

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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ANNABLUME

HARVESTING THE FRUITS OF VIRTUE: *PHILIA*, *EROS* AND *ARETE* IN PLUTARCH

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Abstract

This essay examines Plutarch's manipulation of epithalamial imagery in the *Amatorius* in conjunction with the motif of the discourse on love from Plato's *Symposium*. In particular, it explores how the *topos* of "fruit", traditionally representing fertility in wedding poetry, is separated from human reproduction by pederastic discourse and instead held to represent "virtue", the fruit of philosophical friendship between men. Women are associated with an inferior "flower", incapable of friendship or virtue. Yet Plutarch combines and develops these images to produce a philosophy on love that is at once relevant to marriage and to philosophic discourse.

If Sappho was proud enough of her songs to write to a rich lady,
"When you are dead, there you shall lie, and there will be no memory of you, who have no share, in roses that the Muses bear,"
will you not be able to have proud and splendid thoughts of yourself, if you have a share not in the roses, but actually in the fruit the Muses bear, and which they have lavished upon those who admire education and philosophy?¹

Thus writes Plutarch to Eurydice in the conclusion to the *Coniugalia Praecepta*. At first glance, this image seems only natural in the context of a marriage – the occasion for this text. The *topos* of fruit and flowers is a commonplace in nuptial literature, dating back at least to Sappho's epithalamia. It betokens sexuality and fecundity, and can be used as a metaphor for the loss of the bride's virginity, as in *frr.* 105(a) and (b) V².

In Plutarch, it serves to bring full-circle his ring-composition in the *Coniugalia Praecepta*³: the epithalamial motif connects with the participle *συνυμμεναιοῦντα*, "join the wedding song", in 138B. The Muses, popular figures in the wedding songs of Sappho⁴, in Plutarch's introduction lay the foundations for the *παιδεία καὶ φιλοσοφία* mentioned here, "ensuring the tunefulness of marriage through discourse (*λόγου*) and harmony and philosophy" (138C). Finally, the "plucking" of virginity implied in the first two precepts (the bride should eat a quince, *μήλου κυδωνίου*, on the wedding night, so that the first *χάρις* of her mouth and voice should be sweet; in Boeotia the bride is crowned

¹ *Con. Praec.* 145F-146A.

² See R. HAGUE, 1983; R. D. GRIFFITH, 1989; E. CONTIADES-TSITSONI, 1990, esp. pp. 95-7; T. BADNALL, 2008, pp. 15-27.

³ For ring-composition in the *Con. Praec.* and the *Amat.*, see further L. GOESSLER, 1962, p. 46.

⁴ E.g. *fr.* 103.8 V.

with asparagus because the sweetest fruit, ἥδιστον καρπὸν, comes from the sharpest thorns; husbands who cannot put up with the bride's early quarrels are like those who leave a bunch of grapes, σταφυλήν, to others because the first one they plucked was tart, 138D-E) is transmuted to a positive image of marital "harvest" or "bounty" in the last, suggesting a successful integration of the bride into marriage, which is the long-term aim of this treatise.

Though Plutarch makes extensive use of the imagery of the Sapphic epithalamium, however, he seems to reject Sappho's programme in his final remarks to Eurydice. The fruits of the Muses are represented as superior to their flowers; his project must in some way trump that of Sappho: how can we reconcile this simultaneous integration and rejection of the poetess? In the rest of this paper, I will argue that Plutarch's use of this epithalamial image is complex and distinctive. His Muses are not just those of music and marriage, but also of philosophy. In the *Coniugalia Praecepta*, he lays the foundations for the development of that philosophy in the *Amatorius*. This is a very different text, a debate about love more generally rather than precepts for a marriage, but the use of certain themes and imagery from the *Coniugalia Praecepta* suggests that our understanding of the latter text may be enhanced by the former. Here Plutarch adapts Platonic motifs, especially the dialogue on love from the *Symposium*, to another encomium of married love. In doing so, he expounds a theory of ἔρωσ that is at once located in the marriage relationship and at the same time, an appropriate subject for philosophic discourse.

