

Introduction: classical humanism and republicanism in England before the Civil War

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The Civil War and the Interregnum hold a prime place in the history of English political thought. There is a high degree of unanimity amongst historians that English political discourse faced an abrupt and total turning point in the 1640s and that the period between 1640 and 1660 gave rise to an exceptionally diverse body of political understanding and interpretation. One of the most significant and farreaching traditions to emerge upon the stage of English political thinking was republicanism, in the writings of such men as John Milton, Marchamont Nedham, James Harrington and Algernon Sidney. Whilst scholars have long been aware of the great importance of these theorists, they have been keen to emphasize two issues in so far as the moment of the emergence of republicanism is concerned.

In the first place, they have pointed out that distinctively republican themes were discussed in a comprehensive manner relatively late. During the Civil War the idea of kingship was tenaciously held, and republicanism only gained currency for the first time after the regicide, as a device to legitimate the foundation of the republic. Secondly, and closely related to this, scholars have stressed even more strongly that before the Civil War there were no discernible signs of republicanism. That is to say, the republican strand of political discourse only appeared in England after the collapse of the traditional frames of reference. Before this there was simply 'no room for republican notions'; the dominant modes of discourse stressing eternal unity, harmony and hierarchy effectively inhibited the emergence of republican modes of thinking.¹

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E.g. Zagorin 1954, pp. 146–9, quotation p. 146; Rawson 1969, pp. 187–8; Worden 1990, pp. 225–6; Worden 1991a, pp. 443–5; Wootton 1986, pp. 70–1. Cf., however, Worden 1981, pp. 182, 185–90, which depicts some family contacts; Scott 1988, pp. 18, 48–58. For the abrupt



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The republicanism of the 1650s is often referred to as classical republicanism because of its obvious intellectual debt to classical Greek and especially Roman sources. It conceived of men as citizens rather than subjects; they were characterized not so much by obedience to the king as by active participation in the political life of their community through counselling and the law-making process. The citizens' participatory role was chiefly based on their virtuous characters, which enabled them to promote the public good. The term 'classical republicanism' thus embraces a cluster of themes concerning citizenship, public virtue and true nobility. But it also refers to a more specific constitutional stance. Virtue was closely linked with the distinctively republican character of classical republicanism: to ensure that the most virtuous men governed the commonwealth and to control corruption. magistracy should be elected rather than inherited. In this sense republicanism (in the narrow sense of a constitution without a king) could be an anti-monarchical goal: civic values required concomitant republican institutions, but monarchical arrangements were said to suppress these. Arrangements usually favoured by classical republicans were those of the mixed constitution, and the term republic was also used in the wider and more general sense of referring to a good and just constitution.²

If historians have concurred that classical republicanism only emerged in England during the 1650s, their unanimity further extends to its wider ideological background. They agree, in other words, that the broader political vocabulary which to a great extent underlay this form of republicanism – classical humanism – was also absent from English political debate between the mid sixteenth and mid seventeenth centuries. It is commonly assumed that classical humanism appeared twice in England. In its original form it reached England in the late fourteenth century and flourished during the early part of the sixteenth. It fizzled out, however, in the middle of the century to reemerge transformed in the 1650s. Most accounts of the role of humanism in English political thought break off at the middle of the

change, see also Eccleshall 1978, pp. 153, 2; Sharpe 1989, p. 18; Salmon 1959, p. 12. See also Sommerville 1986, p. 58, for the absence of republicanism before the Civil War. Sommerville, however, maintains that the Civil War 'was no great watershed in English political thinking', p. 238.

For an excellent definition of the terminology, to which I am particularly indebted, see Goldsmith 1987, pp. 226–30. For suggestive remarks, see Worden 1991b, pp. 249–53; Mendle 1989a, pp. 116–17. See also Fink 1945; Worden 1981; Worden 1990; Scott 1988; and more generally Nippel 1988.



