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Fantasy Art and Warrior Women: An Aesthetic Critique of Feminine Images

Abstract

Discusses the significance of portrayals of warrior women in modern fantasy art, particularly in comic books and their associated items. Notes the good and bad points of such portrayals and expresses the hope that the spiritual dimension present in characters such as Lewis's Jill and Tolkien's Éowyn will come to play a greater role in artistic portrayals of warrior women.

Additional Keywords

Comic book art; Fantasy art and illustration; Women in art; Women warriors

FANTASY ART AND WARRIOR WOMEN

AN AESTHETIC CRITIQUE OF FEMININE IMAGES

JOE SIMMONS

In Kant's *Critique of Judgement* he argues that the "beau- tiful" and the "sublime" are not merely our "taste" or even simple "subjective" judgements. Aesthetics, he says, really tells us something about the meaning of human existence. Aesthetics, in other words, contains and conveys a metaphysic. (See *Critique of Judgement*, section no. 45). I will be concerned with one type of art, fantasy art, and one type of portrayal in fantasy art. If what Kant claims is true, then we may be able to sort through some necessary obscurity and ambiguity to see whether we can establish guidelines for an analysis of a specific type of art and its meaning.

There are three common artistic images of women. For convenience sake, let us divide them into three basic prototypes, each type having a variety of sub-types. There is, first of all, the prototype of the feminine as mother. This would be commonly represented in the West by the artistic image of the Virgin Mary, both virgin and mother. Secondly, there is the image of Athena. The Homeric scholar, Walter Otto, describes this type as a "sister" and "companion" to heroes. (See Otto's, *The Homeric Gods*.) Thirdly, there is the image of woman as lover. Both Guinevere and Isolde would represent this image. Of course, these images can be mixed. Athena not only is a "sister to heroes" but represents wisdom as well as war.

I am interested in a fourth type of feminine image, the image of the woman-warrior, an image closer to Athena. Today, this image is occurring more frequently, especially in fantasy art.

In making judgements about aesthetic meaning, I will rely on two considerations. First of all, Plato argued that "art" is a most important means of communication. It bypasses "intelligence" and goes directly into the "soul." Thus, art is a serious means of either "building a soul" or "corrupting a soul." (See Plato's *Republic*, 375^a-376^e and especially 401^e and the *Laws*, 797^a - 798^d.) Secondly, the 19th century romanticist, Fredrick Schiller, following Kant, sees art, as such, with an implied "ought" or imperative. Art should make "beauty" that builds inner power. (See his *The Aesthetic Education of Man*.) If Plato and Schiller are correct, then art is a serious concern for any culture. How women are portrayed would be a vital aspect of that general issue.

I will suggest in the following article that the portrayal of women in fantasy art is a major step forward in the modern human understanding of femininity. I will also suggest that these diverse and multiple images of women in fantasy need much development and refinement. I do

not here refer to the purely artistic merits of the art itself, but rather to the philosophic and even moral meanings of this fantasy art.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*, we have a portrayal of a young warrior princess. Jill is an archer. In the final battle of all time (and all *The Chronicles of Narnia*) she stands her ground against the overwhelming forces of the Tisroc. She watches as the battle for Narnia takes its inevitable turn for the worst. The rescuing horses all die. The good bear dies in his simplicity and confusion. Jill holds her ground knowing defeat is imminent. She will die and she knows it. She starts to cry but makes sure her tears do not wet the bow strings. She will sell her life dearly.

I am interested in examining the presentation of this type of "warrior woman" not specifically in written art, but in graphic art. This, for two reasons. First of all, there has been a proliferation of graphic art portraying "warrior women" in the last twenty years. Any comic book store has these images by the hundreds from "Supergirl" to "Batwoman." It is time to analyze the meaning of this growing phenomenon. Secondly, a picture has, in some ways, much more impact than the written word. It is primitive, powerful, and raw. It goes past rational consciousness directly into the heart. In other words, these images will have, and are having, a deep, growing impact on a large segment of future minds.

My first question is: Are there any philosophic guidelines or parameters for the presentation of a "warrior woman" in a genuine art?