To make sense of this motif, we must examine more closely his quotation of Sappho. The rich woman with no share in the "roses of Pieria" is one with no talent for poetry. But more than this, because of her lack, she will be forgotten, οὐδέ τις μναμοσύνα, after her death. This implies that, unlike Sappho, she will have no share in the immortal κλέος which results from poetry. The flowers of the Muses, then, represent poetic immortality (as may be evidenced in the collections of *anthologia*, or the description of Sappho's poems as her "immortal daughters")⁵. What then, of their fruits? Perhaps they, too, represent immortality – but of a superior kind. As well as love and marriage, Plutarch develops the connection between καρπός and ἀθανασία in the *Amatorius*.

As in the *Coniugalia Praecepta*, marriage forms the occasion for this work – in the immediate context, that of Bacchon and Ismenodora, which prompts the dispute about love, but in the wider narrative frame, that of Plutarch and his own wife, which occasions his presence in Thespiae for that dispute. The festival-goers divide into two camps: those who abjure the love of women, including Bacchon's ἐραστής Piasias and his friend Protogenes; and those who embrace such love, including Plutarch, who referees the debate, Anthemion, the youth's older cousin, who is in favour of the match, and Daphnaeus, Protogenes' dialectical opponent. While the setting is overshadowed by nuptial elements, aspects of the homerotic dialogue on love from Plato's *Symposium* intrude: the περὶ Ἐρωτος λόγους (748F) which Flavianus commands Autoboulus to relate

⁵ AP 7.407, also 7.14, 17.

recall the *περὶ τῶν ἐρωτικῶν λόγων* demanded of Apollodorus after Agathon's *συνδείπνον* (172b). Additional parallels to the *Ilissus* of Plato's *Phaedrus* have been noted on many occasions⁶, and this text, particularly through Plutarch's allusion to the ascent of the soul, may even be a more important paradigm for the *Amatorius*⁷. These allusions are in turn played off against the role of *λόγος* in the opening of the *Coniugalia Praecepta*⁸. A tension is created between the marital and the philosophical⁹.

As Frazier has noted, the dialogue is divided into three parts, each representing a progression of thought towards Plutarch's eschatological, marital *ἔρωσ*¹⁰. In the first part of the discourse, Protogenes, a lover of boys, exploits the abovementioned tension and attempts to dissociate *καρπός* from a nuptial context. Denying that love or *φιλία* has any connection with women, he takes a position familiar from the *Symposium*: "Love, in fact, it is that attaches himself to a young and talented soul and through friendship brings it to a state of virtue" (*εἰς ἀρετὴν διὰ φιλίας τελευτᾷ*, 750D)¹¹. *Ἐπιθυμία*, desire for women, is connected with the flowers identified as inferior in the *Coniugalia Praecepta*: *ῥαυρὰ καὶ σώματος*¹². True love wants only to harvest the fruit: "Love, if he loses the hope of inspiring friendship, has no wish to remain cultivating a deficient plant which has come to its prime (*ῥαυρὰ*), if the plant cannot yield the proper fruit of character (*καρπὸν ἡθους*) to produce friendship and virtue" (750E). On this model, the epithalamial image is divided, though in a different way to the *Coniugalia Praecepta*: flowers are associated with corporeal bloom, the female, and inferior desire; fruit with the soul and character, the male, and superior love. Only the latter is part of a relationship of *φιλία*, which leads to *ἀρετή*.

⁶ Plu. *Amat.* 749A, cf. Pl. *Phdr.* 229a-b. H. M. MARTIN JR., 1984, p. 86; A. BILLAULT, 1999, p. 205; J. M. RIST, 2001, p. 559.

⁷ J. M. RIST, 2001, p. 558; F. FRAZIER, 2005/6, p. 64.

⁸ See also V. WOHL, 1997, p. 170, on the union of Hermes and Aphrodite – or *λόγος* and *ἔρωσ* – in 138C-D.

⁹ I am grateful to F. Brenk for drawing my attention to this tension following the delivery of this paper at the 8th IPS Congress. It arises not so much from the pederasts' subversion of an epithalamial motif – indeed, *καρπός* had also been associated with the mental as well as the physical at least since Pindar (*O.* 7.8, *P.* 2.74, *N.* 10.2) – but from the competing claims on this image of both homosexual and heterosexual philosophy and education.

