting all else, including Rutherford’s statement, before recording Selden’s speech and the answers of Herle and Marshall. He then notes at least some of Nye’s statements, which as Lightfoot noted along with the contention, ate up the rest of the time and ended the day’s work. It is certainly possible that it was during the “heat,” that Gillespie wrote out a reply to Selden, and it is at this point after noting Nye’s remarks that in his notes Gillespie gives his “I answer to Mr. Selden.” While it is abbreviated by omissions, Gillespie nowhere reorders the prior debate. He only tacks on the notes of his reply to Selden following Nye’s remarks rather than under the next heading of February 21, the day he actually spoke. If he had wanted to highlight his answer to Selden, he would have inserted his reply right after Selden’s speech. With the debate of the next day headed Feb. 21 beginning with Young’s reply to Selden, it almost appears to be a simple mistake of

putting Gillespie’s words before the heading break instead of right before the words of Young, which is the order Lightfoot and the *Minutes* record them. Indeed, if Gillespie were keeping a journal, how natural would it be to simply have written an outline of what he wanted to say in his notebook, while others were speaking, which was clearly common practice, and then the next day at the assembly begin a new dated entry once his remarks were completed?

Two other things are apparent if we compare Gillespie’s notes for his reply to Selden with what the *Minutes* record.²⁷ His remarks are much longer in the *Minutes*, 30% addressing Selden and the rest answering Nye from the previous day. Lightfoot writes, “we fell upon the work of the day upon Matthew 18 and Mr. Gillespie first began: and first began to answer to Mr. Selden, who held this place to mean a civil court, which he confuted with these reasons.... Then fell he upon some objections of the Independents—which when he was falling upon, I was called out by a friend. But, as I was informed, he spake very home, and very sharply, and very largely.”²⁸

In his notes, Gillespie not only omits the reply to Nye from the text of his reply to Selden, but he also does not record it in his notes for the session of February 21. If Gillespie were looking to highlight or improve his own performance in his own notes, leaving out any mention of his strong rebuttal to Nye does not seem to be consistent with that motivation.²⁹ Indeed, if he is representative of the Scots view of threats to their cause, Baillie was not at all afraid of Selden and thought him arrogant, insolent, and absurd, and easily answered.³⁰ In his letter recounting the sessions that included the one of February 21, it is clear he viewed the Independents as the main threat to a uniform presbyterianism in the three kingdoms,³¹ which would make Gillespie’s omission of his answer to Nye the more inexplicable if he was arranging his notes to make himself look better.

In the notes of February 21, we may have more evidence of how Gillespie used his notebook. After Gillespie and Young spoke, and an exchange between Selden, Young, and Coleman on excommunication that was called to order because the assembly had not taken up that subject yet, Nye gave his reply in which he accused Presbyterianism of being subversive to the state, which brought cries from Henderson and others which eventually the assembly voted as out of order (recorded by Lightfoot). Then speeches were made by Marshall and Lord Wariston, which took some time, and then Vines spoke. In his notes, between Nye’s comments (omitting any notice of the uproar as do the *Minutes*) and Vines, Gillespie omits the others and has written his answer to Nye.

Answer. 1. All this anticipates the wisdom and judgment of the parliament, who can best judge of state inconveniences. 2. We are now to search the Scriptures. 3. It

26. Lightfoot, pp. 166–167.

27. See Sessions 158 and 159 (February 20 and 21, 1644), Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes*, 2.518–533 and Gillespie’s speech, *ibid.*, pp. 525–527.

28. Lightfoot, p. 167, 168.

29. There are other examples where Gillespie is recorded as speaking in the minutes, but he makes no mention of it in his notes. See for example September 20 (Session 290), where he spoke three times, and October 8 (Session 279), “Notes of the Westminster Assembly,” in *Shorter Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 417, 436 n1, f38 n2.

30. Baillie, 2.265–266. If an exchange between Selden and Gillespie received some significant exaggeration, so too has Selden’s reputation. In his biography, Dr. Van Dixhoorn writes: “Selden volunteered (sometimes incorrect) information to the assembly as an antiquarian and as an authority on Jewish history. Lionized though he was by his fellow parliamentarians in the assembly [members of the House of Commons], Selden’s actual contributions related chiefly to the relationship between church and state and the impact of his speeches has been exaggerated.” Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes*, 1.136.