This leads to my second question: How should "Jill" look? This question is odd but, I suggest, not illegitimate. In art, the portrayal is everything. In Jill's case, the issue may not be so grave as in other personae. Jill, after all, is around twelve. This limits the parameters considerably for artistic license. The color of the eyes, or hair, her height, her clothes can all be moderately subjective. She will not, however, have the body of a "Wonderwoman." My point is simply this. To be a genuine art form, the portrayal must approximate an original theme or image. This image of Jill is "set" by C.S. Lewis' original literary portrayal. It is also "set" by an overriding mythic ontology.

This takes me to a third question: Is there an "original image" for a "warrior woman?" Here we are faced with a complex and difficult issue. The question can be restated: Is there a paradigm for a "warrior woman?"

To go into the metaphysical issues of archetypal femininity or Jungian depth psychology would be interesting,

may be even essential, for a full portrayal of the issue. It would, of course, go far beyond the confines of a short article. Nor do we need to run that deeply. I wish to start an analysis of these issues. For that purpose, simple beginnings are enough.

As I write, there lies on the table before me several images of "women warriors" in fantasy art. If these images contain similar aspects, can we cautiously assume that something is coming through artistic consciousness that is grounded in a primal concept? I will suggest, cautiously, that this is so.

During the 50's, 60's and 70's the fantasy art of Frank Frazeta began to gain wide acceptance among the fans of fantasy. If we look at his portrayal of women, we can see a clear break with the "normal" image of femininity. Frazeta's women have strong, athletic and muscular bodies. They are buxom and dressed (sort of) for action. They do not look like either the *Vogue* "model" or common, traditional "movie star" images. These women look as if they are built for speed, power, and action. They are also unmistakably women. Quite often they carry weapons, instruments of empowerment and action.

(Of course, the image of the woman warrior was around long before Frank Frazeta. One only has to think of images like Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. The warrior woman image has always been around, usually on the "periphery" of art and thought.)

I would like to ask the following questions: 1) Is this a "fair" presentation of a certain type of woman?, and 2) Is fantasy art simply disguised "centerfolds" holding swords?

As to the first question, the meaning of the word "fair" will depend on an ontological framework which incorporates femininity as an equal though "polar opposite" force to masculine power. If there are male warriors, are there also female warriors? I suggest that an ontological balance would call for a clear "yes." All warriors need power, speed and weapons.

As to the second question, I will suggest that the fantasy portrayal of women warriors is a major breakthrough in the archetype image for modern culture. I will suggest that portraying women in high action and conflict with the empowerment of weapons in part transforms and redeems the artistic impact of femininity as generally portrayed.

I am suggesting that an image of women, clothed, unclothed, or all the degrees in between is radically transformed, image qua image, when she is portrayed with the symbols of power and/or as competent in a setting of high action. This setting should conform to two basic criteria: first of all, she must be portrayed "radiating" power (martial power, rulership, intelligence, athletic ability, etc.). Secondly, she must be portrayed as involved in action (or capable of doing so). The presence of weapons, for instance, artistically transforms a passive feminine image to an acting feminine image. Most fantasy art which portrays women warriors more than conforms to these principles.

I would like to examine two more examples to illustrate these principles, one of which I hope to be acceptable, per se, the other more controversial.

In Jim Fitzpatrick's Celtic painting of "The Magic Cup" (Acalla Cards, Ennis, Co., Clare, Ireland) we see a tall, attractive young woman with long, tangled blond hair, dressed in a bright rose-white gown. She is holding (presenting in fact, to the viewer) a chalice. Behind her, generally obscured by her presence, is a long haired Celtic warrior. He seems to be some type of guardian warrior to an archetypal Grail priestess. She could easily represent *Parzifal's* Grail Queen, and he, Wolfram Von Eschenback's Templar of the Grail.

In this very artistic and conservative portrayal, it is obvious that she is the center of the artistic creation. She is subtly attractive, combining a dignity and royal presence which radiates a type of mystical quality. She is, it seems, an archetypal priestess, intelligent and self assured. The rose-white gown delicately clings to her hips and legs, subtly adding feminine attraction to the whole scene.