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sixteenth century;3 Lawrence Humphrey's treatise The nobles or of nobilitye (1560 in Latin, 1563 in English) was already 'a belated Humanist treatise'. 4 It has often been suggested that humanism must have had a considerable impact on Elizabethan and Jacobean statesmen, but this suggestion has never been fully explored.⁵ By and large, scholars have moved directly to the mid seventeenth century. A case in point is Zera Fink who, having discussed the mid-sixteenth-century upholders of the mixed constitution, almost immediately shifts his attention to James Harrington and John Milton, hence skipping almost a century. 6 Likewise, Donald W. Hanson claims that pre-Civil War England was completely dominated by the concept of 'double majesty', whether in its medieval form of dominium politicum et regale or in its earlyseventeenth-century form of dominium regale et legale. It was only during the mid-century upheavals that 'civic consciousness', a 'loyalty to abstract principles of government, justified in the name of concern for the public good', emerged. This new concept is exemplified by Milton's insistence that 'the task was "to place every one his private welfare and happiness in the public peace, liberty, and safety"'.

Historians of English political thinking in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries have mainly been concerned with the question of whether there existed any profound ideological disagreement. Whilst a number of scholars still maintain that the political thought of the period can be inclusively described as the common theory of Tudor monarchy – a theory of order and the rule of law⁸ – recent scholarship has stressed that other political vocabularies – absolutism, the ancient constitution, contractarian theories, including even some forms of resistance theories – were in fact employed in political arguments of the day and that 'there was a variety of political viewpoints in early Stuart England'. A common characteristic of all these accounts, however, is that they all ignore the humanist tradition. Scholars, irrespective of

Morris 1953, pp. 21–6, 143–4

Fink 1945. See also Rawson 1969, pp. 186–201; Mendle 1985. Hanson 1970, especially pp. 42, 248, 254, 287–90, 310, 333.

Raab 1964; Smith 1973; Mendle 1973; Weston and Greenberg 1981; Sharpe 1985, pp. 14-18, 28-31; Russell 1990, pp. 131-60; Collins 1989.

E.g. Bush 1939, pp. 69-100; Ferguson 1965; McConica 1965; Dowling 1986, Fox and Guy 1986; Schoek 1988; Elton 1990; Guy 1988, pp. 408-13.

Caspari 1954, pp. 157, 207–8; Hill 1965, pp. 266–8; Rabb 1981, pp. 72–3; Ferguson 1986, pp. 89–92, 112–25; Charlton 1965, pp. 41–85; Skinner 1988, pp. 445–6; Worden 1991a, p. 444; Guy 1993, pp. 14–15.

Sommerville 1991, p. 70; Peck 1993b; Sommerville 1986; Sommerville 1989; Eccleshall 1978; Bowler 1981; Bowler 1984; Collinson 1987; Cust 1987, pp. 176–85. See also Allen 1938, Judson 1949; Greenleaf 1964.



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their general predilection, seem to concur that humanism had no perceptible impact on the political discourse of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. ¹⁰ It is scarcely any exaggeration to say that there is a scholarly gap between the mid sixteenth and the mid seventeenth centuries in so far as the role of the classical humanist tradition in English political discourse is concerned.

The most forceful and dominant account of these issues has been offered by J. G. A. Pocock. In his study of the classical republican tradition, The Machiavellian moment, Pocock has put forward an argument as to why themes of citizenship and the republic did not gain ground in Elizabethan and early Stuart England. His point of departure, which he broadly speaking shares with other scholars, is that the emergence of republican and 'civic humanist' themes was effectively hindered by other modes of thought and that their real development in England only became possible after the collapse of older viewpoints in the wake of the traumatic experiences of the Civil War and the Interregnum. So although Pocock shares with other scholars the assumption that the Civil War entailed a total and abrupt change in habits of thought, he does not commit himself to the somewhat simplistic idea of the 'Elizabethan world picture' but offers an ingenious account of the roles of different political vocabularies in thwarting as well as paving the way for the development of the ideas of citizenship and republic.