31. Baillie, Public Letter, Aprile 2d [1644], *Letters and Journals*, 2.145. It was Session 159 wherein Gillespie gave his reply to Selden and Nye, that Nye then contended in reply that Presbyterianism was subversive of the state, which Baillie mentions in this letter for that period of sessions. He mentions Selden not once in the whole letter.

contradicts his own *Apologetical Narration*, that they have no state ends to comply with, no commonwealths to mould. 4. We can tell, from our experience in Scotland, that our General Assemblies and their commissioners do not weaken but strengthen the state; and malignants have been more afraid of the church censures than of the civil. 5. Their own way is more formidable for rupture and mischief.³²

Neither Lightfoot nor the *Minutes* record this. Rather than being more proof of padding out his notes to make himself look good to anyone later reading his script, may this not rather be evidence of the use of his notebook? While the uproar was going on and while Wariston and others were speaking, it would seem he jotted down a brief outline for an intended reply to Nye but was not afforded opportunity to speak that day, and since the assembly voted to close the question, neither had he the opportunity to make use of the notes for a reply the next day. This would seem to align with the use of the notes for answering Selden.

Indeed, on February 23 (Session 161), there is a similar gap and omission of speakers in his notes, and Gillespie has written an answer to Nye, which that day he did have opportunity to deliver in reply, and is given with some variation in the *Minutes*. Another example occurs on February 26 (Session 163), where Gillespie has written out an intended reply at the beginning right after the statement of the debate question, and he omits noting several speakers (because writing what he wanted to say), but the debate does not go in the direction of the answer he's crafted, and despite making a suggestion to change the course of the discussion, it continues on, and he has no occasion to make use of the statement he had crafted, which of course does not appear in any form in the *Minutes*.³³

Therefore, it would appear the use of Gillespie's notebook was not just to record what was said but also to make notes for statements and replies when he clearly could not record what was being said at the same time. If he was recognized, he would have the opportunity to reply in that session and did so from these notes, or if the next day the question had not been closed, he would have the notes if the opportunity arose to give a reply that day.

Of the portion of the speech addressing Selden, Gillespie's notes are the fullest text, Lightfoot's are a bit briefer but very close in content to Gillespie's, and the *Minutes* are similar but lacking seven or more lines left blank between the sixth and the midst of the seventh point. They do not witness anything extraordinary, being essentially the same for substance. The substantially longer address to Nye's arguments preserved in the *Minutes* seem to bear out Baillie's belief that the Independents were the main adversary to address, and it is again puzzling if making himself look better in the debates was driving

the arrangement of his notes, why Gillespie would completely omit any text of the answer to Nye, which he could have appended as far as he recollected it if that was indeed his motivation. In fact, the one explanation why he has no text for it in his notes, that he spoke extemporaneously, would seem to make the answer to Nye the more extraordinary of the two parts of his speech.

Having edited and gone through the entirety of George Gillespie's "Notes of the Westminster Assembly," with this question in mind of whether he embellished his notes, this writer sees no evidence of that, either in the "legendary" answer to Selden, or at any other date. Rather, in keeping with his manner, the natural explanation that he wrote his notes for a reply at the end of one session to use if he had opportunity the next day, as long ago pointed out by A. F. Mitchell, sufficiently explains the case that nurtured this charge. There is no need to see in this a deliberate distortion, or "improvement," of what actually transpired, from some vain pursuit by George Gillespie to make his part in the Westminster Assembly look better to his own fancy or for any eyes he may have thought might later read his notes.

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32. Notes of the Westminster Assembly, in *Shorter Writings*, volume 3, p. 308.

33. *Minutes*, 2.553. Gillespie, Notes, p. 29. The question debated was the multitude of teaching elders in the church of Jerusalem. Gillespie's "for which I argue" focuses on the apostles, whereas the rest of the assembly focused on proving a larger number. His reply, which never was given, does not appear in the minutes, and his objection to try to move the discussion to how he thought it should go does not appear in his own notes. His objection to moving the debate to no avail was, "One word for expediting. It seems not necessary to be debated for the proove of poynt in question whether '120' were preachers or Barnabas." Lightfoot words it, "We needed not to insist upon this 'medium' for it is enough that the twelve apostles did preach, and preach daily." *Journal*, pp. 181–182.