In oblique contrast to this portrayal, I would like to consider Boris Vallajo's picture of the Amazon Queen. Here we have a portrayal of five women, one of whom stands above all the rest. The first thing that may strike the intelligent viewer is that absolutely none of these Amazon warriors could ever be confused with a Byzantine portrayal of the Virgin Mother. They radiate a strong sense of sensual and possibly even direct erotic power. They are almost totally naked. Their bodies are outstanding as well as athletic. No men are present. Their postures accentuate their bodies. The Amazon Queen is striding, if not strutting. Four of the five women carry weapons and seem prepared for any eventuality. The Amazon in the foreground holds a knife, and though almost totally without clothes, wears near knee-length boots of a cavalier type. The Amazon Queen herself appears to be leading a lion, obviously a symbol of royalty and power. (See Comic Card #41, 1986, Vallajo, Fantasy Art Techniques.)

Several objections may occur to the thinking viewer concerning the second example.

Isn't Vallajo's portrayal of these warrior women "too" erotic? To condemn these portrayals, however, involves many presuppositions. These issues, of course, cannot be resolved without appeal to some moral and aesthetic subjectivity. How can one distinguish between Botticelli's "Primavera," a traditional Buddhist temple goddess in the caves at Ajanta, bare breasts and all, and Vallajo's "Amazon Queen" concerning the moral appropriateness of female semi-nudity? Much art—Western, Indian, Tibetan and African—produces feminine images somewhat similar to Vallajo's images. Again, we can see the importance of an underlying ontology or even "religious" metaphysics in which the images occur.

However, a stronger objection can be raised to these types of portrayals. Doesn't this type of art overemphasize

sexual attraction? At least for some viewers? Again, I will suggest that there are numerous hidden assumptions here. First of all, it implies that sexual attraction in viewers is, in and of itself, wrong. Again, one could argue that a male artist like Vallajo is catering to male sexual interest in an exploitive way. However, since there are female artists, Doris Vallajo among them, who draw warrior women, this argument is based on a false assumption.

These portrayals are not, as point of fact, simple male creations. But even if they were, the argument would still be pointless, unless one is willing to assume that male artistic portrayal itself is intrinsically wrong. This whole controversial issue of Vallajo's art, unfortunately, finds this complex issue further distorted by some of his themes. This just muddies already murky water.

Laying these issues aside for the moment, I would like to compare this type of fantasy art to more modern images of the 90's. If we move from the book and calendar art of a Frazeta or Vallajo to the "comic book" art found in "Savage Dragon," "Wild C.A.T.S.," or "X-Man," we find similar portrayals though different in some significant respects. The image still contains weapons and physical muscularity. These images, however, seem more voluptuous. Furthermore, these women not only are the equal of the males, but are often central and dominant. They meet evil male warriors not only on an equal footing, but often exceed these males in martial power. Again, there is a new emphasis on inner mystical power directed toward the ends of justice in the world. In the "Wild C.A.T.S.," character of Zelot, we find a warrior . . . equally at home with any weapon. . . a magnificent fighter. . . (who) brings muscle and experience to the Wild C.A.T.S." (See Wild C.A.T.S., August 1992 for a full page portrayal.) In the character of Cerise, (The Marvel X-Man, Book I, Vol. I, #1) we discover that she is the 5'11", 125 lb. daughter of the Subruki, Zarstock, and Kuli tribes, warrior of the Ghrand Jhar, Group Excalibur, England. She is "able to wield crimson energy fields in a variety of shapes from a powerful blast. . ."

In the character Voodoo ("Wild C.A.T.S.," Card #92), we discover that she "is the only one capable of spotting and exorcising the Daemonite B'Lial. . . ." In "Wild C.A.T.S.," August 1992, Voodoo (aka Priscilla Kitten, 18, 5'8", 130 lbs) is a "balance of power between Daemonites and Kherubim." She has strong . . . animalistic forces. . ." and an "aura of animal attraction. . . ." In "Savage Dragon," #4, September 1993, Rapture zaps her foes with blue lightning from her left hand. In "Savage Dragon," #4, September 1993, Dart does equally well with darts or a fully automatic rifle.

Not all are heroines. The White Queen (the marvel "X-Men," Book I, Vol. I, #1) is evil. She is the leader of the "Mutant Team" and the "Hellfire Club." Tall, blond, booted with full white cape, and a revealing white corset, she radiates deadly beauty.