According to Pocock, the political vocabulary of the early-sixteenth-century humanists offered a way in which the English could develop civic awareness by projecting the image of the humanist as a counsellor to his prince. In this role the humanist possessed skills which the prince was lacking and he was, therefore, 'contributing to an association a virtue of his own, an individual capacity for participation in rule, and had then taken a step in the direction of the Aristotelian image of the citizen'. Pocock accepts, however, the idea that English humanism declined in the mid sixteenth century and that its intellectual inheritors, if it had any, were the Tacitean courtiers in whom we encounter the first signs of a fully fledged conception of a political community as an association of active participants. Even though the Tudor notion of descending authority was incompatible with a theory of mixed government, there were indications of republican vocabulary in imperfectly

See, however, Sommerville 1986, pp. 81, n.1, 245.

Cf., however, Pocock 1966, especially pp. 266-7, 270, where he accepts to an extent Raab's simplistic account of the political thought of Tudor England.



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legitimized situations. In these situations there was more room for independent choices and decisions. 'It was consequently', Pocock declares, 'in the study of statecraft that Jacobean intellects were most likely to lay hold upon these elements of the republican tradition which ascribed distinctive characteristics – interests, humors, *particulari* – to kings, nobilities and peoples, and considered how these might conflict or be reconciled.'¹²

For Pocock, the idea of order and all that went with it was only one way of conceptualizing the political universe before the Civil War. There were other theoretical standpoints which offered directions for the early modern Englishman to develop an understanding of the political world, and which in their own ways developed into modes of civic consciousness but at the same time effectively impeded evolving republican and 'civic humanist' conceptions. Amongst these were the medieval vocabulary of *jurisdiction* and *gubernaculum*, the theory of ancient constitution, the doctrine of the elect nation and the tradition of natural jurisprudence. All these traditions contributed ultimately to preventing Englishmen from conceiving themselves as active, participating citizens and of the commonwealth as a genuine republic. ¹³

Although Pocock's thesis has met with wide acceptance, his arguments have failed to convince the entire scholarly community. Recently some historians have become increasingly aware that there is perhaps something lacking in his account. It has become clear that in parliamentary elections, for instance, a 'surprisingly large social group became involved in legitimate politics'. And it has been suggested that during the early seventeenth century the concept of liberty became associated with 'an ideal of community and a sense of participation in its public business'. David Norbrook has emphasized how 'the conscious intentions of some [Elizabethan and Jacobean] poets may in fact have been less conservative than has often been assumed'. He painstakingly excavates a number of radical implications from their works and convincingly argues that many of them were expressed in classical humanist vocabulary. Linda Levy Peck has recently asserted

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Pocock 1975b, pp. 338–9, 347, 350–7; Pocock 1966, p. 279.

Pocock 1966, pp. 278–9; Pocock 1975b, pp. 334–7, 340–7; Pocock 1977, p. 15; Pocock 1981a, pp. 54–6; Pocock 1981b, pp. 356–7; see in general also Pocock 1970; Pocock 1971; Pocock 1975a.

⁴ Hirst 1975, especially pp. 4, 6–7, 104–5, 152–3, 176–7, 191–3. Cf. Underdown 1985, pp. 106–45.

Sacks 1992, quotation from p. 110.

¹⁶ Norbrook 1984, especially pp. 12–16.



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that the discourses of patronage and corruption were in large part classical humanist in character. ¹⁷ Mentions of the republican notion of liberty have lately been found in debates about the puritan colonies in America in the 1630s. ¹⁸

More to the point, Patrick Collinson has called attention to the fact that the Englishman's horizon concerning his active and participatory role in the life of his commonwealth was perhaps not as limited as Pocock allows. Collinson does not argue for 'a continuous, coherent republican movement' nor even for 'the incipience in Elizabethan England of a kind of constitutional monarchy'. But referring on the theoretical level inter alia to 'the legacy of early-sixteenth-century humanism' and on the practical level to the Bond of Association, he points out that the English, whether in the upper or lower stratum of society, were able to respond 'resourcefully and intelligently to a most unusual [political] situation'. We must, therefore, be careful 'not to underestimate both the political sophistication and the political capacity of high Elizabethan society'. 19 According to Collinson, 'Pocock underestimated ... quasi-republican modes of political reflection and action within the intellectual and active reach of existing modes of consciousness and established constitutional parameters'; 'citizens', Collinson adds, 'were concealed within subjects'. 20