¹⁰ F. FRAZIER, 2008, pp. IX-XII: the first discussion starts from the question of whether Bacchon should marry Ismenodora, and progresses through Plutarch's 'central intervention' on the divinity and benefits of *Eros*, to his apology and encomium of conjugal love in answer to *Zeuxippus*.

¹¹ While all Plato's dinner-guests accept pederasty as a higher form of love, Pausanias separates *ἔρωσ* into "Common" (love for women, the body, and the unintelligent) and "Heavenly" (love for intelligent boys), 180c-185c. To him, the granting of sexual favours (*χαρίζεσθαι*, 185b) should only be done for the sake of virtue. By the time of Plutarch's writing, the distinction between the two loves is a rhetorical commonplace (cf. Luc., *Amores* 37, F. FRAZIER, 2005/6, p. 80) and the impulse of pederasty towards virtue is typical of Stoic thought: *SVF* III 716-717.

¹² *ῥαυρὰ* is often used metaphorically for the "spring-time" or "bloom" of youth, associated with physical beauty: *Mimn.* 3.1, LSJ s.v. *ῥαυρὰ*. It is specifically associated by Plutarch with *ἄνθος* at *Alc.* 4.1. Cf. also S. GOLDHILL, 1995, p. 174.

Protagoras claims a “philosophical” function for pederasty (751A), based on women’s incapacity for virtue¹³. This attitude is common for the period – the Stoic philosophers in particular held love to be θήρα...ἀτελοῦς μὲν εὐφοῦς δὲ μειρακίου πρὸς ἀρετὴν¹⁴. But by insisting on such pedagogical pederasty and aligning himself with the Stoics, he somewhat forsakes his claim to “Platonic” capital – for this philosopher presented female capacity for virtue as equal to that of men¹⁵.

On the other side of the debate, Daphnaeus argues that Protagoras’ “harvest” is merely the forbidden fruit of pederasty: either it must be gathered furtively, γλυκεῖ’ ὄπωρα φύλακος ἐκλελοιπότης, which means it has nothing to do with philosophical ἔρωσ, or, if there is to be no sexual intercourse in it, it is Eros without Aphrodite – an oxymoron (752A). Moreover, it denies the legitimate use of any naturalistic imagery: it is a union contrary to nature, παρὰ φύσιν (751C). If the harvest is taken by force, it involves βία and λεηλασία; if it happens by consent, it is weak and effeminate – there is no manly virtue involved at all (751E)¹⁶, and being without virtue, it is thus without fruit (ἄκαρπον, 752B). Χάρις, the yielding of woman to man (another epithaliamal motif: χάριεν, Sappho *fr.* 112.3 V), is instead held to be the beginning of φιλία (751E-F).

The tension is exacerbated, but not irreconcilably – for though Daphnaeus rejects the pederastic καρπός and reclaims φιλία for the female sex, he himself does not specify the “fruit” of such a “natural” union. As Martin notes, “he never goes so far as to actually claim that women are capable of ἀρετή”¹⁷, but as Plutarch continues to develop his thought throughout the dialogue, he will attempt to resolve the tension between the epithaliamal and the philosophical¹⁸ (indeed, this part of the dialogue has been identified as “pre-philosophical” – it is more rhetorical, and the true philosophical debate has not yet begun)¹⁹. Plutarch’s encomium of Eros begins on the side of married love. The traditional “fruit” of a marital union – children – are eulogised, and Ismenodora’s capacity for procreation is stressed (754C). In the next part of the dialogue, Aphrodite is called εὐκαρπον, as she is in the *Coniugalia Praecepta* (756E), suggesting

¹³ H. M. MARTIN JR., 1984, p. 83; M. B. CRAWFORD, 1999, p. 291; J. M. RIST, 2001, p. 559.

¹⁴ *De Comm. Not.* 1073B. Marriage and family life were regarded by Stoics as the duty of the sage to the state, and thus a different sphere: *SVF* I 270, cf. D. BABUT, 1963, pp. 57, 60-61.

