



## Deception, Misrule and a Substantial Saturnalia in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, a Festive "Comedy"

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**Abstract:** Most of the Shakespearean comedies, specially the mature ones, are popularly set on a merry and jocund plot of celebrating either a festival or a carnival in a natural atmosphere, and *Twelfth Night* is no exception. The article will focus on a festive mood, just like celebrating the festival of Twelfth Night, though the play has no direct connection with its titular festival except the jolly spirit of the same, among the characters dealing with their follies and foibles, planning and plotting. Moreover, it will hint at the saturnalia-structure of these festive events, being a common trait of Elizabethan plays.

**Keywords:** Folly, Deception, Ignorance, Revelry, Morbidity

**Introduction:** 'A study of the structures of the early comedies up to and including *Twelfth Night* establishes at once their astonishing variety and the energy of Shakespeare's creative mind.' (Brown 27) It is not unknown to the readers of Shakespeare that "[...] how each of the festive comedies tends to focus on a particular type of folly that is released along with love- witty masquerade in *Love's Labour's Lost*, delusive fantasy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, romance in *As You Like It* [...] *Twelfth Night* deals with the sort of folly which the title points to, the folly of misrule." (Barber 248). It is, therefore, a play where even the heroes and heroines are not spared from the fabric of deception and folly and thereby proved to be the funny agents to be laughed at. With concordance to the very title, the play is meant to be something containing the spirit of merrymaking and liveliness. But there is an alter name too – "*What You Will*" and thus when the liberty to enjoy revelry and merrymaking to the fullest (as it is the end of festive season and beginning of winter) gets a license to use the 'will', the result is only a misrule, a flip.

"[...] myself and a sister, both born in an hour: if the heavens had been pleased would we had so ended" (II, i, 19) – thus mourned Sebastian, the identical brother of Viola and thus hinted at the mother source of all happenings. The actions get its wind from a divine deception, took place in the form of a ship wreck in which the two identical siblings got separated assuming each other devoured by the cruel sea and then started the chain of deceptions and practices. Everyone is deceiving everybody as a projection of their whims and will, position and power:

"[...] in *Twelfth Night*, as in Gl'Ingannati ('The Duped')... everyone deceives or is deceived, while several deceive to be deceived in turn[...] but always the

chief deceiver is ourself – our sentimentality, our vanity, our fears, our egoism.”(Cambridge xxi)

The whole action of the play lies on the biggest deception performed by Viola. Shipwrecked, somehow saved and separated from her brother, Viola to save her femininity from the society of males, decided to wear the disguise of a eunuch as a means to deceive Illyria of her real identity with the help of the captain that saved her:

“Conceal me what I am, and be my aid

For such disguise as haply shall become

The form of my intent

I’ll serve this duke

Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him.”(I, ii, 52-55)

But this deception was more intentional than a compulsion as she herself has stated to the captain that she needed time to decide her further business in Illyria and probably this deception was a means to get some only:

“And might not be delivered to the world

Till I had made mine own occasion mellow

What my estate is.”(I, ii, 41-43)

Thus, taking the advantage of being an unknown face in Illyria, she played the dice of deception. Shakespeare’s other women characters, with disguise played the deception only in limited scenes and within a limited circle of people. For example, Rosalind disguised as Ganymede in *As You Like It* only for two major scenes, or Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* wore the disguise for one act only. In comparison to that, Viola took the disguise as Cesario at the very outset of the play and it was applied to every event and every person, all scenes and all acts:

“Viola’s truly a practice on the whole world of Illyria [...] as, in tragedy; Iago’s is on his world [...] Viola rightly belongs in this company of most notable masqueraders in all the plays”. (Evans 138)

Thus this proves to be the mother deception of the entire play manifested from the illusion of identity.

This single device, noxiously or innocuously, dived by Viola led many confusions. The Duke Orsino found a good friend cum companion in her, the countess Olivia found love in her, Aguecheek found a rival in her and for the rest – they found a good nuisance in Cesario, her disguised male-self. All are deceived by this single masquerade of Viola, resulting in a reversal of roles, misrule:

“Yet the frame of the situation is comic, even grotesque: the reversal of roles, the woman wooing the man, an incongruity in society if not in nature, in a perennial subject of jest; and the fact that this ‘man’ is not even a man adds a joke to what already a joke.” (Evans 149)

