John Lowin’s *Conclusions Upon Dances*: Puritan Conclusions of a Godly Player

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An otherwise forgettable little quarto entitled *Conclusions Upon Dances, Both of this Age and of the OIde* appeared in London early in the year 1607. I say “otherwise” because although the thirteen-leaf pamphlet was published under the pseudonym “I.L. Roscio”-literally “J.L. the Actor” – it is understood to be the work of John Lowin, one of the “Principall Actors” listed in the Heminges and Condell First Folio of Shakespeare. Collier attributed the piece to Lowin on the basis of the initials in the pseudonym, and because of a long-hand inscription on the title page of what he thought was then the only extant copy: “By Jhon Lowin witnesseth Tho. D. 1610.” The *DNB* cautioned “Collier’s evidence will be regarded with suspicion,” but it paid lip service to Lowin’s authorship, and no one has questioned it since. Every biographical summary of Lowin’s career mentions him in connection with the tract, and every library either catalogues or crosslists the piece under Lowin’s name. There is a problem, however: if Lowin the actor is the author of *Conclusions Upon Dances*, then Lowin the actor is also a Puritan.

It is strange that the critical history of *Conclusions Upon Dances* – negligible as it is – should back itself into this rather heretical finding. Collier’s declaration came first. Of the pamphlet, he adjudged “The main object (excepting that perhaps of raising a temporary supply of money) was to vindicate dancing from the attacks of the Puritans.” Some twenty years later, Collier had diversified his opinion. Noting the “pious tendency” of the treatise, he went on to excuse the technique as “not much in Lowin’s way, but a style adopted by him for the sake of obtaining a greater sale among the Puritans.” Any allusions since have been disparaging if not dismissive; and Alan Brissenden’s mention of the piece as “a defence of dancing on religious grounds” is tempered by regret for the pamphlet’s overall lack of spirit. I agree that the pamphlet has a religious basis; but its tenets are basically Puritan, and its stance is not one of defence. The most recent commentator on the subject, Sandra Clark, calls *Conclusions Upon Dances* “a solemn pamphlet,” concluding that “the author, perhaps the
actor John Lowin, grudgingly conceded that dancing might on occasion be allowed, but subjected to so many restrictions as to nullify it entirely as a spontaneous and pleasurable pastime. 6 While I agree with Clark's basic notion, I find that Lowin neither concedes his conclusions "grudgingly" nor requires intercessionary critical apology because of them. Indeed, although it is seldom mentioned, the tract was given a new title for its 1609 reissue, and a revealing title at that: Brief Conclusions of Dancers and Dancing: Condemning the prophane use thereof. . . . 7

Lowin's conclusions are Puritan conclusions. But they are neither dogmatic nor assertive. And "vindication" in any measure (to use Collier's term) is too grand a motive for this little tract, which neither names nor describes any of the dances then in fashion. By the same token neither does it display any of the crusading zeal or religious fervor of the well-known Puritan attacks of Northbrooke, Gosson, or Stubbes. 8 Yet Conclusions Upon Dances adduces only Scriptural support in weaving its modest argument. It is also clear that the author relies on the Geneva Bible of 1560 — that valuable if somewhat antagonistic progenitor of the later Authorized Version. 9 Moreover, the strong Puritan bias of the Geneva Bible manifests itself throughout in Lowin's turn of phrase and style of exposition. I am willing to accept John Lowin, an actor intimately associated with the London stage for over half a century, as the author of Conclusions Upon Dances. In doing this, I plan to examine the text itself along with its contemporary circumstances to show that the pamphlet is a personal essay by a player who was — at least at this point in his career — a Puritan.