¹⁵ Pl. *Men.* 72a-73c, *R.* 451d-e, 455d-e, *Lg.* 804e-806c, 829c, but cf. *Ti.* 90e-91a, *R.* 605d-e, *Lg.* 781a-b. “Socrates” also maintained the equality of male and female virtue in other texts: *X., Smp.* 2.9, *D. L.* 6.12, *contra* Arist. *Pol.* 1260a21. See also A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1997, pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ M. FOUCAULT, 1986, p. 201; M. B. CRAWFORD, 1999, p. 293. S. SWAIN in S. B. POMEROY (ed.), 1999, p. 89, locates this change from classical ideology in the need for perpetuation of Hellenic identity (through reproduction) of Greek elites at the beginning of the Second Sophistic, but *contra* C. PATTERSON, 1999, p. 129.

¹⁷ H. M. MARTIN JR., 1984, p. 83.

¹⁸ Plutarch briefly resumes the question of women’s virtue in 754A (Πλοῦτον δὲ γυναικὸς αἰρεῖσθαι μὲν πρὸ ἀρετῆς ἢ γένους ἀφιλότιμον καὶ ἀνελεύθερον...) and, in suggesting in the last part of the dialogue that Eros is the source of all virtue (757F ff, esp. 761E), foregrounds its applicability to women.

¹⁹ J. M. RIST, 2001, 561.

the traditional function of sexuality in such a relationship. Eros must also be present for this relationship to produce *φιλία*, but this is not necessarily problematic – the god is traditionally her follower, though Plutarch here reverses their relationship²⁰. Indeed, he seems to be the deity who presides when men *ποθοῦσι δὲ γάμου καὶ φιλότιτος* (757D).

Yet the metaphor of erotic cultivation is more often used as a model for the education of the young through pederasty, and, even when Plutarch supposedly applies it to marital *ἔρωσ*, even he cannot overcome his Platonic paradigm to develop the image beyond the education of boys: though divine love is the guide and helper of marriage, he operates, as Russell states, via the traditional analogies of boy-love: hunting the “fairest prey” (*κάλλιστον θήραμα*), and shaping boys and youths “in the ripening and flowering season” (*ῶρα καὶ ἄνθει*, 758E). Indeed, Eros is the god “whose care it is that a man grows straight in the direction of virtue with no deviation or crushing of the main stem of excellence” (757F-758A)²¹. The tension remains, but Plutarch *does* align the image of youth’s flower, *ῶρα*, with both the body and the soul (*ῶραν καὶ κάλλος ἅμα σώματος καὶ ψυχῆς*, 757E), thus mitigating Protogenes’ strict dichotomy of flower/body/female vs. fruit/soul/male.

The result of this alignment is itself expressed in terms of natural fertility, but this goes beyond the wedding song. Eros is *αὐγὴ δὲ καὶ θερμότης γλυκεῖα καὶ γόνιμος* (764B), a physician, saviour, and guide (indeed, the most philanthropic of gods, 758A) who directs the soul to the Plain of Truth (764F-65A)²². The aid to memory which allows the lover to apprehend the true Beauty which resides on this plain is to be found in pederasty: *ἔν τε σχήμασι καὶ χρώμασι καὶ εἶδει νέων ῶρα στίλβοντα* (765B)²³. The warmth generated in the true lover by such a memory produces “sap”, just as in a growing plant (*φυτῶ βλαστάνοντι*) which allows the development of *εὐπειθείας καὶ φιλοφροσύνης* (765C). Eros, in this model, is again the cultivator of the human “plant”, which leads to *φιλία*.

While Plutarch’s exposition is linguistically pederastic, he is keen to reclaim this image for marriage in the third part of the dialogue, claiming that the *εἶδωλα* of both boys and women can enter the body of the lover and produce “seed”, as long as *ἦθος* combines with *ῶρα* (766E-F). He goes further

²⁰ Cf. Hes. *Th.* 201-2; compare *Amat.* 759E-F; F. FRAZIER, 2005/6, p. 97, 2008, p. XXVII.

²¹ D. A. RUSSELL, 1997, pp. 102-3: “These two analogies are traditional. The lover and the sophist are “hunters” of the young in Plato and Xenophon [e.g. *Pl.*, *Sph.* 221-2, 231D, *Lg.* 831B, *X.*, *Cyn.* 13.9]; the analogy between education and growing plants is also conventional and obvious; and the association between pederasty and education is Platonic”.