And so on. Jubilee, Psylocke, Rouge, Storm and Marvel

Girl, heroines and warrior women, all radiating feminine intensity, all worthies in any Norse pantheon of Valkyries.

Can we find our prototypical feminine warrior in all of these images? Do they all share aspects in common? I would suggest that they do. Athena, Artemis, Sheena, Zelot, et al, are armed, powerful and femininely attractive.

I would like to suggest the following points.

1) The portrayal of women of power in fantasy art is a major step in the restoration of the feminine to its place of rightful ontological and aesthetic status with the mother, sister and lover.

(2) The emphasis of erotic power is a legitimate aspect of power, though often, and with growing frequency, overemphasized.

Though artists like Boris Vallajo push this emphasis to the limit, it does not go beyond the bounds of one sub type of a genuine artistic understanding. Athletic women should have athletic bodies. The artistic portrayal of erotic power gains its legitimacy by being synthesized with the aspects of physical strength, intelligence, and the presence of empowering weapons. It is unfortunate that our culture has no metaphysical framework that allows for an artistic presentation of "sacred" erotic power, unlike India, Greece, Rome and Egypt.

The *Playboy* centerfold does not serve, whether or not it is pornographic, simply because the woman lounges as a sex kitten rather than an acting being of power. The *Vogue* model does not serve. She, also, is a passive, if tastefully alluring, example of one type of feminine image. Women in advertisements generally are portrayed in ways that sell products, whether it be clothes or beer. The quality of empowerment varies from so-so to nil. Because of this, women warriors in fantasy art serve as a major breakthrough in the presentation of women, *per se*.

Fantasy art has done two things well: 1) It has portrayed women as powerful actors on the stages of life, and 2) It has portrayed them as women, not as women disguised in male roles.

I would like to suggest that even in portrayals of warrior women like Vallajo's, certain aspects of femininity are portrayed which are positive, even redemptive of lost attitudes and wisdom. The women appear strong, competent, athletic, intelligent and very much feminine. The burden of proof must again rest on those who have objections. Would they prefer women to look less assertive, and less athletic? Is art more moral if the women look less well proportioned? Why?

Still, there are problems and challenges with women in fantasy art. Most of this art falls along a continuum of beauty and artistic merit. Yet, it is too facile to throw out these portrayals of women as mere "comic book" art. I suggest that something working deeply in the inner mythic structure of the human unconscious has come to

the surface. The archetypal is moving from the hidden subliminal consciousness into artistic thought. Along with quests, dragons and knights, we have the emergence of queens, priestesses and warrior-princesses. For some literati to dismiss all of this as "fantasy," "myth" (and therefore unreal) is to miss the complexity and subtlety of the present artistic historical moment.

The women-warrior motif comes along at historical moments of creativity. Athena, with her helmet, shield and spears, Artemis the Huntress with bows and her lion and wolf companions, or the historical Joan d'Arc, all contribute to archetypes rooted in the deepest structure of human consciousness. I think that images like "Rapture," "Zelot," or "Voodoo" are genuine attempts at cosmic statements. Instead of condemnation, these images need to be taken and refined, made not only beautiful but, in Kant's phrase, "sublime," even spiritual as well as powerful. It is fantasy art which has taken the first steps into this new (but very old) threshold of consciousness. "Sophia" is returning in new clothes (or no clothes), but in very ancient images.

Issues remain: Can there be a genuine artistic portrayal of a voluptuous Joan of Arc? Is this combination a genuine combination, i.e., one that is fair to the feminine and fair to saintliness? If so, can this type of art eventually become great art?

I do not have any direct answer to these issues, but I would like to suggest some possible directions.

Images of warrior women like Zelot and Rapture need to develop more depth and complexity. Instead of being armed and semi-nude all the time, we need to see them dressed and relaxed more often. (Does Zelot go to formal dances or to concerts?)

These images of warrior women need to also have intelligence stressed more. (Does Rapture ever read a book or write poetry?) This does not mean that they must become poets or intellectuals. After all, they are warriors. But it does mean that they need more internal development as persons.