First a word about the very word "Puritan." It is an unfortunate truism that we think of the term only in its most cliché sense. "Puritans" self-righteously despise any form of display, and live entertainment is their particular bugbear. Prynne therefore, outraged, acrimonious, and slightly mad, represents the typical Puritan. But this grossly oversimplifies the social and religious complexities of Renaissance England. Prynne was, without doubt, an unbalanced fanatic, but it is easier to defy a monstrous caricature like Prynne than to examine evidence dispassionately. In Puritanism, as in everything else, the truth of the matter resides in the middle way of moderation. Social historian Christopher Hill warns that the word "Puritan" is too often used as a "refuge from clarity of thought." However, he also warns against dogmatism: "It is important, in discussing Puritanism, to remember that for contemporaries the word had no narrowly religious connotation." 10 Even such a diocesan figure as John Donne could see fit to declare, "Men and Brethren, I am a Puritan, that is, I wil endeavour to be pure, as my Father in heaven is pure, as far as any Puritan." 11 The word "Puritan" signals a complex association of attitudes that goes far beyond any narrowly religious or theatrical connotation; and Margot Heinemann, in Puritanism and Theatre, produces an impressive list of "Puritans" who
were somewhat less than horrified over the alleged ungodliness of the Renaissance stage: Milton, Leicester, Walsingham, the 3rd Earl of Pembroke—Shakespeare’s patron no less—as well as, among others, the Cromwellian officials Bulstrode Whitelocke and Peter Sterry. Based on the information contained in *Conclusions Upon Dances*, I think John Lowin the player could be added to the list, and so could the nobleman to whom the pamphlet is dedicated: Edward Lord Denny of Waltham, later to be created 1st Earl of Norwich.

Before turning to the text, however, I would like to draw attention to other material dedicated to Lord Denny, who was styled “a liberal patron of religion and learning.” This substantial body of writing involves, for the most part, tracts, treatises, and sermons by leading Puritan authorities. The better known controversialists include Joseph Hall, Anthony Wotton, and William Perkins. To be Perkins’ patron was to be patron of a scholastic Calvinist and Cambridge don who was also the foremost Puritan preacher of the period. His favorite adjective, in describing dance, seems to have been “lascivious.” Joseph Hall’s biographer describes Denny as Hall’s “intimate and lifelong friend,” as well as his patron, before concluding of Hall, “Like most of the Bishops and the vast majority of the laity of his time, he was an out-and-out Calvinist.” Calvinism is the extreme ontological arm of Puritanism. It was a vital part of the theology of the period, as disseminated from the pulpits of England and in the colleges of Cambridge University. Denny, a Cambridge man himself, seems to have been at least sympathetic with this influential form of inquiry. *Conclusions Upon Dances*, therefore, finds itself in some very austere company. But it must also be noted that Denny served as patron for John Brinsley’s 1618 rendering of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*. This is the same John Brinsley, classicist and pedagogue, who published *Ludus Literarius* in 1612, a discussion of grammar school ethics argued in the form of a dialogue and promoting the plays of Terence for their Latin value. As well, Denny was patron for the delightful *Ayeres* (1608) of Thomas Weelkes, musician and voice-master. Also notable, the marriage of Denny’s only daughter was celebrated with a wedding masque by Thomas Campion, performed before James at Whitehall on Twelfth Night, 1607. Simply put, there seems to be a real tension here between Edward Denny, Puritan gentleman, and Baron Denny of Waltham, Cavalier Lord. I submit that this tension is felt likewise in *Conclusions Upon Dances*, which is ostensibly a set of Puritan conclusions drawn by a popular performer.

The argument of *Conclusions Upon Dances* relies heavily on the conditional. The very pseudonymous form of the title page has an ironic edge to it: the tract is described as being “Newly composed and set forth, by an Out-landish Doctor.” This is a common didactic strategy. The writer, in the guise of an “outlandish” or foreign “Doctor,” is better able to observe and
record with impartiality. Because he is a "Doctor," he is a learned man, a man who carries authoritative opinion. In this guise, then, Lowin finds that there are three basic opinions concerning dances: dances are holy in themselves, as witnessed in David's dance before the Ark of the Lord (II Samuel 6); dances are profane, as exhibited by the backsliding Israelites who danced in idolatry around the golden calf (Exodus 32); and, the largest category, dances are altogether indifferent—neither sacred nor profane. The "highest" argument for indifference to dancing, we are told rather warily, embraces one speech of Christ in the seventh chapter of Luke, and Lowin quotes the passage loosely: "They are like unto little children sitting in the market place, and crying one to another, and saying, Wee have piped unto you, and ye have not danced: wee have mourned unto you, and you have not wept" (B1'). This verse, taken out of context and set on its own, has something of the stage player's common lament about an audience's lack of receptivity. But Lowin is cautious about all three examples cited in this first division of the text. He explains that the relative holiness, profanity, or indifference of dance must be read against the particular "causes" of dancing.