²² Here Plutarch departs most obviously from the conversation of Plato’s *Symposium* to that of the *Phaedrus*: τὸ ἀληθείας πεδίον (248b). The motif of ascent of the soul is, however, also present in Socrates’ dialogue with Diotima (*Symp.* 211b-c), demonstrating Plutarch’s manipulation of a number of Platonic theories. See H. M. MARTIN JR., 1984, p. 85; J. M. RIST, 2001, p. 558. J. OPSOMER, 2004, p. 137, however, argues against scholarly opinion, especially that of Cherniss, that Plutarch is “a Platonic interpreter manipulating the texts so as to make them suit his own interests”. Instead, he suggests that Plutarch was searching for doctrinal consistency across dialogues (p. 155), which explains his mixing of theories.

²³ See J. M. RIST, 2001, p. 572.

than Daphnaeus in reclaiming the physical “flower” for a positive usage: to him, women are capable of virtue, and this is inseparable from beauty. “To be sure they say that beauty is ‘the flower of virtue’ (ὥραν “ἄνθος ἀρετῆς” εἶναι); yet it would be absurd to deny that the female produces that flower or gives a “presentation” of a ‘natural bent for virtue’” (767B)²⁴. A woman’s flower is not just in her body, but, in the case of a “good” woman, also in her ἦθος – the character whose fruit, Protogenes insisted, produces φιλία and ἀρετή in boys and men²⁵.

Such encomium of female beauty, in the case of nuptial literature, may inspire the ἔρωσ which allows the groom to consummate the marriage²⁶, and Plutarch applies a novel twist to this traditional *topos*: consummation is itself the beginning of φιλία (769A), which is absent from “philosophical”, pederastic sex (768B)²⁷. We see a progression from the beauty of a good woman, the “flower of virtue”, to ἔρωσ, leading to physical union, which inspires φιλία and the cultivation of the “fruit of virtue”, ἀρετή, which in turn leads to beauty (769B-D). Such a progression forms a never-ending cycle, in which fruit follows flower, which in turn fertilises the human plant so that the flower may bloom again. Neither seems to represent a “superior” metaphor, as they continually supersede one another. The harvest of virginity and the harvest of virtue are equated, though what is intended here is not the singular “reaping” of the bride on the wedding night, but a long-term “cultivation”, a lifetime’s progression or renewal (ἀνανεοῦνται) of φιλία (φιλοφροσύνη, 769A)²⁸.

The idea of “progression” leads us back to the beginning of this paper: the concept of the flower of immortality. For it is the bloom of youth, ὥρα, by which “Love gently excites our memory”; reminding us of the true and intelligible Beauty that lies behind bodily forms (765B). The lover tests the beloved to discover if they, too, can perceive this ideal Beauty, and if so, a communion of ἔρωσ and φιλία results, which refracts the memory of the lover to the Beauty of the other world²⁹. The physical ὥρα “inflamm[s] his spirit” in this life (766B),

²⁴ This is itself a Stoic expression, εἶναι δὲ καὶ τὴν ὥραν ἄνθος ἀρετῆς, *SVF* III 718A, and shows Plutarch developing the contemporary theories put forward by Protogenes as well as those of Daphnaeus earlier in the dialogue. See also G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1997, p. 84, on also *Mul. Virt.* 242F.

²⁵ M. FOUCAULT, 1986, p. 161 argues that female possession of equal virtue is a Stoic innovation; cf. S. GOLDBILL, 1995, p. 157: “[Plutarch], like Musonius, appears to allow a woman in the name of shared virtue to demonstrate the qualities of a man: *to andreion*”.

²⁶ E.g. *Men. Rh.* 407.12-14.

²⁷ Not only does Plato reject the physical consummation of love (e.g. *Symp.* 211b), but consummation with the female leading to philosophic φιλία is a Plutarchian innovation. See M. B. CRAWFORD, 1999, p. 295; R. HAWLEY, 1999, p. 117. In this way, Plutarch reconceptualises, rather than remaining utterly faithful to, Plato; J. M. RIST, 2001, p. 559: he “offers a ‘Platonic’ evaluation of the human experiences available to most of us, not just to the self-conscious followers of Diotima of the *Symposium* or to the philosophical lovers and kings of the *Republic*”; F. FRAZIER, 2005/6, p. 64, 2008, p. XV.