Fantasy women need to have greater "spiritual" depth. In a genre which emphasizes cosmic wars between good and evil, this should not be overly difficult, though it is sadly lacking in most of the characters. (Does Voodoo pray? If so, to whom or what?) In this respect, C.S. Lewis' heroines, like Jill, do suggest this dimension. Jill and Aslan meet and she knows things about life and the world because of these meetings. It is again unfortunate that much of contemporary fantasy, as such, seems divorced from the roots of the Western warrior fantasies like Arthurian romance. Instead, it tends to turn toward pre-Christian Teutonic motifs. And in some unfortunate cases, dark, occult themes. In writers like Lewis and Williams, there is a potentiality of "redeeming" the archetype of the warrior feminine from the potentiality of dark powers. A hopeful example in this direction might be "Samuree." The warrior woman, martial arts, high school teenager, is the implacable foe of Ahiraman, the dark force in Zoroastrian religion. Here we have a noble attempt at a philosophic and meta-

physical framework. She is thoroughly anti-drug and anti-violence. In "Samuree" (aka Darryl Sheppard), we have a great image of a thinking mind, battle cool, in conflict with Lucifer and evil. (See "Samuree," #8, *Continuity Comics*, November 1990.)

If the warrior women images of contemporary art are to grow beyond the fourteen year old mentality, major issues will have to be addressed. It is to the credit of the creators of images like White Queen (Marvel Entertainment) that they attempt to do just this. On the back of Card #123, we are given White Queen's power ratings from one to seven. For strength, she rates a "2," intelligence a "4," energy projection "1," mental powers "6," fighting ability "2," and speed "2." Her real name, we are told, is Emma Frost (yes, it is a rating, but not about her physical looks). Her goal? It is the domination of all mankind. Her portrayal is a small, but promising beginning for the development of complexity of character in this evil queen. Yes, of course, there is a long way to go.

Finally, let us leave with two more examples leading to final questions. In the 1994 J.R.R. Tolkien calendar art by Michael Kaluta we can find two portrayals of a woman warrior. In May, the woman warrior, Eowyn, is seen in full armor before the doors of Meduseld. In October, we see Eowyn leaping in high action, fully clothed and armored, fighting the Witch King of Angmar. Compare this portrayal with a drawing of Red Sonja by Stephen Fabian, for Robert Howard's *The Shadow of the Vulture*, (1976). Red Sonja is naked except for boots, a sword in her right hand and arrows and a shield in her left hand.

My final questions: Are both these images true and genuine portrayals of the prototype of that aspect of femininity which is the woman warrior? Do they both, in Plato's words, "make soul?" Do they "empower?" Do they accurately represent genuine art and, finally, do they convey serious meanings?

After these few important final questions, a few philosophical, cautious, final observations about the philosophic context in which women are portrayed. It is obvious that there are deep underlying axiologies and even "spiritual" metaphysical, foundations grounding much of contemporary comic art. Since few, if any, philosophers walk through comic book outlets, I believe this phenomenon goes unobserved by the philosophic and literary communities. Often undergirding the comic art, just as in the novels of Williams, are strong currents of magic, alchemy, tarot, and shamanistic world views. (These intellectual currents, however, can mean many different things to different people.) As two examples among many possibilities, one may note the D.C.'s *Sandman* series by Neil Gaiman, and Rachel Pollock's D.C. Comic, *Doom Patrol*. In a recent interview in *Gnosis* (No. 32, Summer 1992), Erik Davis asks Gaiman and Pollock if they are willing "...to go into the darkness, the terror, the confusion, the blood and

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and an anonymous reviewer in *Notes and Queries*. N. S. Brooke's "C. S. Lewis and Spenser: Nature, Art and the Bower of Bliss" is the essay, and the excerpts are from Peter Dronke's *Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love-Lyric* and E. T. Donaldson's *Speaking of Chaucer*.

The third section covers, its title says, "Essays and Lectures." It begins with two reviews of and a reaction to *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*: an anonymous reviewer in *Times Literary Supplement*, L. C. Knights (*Scrutiny*), and the reaction to Lewis's educational essays in that volume by Q. D. Leavis (*Scrutiny* again). Then come two reviews of the pamphlet edition of *Hamlet: the Prince or the Poem?*: William W. Lawrence (*Modern Language Review*) and an anonymous review in *Notes and Queries*. Finally there is a review by Barbara Everett of *They Asked for a Paper*.