Lowin cites four Biblical examples of "holy" dancing, dances with a "godly" cause: Miriam's dance (Exodus 15) after the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea; the dance of Jephthah's daughter after the defeat of the Ammonites (Judges 11); the dancing of the women of Israel (I Samuel 18) after David's slaying of Goliath; and, in the Apocrypha, Judith's dance after she had decapitated Holofernes. It is quickly pointed out, however, that while all these women danced "after some great victorie, in praysing and glorifying the name of the Lord" (B3'), they did so without any mind toward "worldly pleasure." To the Puritan mind, of course, such "pleasure" is of little value, and the women of the Old Testament were correct in ignoring it. Holy dances were also performed, Lowin finds, after celebrating "some solemn feast consecrated unto God" (B3'). His first conclusion follows: it is "lawfull to reioyce with dances, at the time of mariages, and of all other holy and great occasions" (B3'). But an encompassing proviso is attached: "whensoeuer the occasions of dancing are holy, then the forme of dancing ought to represent holiness, ... the discerning wherof must be left to the judgement of godly and well learned persons" (B3'). With this statement, Lowin goes on to undercut the exemplar of holy dancing first cited in the treatise. He points out that while dances are "motions composed with measure," David's dance before the Ark was "without measure," adding "His minde was transported and carried away, through the great vehemencie of the burning zeale, wherewith hee was altogether inflamed" (B4'). In other words, David's "burning zeale" moved him to perform acts and motions inconsistent with any concept of "holy" dance. Lowin even doubts if David's actions can be considered "dancing" at all.
Concerning profane dancing, Lowin, like other Puritan commentators, is quick to fasten upon Salome’s dance before Herod (Matthew 14), attending her wish for the head of John the Baptist. According to Lowin her dance had no regard for God, but was used merely to please Herod with a view toward darker designs. He therefore concludes, “every dancer and danceresse, which in their dances have no remembrance of God, are greatly culpable before the eyes of God himselfe, although they seeme to be without fault in the sight of men” (B4\*). As in the preceding division on holy dances, however, Lowin goes on by means of indirection to deflate the exemplar of profane dancing first adduced:

Wee do not bring hither the dancing mentioned in the [32]. Chap. of Exodus: because those stubborn and stiffehearted Israelites, which danced about the molten Calfe, were become Idolaters. For it might be in that consideration, that such dances were part of their religion.(B4\*)

Certainly, in the Puritan view of things, idolatry was part of religion as practised by Roman Catholics. Lowin’s statement on idolatry pushes Puritan toleration to the brink, and it would fall over were it not for its own irony.

The argument continues under the heading “Of such Dances, as by reason are esteemed to be indifferent.” Lowin cites the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), and points to the “Bankets, Melodie and Dances” (C1\*) with which he was welcomed home. This is all seen to be quite legitimate, and Lowin notes as well the traditional Puritan apology from Ecclesiastes 3:4, “That as there is a time to mourne, so there is a time to Dance” (C1\*). As a result, Lowin draws his third conclusion: “it is not any action displeasant unto God, to use Dances for an honest recreation, in the joyfull full meetings of faithfull friends, or deare kinsfolkes” (C1\*). Just as he had in the two preceding chapters, however, Lowin goes on to discredit the original example of indifferent dancing: the “little children” of the marketplace, inviting other little children to dance (Luke 7:32). Lowin now points out the negative context in which Jesus uttered the words against the Pharisees and lawyers, and cannot help adding his own belittling commentary: “it is well known every where, that many things are to be tollerated in Children, which are not to be tollerated in other persons: as the ryding upon Stickes, and the playing with Babies; with such other foolish pastimes” (C1\*). At best, dancing is only another “foolish pastime.”