There are two closely related problems in Pocock's interpretation which offer sufficient reason to re-evaluate his account. First, in treating the Civil War period as an absolute turning point, his interpretation, in accordance with other assessments of early modern English political thought, tends to make too sharp a division between the modes of political discourse before and after the 1640s. Secondly, although Pocock recognizes the role of humanism in the incipient development of civic consciousness, in assuming that it lost force in the mid sixteenth century, he unduly neglects its importance in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. There is no reason to belittle the importance of the Civil War in the history of political thought, but it does not follow that Englishmen were completely incapable of developing a civic consciousness before that period. It is arguable that Pocock underestimates the level of sophistication of pre-Civil War English political

Peck 1993a, p. 208 and in general pp. 161-207.

¹⁸ Kupperman 1989.

Collinson 1987, citations pp. 422, 408, 423, 402; see also pp. 406–7.

²⁰ Collinson 1990, pp. 23-4, in general 22-34.

See, however, Pocock 1985b, p. 150.



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writing. A partial embracing and employment of republican themes in England was not entirely dependent on a complete and dramatic change in the political context. Nor was a fully fledged republican theory obligatory for the development of civic consciousness. Englishmen were to an extent able both to embrace parts of the republican vocabulary in their own context and to articulate their civic consciousness without a full-scale republican theory.

The main aim of the present study is, accordingly, to examine the role of classical humanism in English political writing from the 1570s to 1640. It is hoped that this examination will throw light on a number of issues central to early modern political thinking. First, a study of classical humanism should enable us to consider civic consciousness and the idea of citizenship in pre-Civil War England. If we wish, in other words, to assess the nature and development of these issues properly, it is to a large extent the continuance of the classical humanist vocabulary that ought to serve as the focus of our attention. Moreover, this investigation will enable us to analyse the republican features of early modern English political thinking. It is again primarily the classical humanist tradition which should be examined in order to gauge the extent of republicanism before the Civil War.

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Humanism is taken to include the conscious revival as well as the reinterpretation of classical Graeco-Roman history, literature and values and, in so far as political thinking is concerned, their effective application to the political problems of the contemporary world. It follows that classical humanism was 'a mode of discourse' or 'a political vocabulary' rather than 'a programme'; it was a means of grasping and conceptualizing politics, rather than a monolithic and detailed plan or strategy. ²³

Whether as a scholarly movement or a mode of political thought, humanism emerged, it is widely agreed, relatively late in England. Its inception in the mid fifteenth century was due partly to Italian scholars who diffused humanist ideas in England and partly to those Englishmen who acquired a predilection for humanist studies in Italy.²⁴ It is still

²³ See Pocock 1987b; Pocock 1985c, chapter 1; Pocock 1977, p. 15; Lockyer 1979.

See e.g. Burke 1990, p. 2; Todd 1987, pp. 22-3; Ferguson 1965, pp. 162-3; Logan 1977; Trinkaus 1990, pp. 681-4; Fox and Guy 1986, pp. 31-3.

Weiss 1957. For a succinct account of the dissemination of Italian humanism, see Burke 1990. For the connections between England and the continent in the early sixteenth century, see e.g. Dowling 1986, pp. 140-75.



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essentially correct, however, to follow Francis Bacon in dating the chief period of humanism, or as Bacon put it in his succinct definition of the scope of humanism, 'the admiration of ancient authors, the hate of the schoolmen, the exact study of languages, and the efficacy of preaching', to the period between Erasmus and Roger Ascham.²⁵