²⁸ A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1997, p. 45 on the “general application” of the Solonian legislation on frequency of sex (*Sol.* 20.4) in this context.

²⁹ *Amat.* 765D: ὅπου δ’ ἂν ἔχουσιν ἴχνος τι τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἀπορροὴν καὶ ὁμοίότητα

but it is in the next that he progresses upwards and reaps the true benefit: “The true lover, when he has reached the other world and consorted with true beauty in the holy way, grows wings and joins in the continual celebration of his god’s mysteries” (766C). The τέλος generally assumed for marriage has taken on an eschatological form, appropriate to the ἔργον ἱερώτερον (758B) of the marriage–deity³⁰.

This is an intriguing development of both the Platonic and the epithalamial, and may offer some resolution to the tension between them. Daphnaeus had argued that marriage makes mankind immortal through reproduction in *this* life (752A; we see the same formulation in *Symp.* 208); in the ascent of the soul, we may think that Plutarch intends a Platonic progression and contrast between the immortality granted by corporeal offspring and those which result from “spiritual” pregnancy: τεκόντι δὲ ἀρετὴν ἀληθῆ (*Symp.* 212a), or assume, as does Wohl, that “philosophy becomes the child of this union”³¹. But Plutarch goes further than both these ideas *and* that of poetic immortality, to suggest that true love, whose *locus* is marriage, offers immortality in the *afterlife* (μετὰ τὴν τελευτήν, 766B). The begetting of life is mentioned, certainly (769E, 770A), but it is after death that his philosophical lovers are expected to “reap” the “harvest” of their philosophy. As in the *Coniugalia Praecepta*, the “flower” and “fruit” of the epithalamium function as a metaphor for immortality, but with a distinct difference. In the earlier text, flowers had represented poetic immortality and fruit a superior, spiritual one, gained by the young wife through philosophical intimacy with her husband³². In the *Amatorius*, Plutarch uses and develops this imagery in a different way.

In the *Coniugalia Praecepta*, Plutarch implied that the “fruits of the Muses” were superior to their flowers. The theory of pederasty represents this fruit as virtue, the ethical product of a human plant cultivated by Eros. Taking its cue from the contrast between “Heavenly” and “Common” love in the *Symposium*³³, “virtuous” ἔρωσ for boys is contrasted with desire for women, based solely on the physical flower of the body. But to those who support married love, this flower, ὤρα, is connected with both body and soul – thus, in the *Amatorius*, Plutarch presents a far less dichotomised schema either than that of Protogenes, and one that is also different from his own conclusion in the *Coniugalia Praecepta*. As in the epithalamium, beauty combines with χάρις to situate ἔρωσ within an idealised marriage relationship. This is held to produce φιλία, which leads to virtue, of which beauty is the flower. Plutarch struggles to combine the

σαίνουσαν, ὑφ’ ἡδονῆς καὶ θαύματος ἐνθουσιῶντες καὶ περιέποντες, εὐπαθοῦσι τῇ μνήμῃ καὶ ἀναλάμπουσι πρὸς ἐκεῖνο τὸ ἐράσιμον ἀληθῶς καὶ μακάριον καὶ φίλιον ἅπασι καὶ ἀγαπητόν.

³⁰ See also 750C: ἱερωτέρα κατὰ ζευξίς.

³¹ V. WOHL, 1997, p. 184. This assumption is based on the λόγων χρηστών σπέρματα which will prevent a wife who shares her husband’s education from κύουσι evil thoughts and feelings (*Con. Praec.* 145D). Cf. Pl., *Smp.* 210a, in which the budding philosopher may γεννᾶν λόγους καλοῦς in the body of a beautiful beloved.

³² I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article for their comments on this point.

³³ Cf. n. 11; M. FOUCAULT, 1986, p. 195.

philosophic with the epithalamial; finally he mixes and progresses beyond both these and other Platonic elements to a philosophy of immortal love grounded in mortal marriage. This philosophy is more developed in the *Amatorius*, setting up the idea that fruit may supersede flower, only to show that both are part of a continual cultivation of virtue within marriage. Within this philosophy, both images form part of a progression towards immortality that *is* superior to that offered by the “roses of Pieria” – not the preservation of song, but that of soul.

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