The crown for practicing the second biggest device, after Viola, of course, goes to Maria. Malvolio, the steward to Olivia is always in desperateness to prove him to be the most loyal to her and he addresses her with all his affection as ‘my lady’. “The butts in the festive plays consistently exhibit their unnaturalness by being kill-joys.”(Barber 8) and the character of Malvolio, grotesque and somehow a little funny, is the ‘kill-joy’ of *Twelfth Night*. The morbid Malvolio even took a fool’s jest as ‘infirmity’ and gave the verdict:

“I protest, I take these wise men  
That crow so at these set kind of fools,  
No better that the fools’ zanies.” (I, v, 86-88)

Such a person sharing the roof with Sir Toby who is the “liberty incarnate, a specialist in it” (Barber 250) and the revel master, must result in a boom and a bang. So it happened, like something obvious, when Malvolio called at Toby, Maria and their troop at midnight with the authority of next in power in the house and delivered the speech:

“My masters, are you mad? Or what are you? Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty, but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do you make an alehouse of my lady’s house...?” (II, iii, 91-94)

Hence Malvolio, ‘a puritan’(II,iii,154) what he was called by Maria, had to be taught a lesson for his over protectiveness and self imposed duties of being the most responsible person in his lady’s palace. A pissed off Maria then resolute that “For Monsieur Malvolio, let me alone with him: if I do not gull him into a naywood, and make him a common recreation, [...]”(II, iii, 14-142). Then taking the advantage of the seed of love already present in Malvolio for his lady, Maria tricked him to make their merrymaking and celebration a little sportier. When the ‘puritan’ steward was visualizing a reverie of “Having been three months married to her, sitting in my state-/ calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown; having come from a day-bed, where I have left Olivia sleeping [...]” (II,v, 44-49), Maria along with Toby and Sir Andrew dropped an ‘employment’ (II,v,83,) on his way. As she had a look alike hand writing like Olivia, Maria wrote some phrases of love with an adorable order to accept the “greatness thrust upon” (II,v,150) to the buffoon Malvolio. A substantial saturnalia thus manifested itself when Maria appearing as Olivia ordered him to subvert their roles:

“Be opposite with a kinsman, surely with servants; let thy tongue tang arguments of state; put thyself into the trick of singularity.”(II, v, 153-155)

Though it was Maria, Toby and his troop of revels who deceived Malvolio by convincing him to wear ‘yellow stocking’, to dress “cross gartered”(II,v,169-170) and to carry an ever smiling face just as a matter of chance for their being in an advantageous state, it is Malvolio himself who has deceived himself by his deceived ego of being the perfect man of Illyria. Maria has justly thus opined:

“The devil a puritan that he is, or anything constantly but a time pleaser, an affectioned ass, that cons state without book and utters it by great swarths: the best persuaded of himself, so crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies, that it is his ground of faith that all that look on him love him; and on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work.”(II, iii, 154-159)

It is his folly of considering himself to be the best and most desirable that has deceived him unknowingly:

“Malvolio, on the other hand, is self-deceived before he is deceived. [...] Malvolio’s fire is the product of spontaneous combustion, and his sense of worthiness is unalloyed by misgivings. Shakespeare makes this fact clear by exhibiting the man’s vainglory just before he finds the forged letter: ‘To be count Malvolio!’”(Evans 153)

The third practice with same amusement is being applied on the ‘foolish wit’ (I, v, 35) Sir Andrew Aguecheek, which was again a result of the sheer ignorance of the victim. The ‘foolish knight’(I,III,15) as Maria identified him, is a rich, good-looking and a matchless youth of Illyria what he thinks himself to be. He came to Illyria with the consent of Sir Toby to woo the countess Olivia. But what Sir Toby finds in him is not a suitor for his niece, rather it is the “three thousand ducats a year”(I,iii,22) of the knight that reflects in his eyes. It is then very obvious to all except Andrew that if Sir Toby thinks that Olivia “[...] will not match above her degree, neither in estate, years nor wit; I have heard her swear’t; tut, there’s life in’t, man”(I,iii,112-114), it is then only to convince Andrew to change his decision from “I’ll home tomorrow”(I,iii,108) to “I’ll stay a month longer”(I,iii,117) erecting before him an illusion of his perfection as a master in ‘galliard’, ‘caper’ and ‘lickshaws’. It is then more in the favour of Sir Toby himself and less, or not at all, in the favour of Sir Andrew. What Sir Toby wants is to make a proper use of Andrew’s wealth and fix a bountiful source of fund for his never ending revelry. That is the reason when Maria exclaimed about Andrew that “[...] he’ll have but a year all these ducats; he is a very fool and prodigal.”(I,v,23-24), Toby promptly defending him replied Maria in a reprimanding tone: “they are scoundrels and sub-stractors that say so of him”(I,iii,34-35). The falsity of his love and care for Andrew was unveiled at the end when broken head Toby called Andrew “an ass-head, and a coxcomb, and a knave! A thin-faced knave, a gull!”(V,I,204-205) before all. Toby being nasty, plotted a rivalry-triangle between Cesario, Olivia and Andrew and a duel thereafter between the suitors, the rivals in love, to make his revelry more enjoyable. When the heartbroken Andrew, peeping the favour of Olivia on Cesario, the count’s servant, decided to “not stay a jot longer”(III,ii,1), the cunning Fabian persuaded him by producing a very weird fact that “she did show favour to the youth in your sight, only to exasperate you, to awake your dormouse valour, to put fire in thy heart...”(III,ii,18-20). The super moron Andrew started brewing in valour at once and then to add more weed to the fire Toby suggests him to “challenge me the count’s youth to fight with him, hurt him in eleven places- my niece shall take notice of it,” (III,ii,34-36) and assured him that “there is no love-broker in the world can more prevail in man’s commendation with woman than report of valour.”(III,ii,36-38). He then, acting like a ‘dear manakin’(III,ii,52) to