Humanism as a vocabulary of political discourse had a similar beginning in England. One of the first humanist political treatises in English was produced by John Tiptoft, earl of Worcester, who translated Cicero's *De amicitia* as well as Buonaccorso da Montemagna's *Controversia de nobilitate* as early as the 1450s. ²⁶ It grew into prominence during the first part of the sixteenth century, when its most celebrated treatises such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Thomas Elyot's *The boke named the gouernour* (1531) and Thomas Starkey's *Dialogue between Pole and Lupset* (c.1529–32) were composed alongside numerous less famous treatises by such authors as Thomas Lupset, Richard Morison and John Heywood. A little later, in the mid Tudor period, it found its exponents in such men as Thomas Becon, Roger Ascham, Thomas Smith and in the so-called 'Commonwealthmen' in general. ²⁷

English humanists, together with their North European contemporaries, inherited a somewhat equivocal legacy from the political vocabulary of Italian humanism. On the one hand, humanism had been used to defend and characterize republican values, although it would be highly misleading to equate republicanism with humanism, for, of course, there had been pre-humanist republican arguments. In the course of the fifteenth century, however, strong princely rule emerged in various Italian cities with the consequence that the humanist tradition was used to eulogize princely rule. By and large, northern humanists were more inclined to employ the values and beliefs of the princely mode of Italian humanism. They were particularly reticent on some of the two central issues of the republican tradition: liberty and the citizens' army. Instead, they were preoccupied with producing treatises in the same genres as those Italian humanists who advocated princely rule — educational treatises and advice-books for princes and

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²⁵ Bacon, Advancement of learning, in Works, 111, pp. 283-4. See e.g. McConica 1965.

Mitchell 1938.

See e.g. McConica 1965; Caspari 1954; Zeeveld 1969; Ferguson 1963; Ferguson 1965; Berkowitz 1984; Elton 1979; Todd 1987; Fox and Guy 1986; Elton 1990. For More, see especially Skinner 1987; Bradshaw 1981. For Starkey, see Mayer 1985; Mayer 1986; Mayer 1989. For Elyot, see e.g. Lehmberg 1960.

²⁸ See e.g. Skinner 1990a; Nederman 1993.

²⁹ Skinner 1978 1, p. 200.



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their counsellors - and were disposed to endorse similar sets of values as their Italian predecessors: the commonwealth was in its best state when a prince with a full range of personal virtues ruled it.30

Nevertheless, it is of crucial importance to bear in mind that Italian republicanism also had from the very beginning a considerable impact on northern humanists.³¹ Although English humanists took the princely context for granted, it did not prevent their adopting a number of 'civic' and republican themes in their writings. In this they partly drew on Italian republicanism, but their main source of inspiration was the Roman stoic authors, who were of vital importance in the formation of the humanist view of politics.³²

The first way in which English humanists can be said to have followed Italian republicanism was in conceiving themselves as reformers of the commonwealth.³³ This issue appeared with vehemence in Thomas More's Utopia and was treated even more extensively by Thomas Starkey in his Dialogue. Robert Whittinton translated Cicero's De officiis partly to explain what engendered the 'encrease of commen welthes' and what was the 'cause of [their] ruyne and decaye'. 34 A more important point of contact with the tradition of republicanism was the discussion of the merits of the mixed constitution. As is well known, Thomas Starkey was fully convinced that 'a myxte state' was not merely the best form of government and 'most convenyent to conserve the hole out of tyranny'; it was also the most suitable for curing the diseases of the English body politic.35 It is equally well known that John Ponet employed the same vocabulary in his argu-

See e.g. Skinner 1978 1, pp. 118–28, 213–17, 222–3, 228–43; Skinner 1988, pp. 423–30, 443–5. For republican humanism, see e.g. Baron 1966; Bayley 1961; Bouwsma 1968. For a balanced survey, see Rabil 1988. Cf. however Grafton 1991.

See in general Skinner 1978 1, pp. 215-42, and for a succinct account where this point is made with particular pertinence, see Skinner 1988, pp. 445-8. In my characterization of the impact of Italian republicanism on the early-sixteenth-century English humanists, I owe an obvious debt to this account. Cf. in general also Todd 1987, pp. 22-52; Caspari 1954; Ferguson 1965;

For the centrality of Roman stoicism for the development of the humanist political vocabulary, see Skinner 1978 1, p. xiv; Todd 1987, pp. 22-3, 27-9; Kristeller 1988, pp. 279, 285; Skinner 1990a, especially pp. 122-3; Tuck 1990.