So in drawing his conclusions about holy, profane, and indifferent dances, Lowin has found the examples adduced by “men of good understanding and litterature” (B1\*) to be completely off the point. The holy dancing of David was not in fact holy, the profane motions around the golden calf not all that profane in context, and the indifferent circumstances surrounding the little children in the market-place quite negative when proper context
is considered. Lowin seems to endorse simple dances that are “godly” and that celebrate “honest recreation” among “faythfull friendses.” But his use of the double negative - “not any action displeasant” - is neither quite conclusive nor quite condemnatory. And if his terms sound like Puritan buzzwords, it should be remembered that “honest recreation” was precisely what was sought after by the caricatured Puritan hypocrite Langebeau Snuffle in Tourner’s The Atheist’s Tragedy (1611). Still, Lowin’s discursive approach does little to clarify his position, and his argument takes an ironic turn in the interests of having a little fun.

What follows is a somewhat digressive division entitled “What sort of Dancing is more convenient for the health.” This is an attempt to anatomize forms of dance that are performed strictly for exercise. Lowin considers these dances to be basically “indifferent,” but the satirical quality of the passage is unmistakable:

Such Dances as doe strongly stirre the body, ought to be chosen of them, which have some obstructions in the wayes of the Urine, or some other like impediment. And the contrarie must be used of such persons, as doe perceive their owne Braines to be weake, or the like infirmitie to be in some other part. But to the others that Dancing is fitter, which exerciseth the bodie in a meane measure of agitation. (C2°)

Scatology, suggestions of autism and sexual inadequacy, and ironic conciliation point directly at satiric effect, at the same time as the language imitates the authority of a medical text. But, predictably, the best prescription for dances is to bear God in mind; and Lowin directs his readers to the appropriate Scriptural passage in the Geneva translation: “Exercise thy self unto godlines. For bodelie exercise profith little: but godlines is profitable unto all things” (I Timotheus 4:7-8).

Lowin declares the dances of his own day - that is, “the greater part of them” (C2°) - to be partly vain and partly profane. The qualification does little to mollify the fact that this is a typical Puritan criticism. Dances are vain because a practical knowledge of them involves “vexion of the Spirit, and losse of time” (C2°). They are likewise profane because, while dancers in Scripture performed in order to glorify God, it is now found that “very often, in a great many places, among the Christians themselves, not onely the Women, but also the Men, doe Dance to please the world” (C2°). The heightening tone of distaste in the accusation is accentuated by the sermonizing rhetoric. Lowin refuses to pass judgment, however, at the same time as he points with conclusive satisfaction to Ephesians 5:16, a text cited regularly in Puritan argument: “Redeeme the time” (C3°). Finally, in a statement that seems to tumble over itself in parenthetical qualification, Lowin declares the so-called “Art” of dancing and the necessary “prayse” of God to be mutually exclusive:
many of these Dances are so much artificiall (at the least within our
cogitations, and within the cogitations of some other persons, which have
also observed in the holy Histories of the old Testament, the manner of
Dancing practised among the Israelitish women, that lived in the fear of
God) many of these Dances (I say) are so much artificiall, that the humaine
minders can not be intended nor attentive to the Art of Dancing, and to the
prayse of God together. (C3r)

The foregoing is a Puritan commonplace. Lowin immediately reinforces
it with a social commonplace. He shifts his prose into an attitude of
rational deference, and returns to his original examples of “holy” dancing.
He intends to show that dancing is more acceptable among the “upper”
classes. Because Miriam was a “Prophetesse” (C4r), because the daughter
of Jephthah was the daughter of the “Captaine over the people of Israel”
(C4v), and because Judith was “crowned” (D1r) with olives, it is clear to
Lowin that their social position allowed them to dance without censure,
and to lead their inferiors in dances of “godly” celebration. The Geneva
Bible crosslists the passages concerned, and describes the “timbrels and
daunces” of Exodus 15 as “signifying their great ioye, whiche custome the
lewes observed in certein solemnities ... but it oght not to be a cloke to
cover our wanten dances.” This is precisely Lowin’s point. He is prepared
to endorse dancing when proper social degree is maintained, but still finds
it to be “somewhat inconvenient for the lower, to have the exercitation of
dancing neere the higher, unlesse some leave be given” (D1v). This sounds
like a suitably safe and humble opinion to offer a titled peer like Lord
Denny. Because it does not condemn dancing outright, it also rescues
Lowin from taking an unqualified position.