Sir Toby and getting caught into the trap of trick, brooded thus: “it must be with valour, for policy I hate”(III,iii,31-32). But then, when the tables were turned, the troop got to test the taste of their own medicine. When Sir Toby was the taskmaster he befooled Cesario by airing an iron man like personality of Andrew before him:

“There’s no remedy, Sir, he will fight with you for’s oath sake: [...] and he finds that now scarce to be worth talking of: therefore draw for the supportance of his vow,”(III,iv,295-299)

On the other, he frightened Aguecheek portraying a false reckless picture of Cesario before him:

“he’s a very devil, I hope not such a firago...I had a pass with him, rapier, scrabbard and all, and he gives me the stuck in with such a mortal motion that it is inevitable: and on the answer, he pays you as surely as your feet hit the ground they step on. They say he has been fencer to the Sophy.”(III,iv,275-280)( Ellipsis in original).

Toby’s words of warning work so prominently on the both that first Andrew, the knight ,impulsively stepped back declaring “I’ll not meddle with him”(III,iv,281) and then Cesario, anybody but a man, tautly thought: “ Pray God defend me! A little thing would make me tell them how much I lack of a man.”(III,iv,300-301) The deception gets a touch of integrity and wholeness when later Sebastian, the twin brother of Viola, the look alike of Cesario appeared. Toby and Andrew mistaking him as Cesario tried to play their old game and meddled with him and thus their trick got turned into a reality and they got to test the taste of their own medicine. Being beaten up badly by Sebastian then the both appeared to Olivia complaining:

Sir Andrew: “H’as broke my head across and has given Sir Toby a bloody coxcomb too” [...] the count’s gentleman, one Cesario: we took him for a coward, but he’s the very devil incardinate.”(V,I,174-180)

It is the deceptive nature of the comic as well as the main characters that has interwoven the whole set of the play. If one takes the deceptions out of the incidents, the festivity will lose its rule.

Next what has carried forward the trend of inverted situations and roles, is the misrule which is again nothing but the projection of the follies of the characters of the play. Hazlitt has wonderfully describes the spirit of the play thus:

“It is full of sweetness and pleasantry [...] it has little satire and no spleen. It aims at ludicrous rather than the ridiculous. It makes us laugh at the follies of mankind, not despise them, and still less bear any ill-will towards them.” (Hazlitt 29)

The very symbolic title of the play, *Twelfth Night* itself draws a picture of unbound merrymaking, unrestrained revelry and unbridled holiday misrule with the added liberty of “What You Will”. Madness is the keyword of these misrules in the state of Illyria full of illusions and delusions. The hidden madness of the ‘puritan’ Malvolio turned real and worst when his follies and foolishness led him to misrule the court as

following his Lady's "greatness thrust upon" him. He spoke "ill of the devil" (III, iv, 104) to the lady's kinsman and his crew and thus appeared mad to all. Then to prove his madness fully, Toby and his team locked him in a dark room and functioned a conversation of him with the fool, disguised as Sir Topas the curate:

"Malvolio: (from the closet) who calls there?"