33 Cf. Todd 1987, p. 23; Bradshaw 1991, pp. 100, 130.

The thre bookes of Tullyes offices, translated by Robert Whittinton (London, 1534), 'An exhortacyon', sigs. b4^r-5^r; Anon., The prayse and commendacion of suche as sought comen welthes (London, n.d. [1549]). See also e.g. Robert Crowley, The way to wealth, wherein is plainly taught a most present remedy for sedicion (n.p. [London], 1550), especially sigs. A3^{r-v}, B8^v; [Humfrey Braham], The institucion of a gentleman (London, 1555), sig. *6^{r-v}.

Thomas Starkey, A dialogue between Pole and Lupset, ed. T. F. Mayer, Camden 4th ser., xxxvII,

1989, pp. 36-40, 67-73, 111-13, 119-23. Cf. e.g. Nippel 1980 pp. 183-9.



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ments against Mary Tudor and that John Aylmer used it in his defence of her half-sister Elizabeth.³⁶

The belief in their own capacity to bring up and tackle the pressing problems of the commonwealth increased, as Ferguson and Pocock have pointed out, English humanists' 'self-image' and their understanding of their own active political role.³⁷ It also led them to discard the Italian princely humanists' predilection for the vita contemplativa and to embrace instead the Ciceronian and republican conviction that the vita activa was the highest form of life. Otium - learning - was, however, accommodated to this conception as a necessary requirement for achieving the true ideal of negotium. An active member of the commonwealth was something akin to the Ciceronian ideal of a rhetorician: he joined learning (philosophy) with the active life (eloquence). This was one of the topics which engaged Hythlodaeus and More in *Utopia*, ³⁸ and it was a governing theme of Thomas Elyot's The boke named the governour. It was also the topic with which Starkey opened his Dialogue, where Lupset persuaded Pole to believe that 'al men are borne & of nature brought forth, to commyn such gyftys as be to them gyven, ychone to the profyt of other, in perfayt cyvylyte, & not to lyve to theyr owne plesure'. This was the true end of 'cyvyle lyfe', as Starkey termed it in true humanist fashion.³⁹ This essentially Ciceronian doctrine of the great importance of the vita activa was repeated in numerous lesser known humanist tracts, and it is scarcely an exaggeration to state that it became a hallmark of the English humanists. 40 The chief ways in which a man could offer his services to the commonwealth were either to act as a counsellor or more indirectly to submit written advice. An increasingly important role, however, was attached to parliament and its law-making function, which was in some ways becoming central to the English vita activa. 41

Another closely related topic which gained currency amongst

Ferguson 1965; Pocock 1975b, pp. 339-40.

Starkey, A dialogue, pp. 1–6, cf. p. 142.

Ferguson 1986, pp. 57–8; Kelso 1929, pp. 39–40. See e.g. 'An exhortacyon', The thre bookes of Tullyes offices, sigs. a5', b2', b4'; Marcos Tullius Ciceroes thre bokes of duties to marcus his sonne, translated by Nicolas Grimalde (London, 1556), sig. c8'. [Braham], The institucion, sig. D6', see in general sigs. D5'-6', A2', c4' G6'. See also e.g. [Leonard Cox], The arte or crafte of rhethoryke (London, n.d. [1532?]), sig. B7'; [Josse Clichtove], The boke of noblenes: that sheweth how many sortes and kyndes there is, translated from French by John Larke (n.p. [London], n.d. [1550?]), sig. G1'-

J[ohn] P[onet], A shorte treatise of politike power (n.p. [Strasburg?], 1556), sigs. A4^v-B5^v; cf. Peardon 1982. [John Aylmer], An harborowe for faithfull and trew subjectes (Strasburg, 1559), sigs. H2^v-I3^v, O4^v.

³⁸ Skinner 1987, pp. 128-35; Skinner 1988, pp. 449-50; Fox and Guy 1986, pp. 40-1.

Ferguson 1965, pp. 146-52; Pocock 1975b, pp. 339-40.