Throughout Conclusions Upon Dances, Lowin treads a fine line between
disapproval and indifference. A statement is made, immediately qualified,
and finally reduced to “godly” generalization. The fact that Lowin finds
dancing to be “more becomming unto women, then unto men” (D1v) only aligns him with every Puritan—variously apologetic or accusatory—from
Northbrooke to Prynne.  But if his “conclusions” betray none of the
Puritan rancor expected in pamphlets on the performing arts, they are
nonetheless unmistakable. The final division of the treatise is entitled
“Why Dances are forbidden in some places among the Christians,” and— not
surprisingly—it draws attention toward arch-Puritan Geneva:

The prohibition of Dances in Geneva, & in some other Territories, which do
keepe all the orders of the same in matters of religion, and Ecclesiastical
Discipline, was made because of the great abuses of them; to cut off the per-
nicious evils, which oftentimes happened thereby. Is not this a sufficient
argument, to prove such an action to be good? (D1v')

Of course every Puritan commentator claims that he is only out to reform
abuses, but Lowin goes further, citing the standard Protestant argument for reform itself:

_Wee read in the 21. Chap. of Numbers, that Moses by commandement of God, did make a Serpent of Brasse, and erected it for a signe unto the Israelites. And we read in the 18. Chap. of the second Booke of Kings, that the religious King Hezekiah did beat downe, and breake in peeces the sayd Brasen Serpent, because he saw that the people of Israel continued yet to adore the same, in burning Incense unto it. If then it have been lawfull, to abolish the Sacrament of God, in consideration that it was abused; why should it not be lawfull, to put away the inventions of men for the like cause? (D2r)_

Even if Lowin was “an expert dancer,” as Peter Thomson has recently characterized him, the “conclusions” on dancing of this treatise are clearly negative if not condemnatory. Yet how is such a stance possible in light of the fact that the author was a player, and dancing had to be part of his craft? Complete irony would involve a pamphlet of more ambition as well as a more conspicuous persona. Earlier, I cited various works dedicated to Edward Lord Denny of Waltham; I would like now to quote part of Lowin’s dedication:

_I dedicate these my Conclusions upon dances to your Lordship, because I was once mooved to speake of them in your Lordships companie: which matter I could not then handle so pertinently in speach, as I can at this time in ink and paper. (A3v)_

There is an autobiographical quality to this appeal, a quality that suggests real connection between conversation, contemplation, and written response. _Conclusions Upon Dances_, therefore, is shown to be an essay in personal clarification: it is aimed at explaining the author’s position. But, although it is written under a pseudonym that reveals the author’s intimacy with the subject, the conclusions of the pamphlet are not those that we might ordinarily associate with a contemporary player’s. Because of this, we must be prepared to think of the player first as a man. Only then do we realize that he is not arguing a set of moral principles for the good of posterity. Rather, he is explaining what seems to be a contradiction in his person: he is a Puritan and a player.

When we read Puritan diatribes, it is usually the work of Puritan clergymen that we are reading. And, because we are conditioned by theatre history to think of the Renaissance stage as a battleground between Royalist patronage and Puritan outrage, we often neglect the simple human truth of the individual conscience caught in the middle of conceptual conflict. I suggest that this mediocre little pamphlet by a contemporary actor represents part of that middle conscience. And “middle” is a key word. The
players of this period were basically middle-class tradesmen; the theatre itself a business venture. In the most recent comprehensive study, G.E. Bentley points out that London players were organized along roughly the same lines as the established craft guilds, and provides a list of theatre people who were "free" of city companies: "Robert Armin, Andrew Cane, Robert Keysar, and John Lowin were Goldsmiths; John Heminges was a Grocer; John Shank was a Weaver; Thomas Downton was a Vintner; Thomas Taylor was a Pewterer; James Burbage was a Joiner."20 Puritanism, as a middle-class attitude of mind, enlisted its broadest support from trades such as these just mentioned in connection with prominent London performers. Lowin's inclusion is not much of a surprise. Throughout the argument of Conclusions Upon Dances, he reveals himself as part of the Puritan middle class; he never considers dance as metaphor, as expression of higher order. This is a way of thinking more appropriate to the "upper" classes. Instead, Lowin lampoons the more common performances of his day with the nonchalance of familiarity. Dance retains for him the Puritan stigma attached to any physical activity that is overtly demonstrative, consciously alluring, and nonproductive.