Next, four reviews, one essay, and two book excerpts concerning *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. The first review must be misdated, since it says 1940 and the book was not published until 1942—or possibly that journal was that far behind in its issues and their dates. The reviews: E. H. W. Meyerstein (*English*), H. W. Garrod (*The Oxford Magazine*), William R. Parker (*Modern Language Notes*), and B. A. Wright (*Review of English Studies*). The essay is E. E. Stoll's "Give the Devil his Due: A Reply to Mr. Lewis" (*Review of English Studies*), and the book excerpts are from A. J. A. Waldock's *Paradise Lost and its Critics* and William Empson's *Milton's God*.

The next section is titled "English Literature in the Sixteenth Century," but, besides the book of that title, it also covers *The Discarded Image*. Three reviews and a book excerpt are concerned with the earlier volume: John Wain (*The Spectator*), Donald Davie (*Essays in Criticism*), Yvor Winters (*The Hudson Review*), and Emrys Jones's *The Origins of Shakespeare*. (The latter does not discuss Lewis's views of Shakespeare's sonnets but his views of the Humanists.) The two reviews of *The Discarded Image*: John Burrow (*Essays in Criticism*) and John Holloway (*The Spectator*).

The last section is titled "Critical Theory and Words." It is really a miscellany of nine pieces. It begins with two discussions of the ideas in Lewis's inaugural lecture at Cambridge: an anonymous editorial writer (*Times Literary Supplement*) and Graham Hough (*Twentieth Century*). Then E. M. W. Tillyard writes an essay on Lewis's ideas in "Lilies that Fester," and William Empson, one on *Studies in Words*. (Empson refers to his own writings—on wit, for example—in the third person; presumably the original appearance of his discussion, in *Times Literary Supplement*, was anonymous, but he reprinted the essay in one of his own books.) R. S. Loomis's "Literary History and Literary Criticism: A Critique of C. S. Lewis" is a reply to Lewis's "The Anthropological Approach." The next item is fairly trivial: Lewis's letter to *Essays in Criticism* questioning what Ian Watt meant by a mythic reference in an essay, and Watt's reply—letters of four sentences each. The seventh and eighth items are reviews of *Of This and Other Worlds*: George Watson (*Times Literary Supplement*) and J. I. M.

Stewart (*London Review of Books*). The final item, A. D. Nuttall's "Jack the Giant-Killer" from *Seven*, is an assessment of Lewis as a critic that turns into an assessment of Lewis as a philosopher (*The Abolition of Man*). [JRC]



WARRIOR WOMEN

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the sex." In response, Neil Gaiman says, "If you are going to walk a road, you've got to walk it all the way. . . you walk down to the depths" (p. 15). (Blood and sex?) Comic books come " . . . directly out of shamanism," says Rachel Pollock (p. 14). (What moral possibilities are covered by the word "shamanism"?) We live in a world "in which everything is up for grabs," says Neil Gaiman (p. 17). (Does the word "everything" cover all possible moral claims?) In Erick Sirmenis' review of *The Sandman*, (p. 80), he points out that there is an impartial worship of " . . . angels, demons, fairies and Gods." (The worship of demons?)

The portrayal of woman warriors in art, like all art, will take its final meaning from the larger context of its spiritual, transcendent principles. In Tintoretto's "Minerva protecting peace and plenty and repelling Mars," at the Sala della 'anticollegio in the ducal palace in Venice, the powerful image of Minerva is grounded in a mythic ontology. The warrior-woman Minerva (Athena) carries with her image a whole Homeric "theology." So it will be for "Wonder Woman" or Lord Morpheus (*Sandman*). Rachel Pollack's " . . . favorite esoteric book of all time. . . " is Charles Williams' *The Place of the Lion*. Let us end this article, then, with the hope that it is the underlying metaphysical framework of a Williams and a Lewis which will dominate comic art and the portrayal of women of power. Will it be the "Jills" and "Galadrials" which will form the feminine archetype or "Ishtar, Goddess of Love, sacred prostitute and sex" working in a "strip joint" for "a kind of power in money paid for love?" (Neil Gaiman, p. 16, *Gnosis* interview). The atavistic gods of the dark depths are always waiting the chance to coop the high mythic images, especially in ages on the cusps of time.

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