In the role of author, he has extended the actor's use of the sanctified word. And his words throughout have been Puritan words: "godly," "honest," "faythfull," "pernicious evils," "burning zeale." His concern with dance is subordinate to a sense of personal acquittal. The guarded criticism contained in the tract reveals him to be a performer, but a performer with a difference: he is a King's Man, a dignified groom of the Royal chamber, one who - like the dancers in Scripture - is asked to perform. He thereby dissociates himself from the poseurs of his craft: the dancers of jigs, the exhibitionists, the extempore wits - such as justified the vagabond status of former days. Like the stage itself Lowin's career as principal actor and, after Heminges' death, virtual stage manager of the King's Company, is a pattern toward respectability. This little pamphlet - Lowin's single publication - may be thought of as a document in that career. A decidedly ephemeral form, the pamphlet is the perfect medium for creating immediate effect. And, with Lowin as author, immediate personal effect would seem to be the burning issue. As a result, Conclusions Upon Dances has nothing to do with vindicating dance or any part of the stage in general. Its focus is not that wide. Rather, it is an exercise bent on vindicating the author himself as an immensely popular yet privately godly player.

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Notes

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Notes

1 In quoting any part of the British Library quarto of Conclusions Upon Dances (London, 1607; STC 16874), I will silently modernize w/v and long s for purposes of transcription. Two other copies of the 1607 issue exist: in the Huntington Library, and in the library of James and Gregory Stevens Cox, St. Sampson, Guernsey. For Collier's attribution, see Memoirs of the Principal Actors in the Plays of Shakespeare (London: The Shakespeare Society 32, 1846), pp. 168-69; also A Bibliographical and Critical Account of the Rarest Books in the English Language (London: Joseph Lilly, 1865), 1, 496-97. Collier supposed “Tho. D.” to be Thomas Dekker, playwright for the Worcester's Company, thereby establishing a link with Lowin who had been a Worcester's Man prior to joining the King's Company in 1603. Collier's postulations aside, ink analysis proves the inscription to be early seventeenth-century, thereby heightening the likelihood of the attribution. It is a brown writing ink, very corrosive and acidic, and compares favorably under high magnification with other writing of contemporary date. Thanks are due to the technicians of the Department of Manuscripts at the British Library for their help in my investigations there, May 1985.


3 Collier, Memoirs, p. 169.

4 Collier, Bibliographical and Critical Account, I, 497.


7 The title continues, “and commending the excellence of such Persons which have from Age to Age, in all solemn Feasts and victorious Triumphs, used that (no lesse) Honourable, Commendable, and laudable Recreation” (London, 1609; STC 16875). But “condemnation” was not mentioned in the earlier title; and, interestingly, the dedication to Lord Denny of Waltham is cancelled in the 1609 reissue.


9 The Geneva Bible, introd. Lloyd Berry (1560; rpt. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). The introduction to this facsimile edition is especially lucid on the “Calvinistic tone” of the text overall, as well as its “controversial notes from the extreme Protestant point of view” (p. 16). When quoting from this text, I will modernize as noted before and expand all archaic contractions.


Since Robin Hood, Maid Marian
And little John are gone a,
The hobby horse was quite forgot
When Kempe did dance alone a.

(p. xiii; setting, pp. 50-52)


15 See *Airs or Fantastic Spirits to Three Voices*, ed., Rev. Edmund Horace Fellowes, The English Madrigal School Series No. 13 (London: Stainer and Bell, 1916). In the dedication, Weelkes wished Lord Denny “the happiness of both worldes” (pp. xx-xxi). As well, the opening stanza of lyric XX includes an interesting allusion to a well-known London showman:

Since Robin Hood, Maid Marian
And little John are gone a,
The hobby horse was quite forgot
When Kempe did dance alone a.

(p. xiii; setting, pp. 50-52)


18 See Northbrooke, p. 150; Prynne, p. 252ff. – a far cry from Sir Thomas Elyot’s findings of the century before: “in every daunce, of a moste auncient custome, there daunseth to gether a man and a woman, holding eche other by the hande or the armes, whiche betokeneth concorde.” See *The Boke Named The Gouernour*, ed. Henry Herbert Stephen Croft (1833; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), I, 235-36.