Clown: Sir Topas the curate, who comes to visit Malvolio, the lunatic."(IV,ii,22-24)

All of them are so misguided by their whims that they want the misrule and madness on Malvolio's part to continue "for our pleasure and his penance, till our very pastime, tired out of breath, prompt us to have mercy on him[...]"(III,iv,141-143)

The same party who conspired to teach the 'kill-joy', Malvolio a lesson, themselves broke all limits. Taking the advantageous condition of Olivia's being indulged in sorrow and mourning for her dead brother, and a veiling from outsiders to keep his remembrances fresh, Sir Toby and Andrew took her palace to be an ideal place to act unruly and to celebrate their unreasoned fun. Rightly has thus Malvolio questioned them: "Do ye make an alehouse of my lady's house?" (II,iii,93-94) At the middle of the night when the rest of the world was at bed, they were drinking, singing, shouting, dancing as Sir Toby thinks "not to be a-bed after midnight is to be betimes; and 'diluculo surgery'"(II,iii,2-3). Sir Toby, who was invited to the palace to sooth the bereaved Olivia, is now determined to do something else: "I'll drink to her as long as there is a passage in my throat and drink in Illyria."(I,iii,38-40) Moreover, Olivia's mourn for her dead brother is to him something nonsense:

"What a plague means my niece, to take the death of her brother thus? I am sure care's an enemy to life."(I,iii,1-3)

Thus they both - Toby, the real "Lord of Misrule"(Barber 37) and Malvolio, the stern 'puritan' set the palace and its peace at stake:

Malvolio seems here to stand for Lenten abstemiousness (even today some still give up something for Lent) while Toby is the embodiment of carnivalesque misrule. ( Atkin 76)

For the lead characters, misrule ruled their lives too, and that is again but the product of their own follies. The duke Orsino thinking Viola as a promising youth in her disguised self Cesario, sent him time and again to profess his love to Olivia and there Olivia got mesmerized by the charm of the youth who was fresh in Illyria. The less expected misrule of a lady wooing a man started thus. On the other hand Olivia fell in love with Cesario with all her "maidhood, honour, truth, and everything" (III, I, 152) and such is her passion for him, she thinks, "nor wit nor reason" (III,I,154) can hide it. But the misrule gets worst when Sebastian enters the scene and Olivia with an utmost haste married Sebastian secretly, mistaking him as Cesario. At the end when both Cesario and Sebastian appeared together, then only the confusion gets sorted. Here Sebastian rightly summarized the misconception and misrule thereby, thus:

"You would have been contracted to a maid,

Nor are you therein, by my life, deceived,

You are betrothed both to a maid and a man.”(V,I,260-262)

The wave of misconception when dashed at Sebastian whom everyone took for Cesario and tried to encounter their way, he justly questioned himself: “Are all the people mad?”(IV, I, 27) or “I am mad,” (IV, I, 61).

In the other part of the palace, the frenzied madness of misguided and abused Malvolio, who after being mercilessly tortured by the tricksters, blamed his beloved lady for being highly unjust to him:

“Madam, you have done me wrong,

Notorious wrong.”(V,I,332-333)

It is at that high tide circumstance that Fabian candidly confessed their deed to untie the knots:

“Good Madam, hear me speak

And let no quarrel, nor no brawl to come...

Most freely I confess, myself and Toby

Set this device against Malvolio here,[...]

We had conceived him: Maria writ

The letter [...]

How with a sportful malice it was followed

May rather pluck on laughter than revenge,(V,I,357-365)

Such was the result of the misrule that the lady Olivia, too, repented at the last: “He hath been most notoriously abused.”(V, I, 378)

“...is it fit infirmities of holy men should be acted upon a stage...?[...] no passion wherewith the king was possessed but is amplified, and is openly sported with, and made a May game to all the beholders.”(Barber 36)- This is how C.L. Barber has quoted and referred Henry Crosse in his book. Like a typical celebration play of the Elizabethan court, *Twelfth Night* contains a holiday group and its pageant figures and a festive spirit:

“[...] the content of revelers with intruder does not lead to neglecting ironies about those who are on the side of pleasure. [...] The festive spirit shows up the killjoy vanity of Malvolio’s decorum. The steward shows no limits when he calls misrule ‘the uncivil rule’” (Barber 249).

To sweeten the coarse exposure of follies one can quote Hazlitt, according to whom Shakespeare “gives the most amusing exaggeration of the prevailing foibles of his characters, but in a way that they themselves, instead of being offended at, would almost join in the humour.”(Hazlitt 29). The exception being Malvolio who left wailing: “I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you.”(V.i,377)

Now the last but not the least focused aspect, the Saturnalia and its implementation with a substantial treatment in *Twelfth Night*. Saturnalia is a time of wild revelry, a festival observed in Ancient Rome as the festival of Saturn held on 17<sup>th</sup> December, extending up to 23<sup>rd</sup> December. It is also a time of general unrestrained merrymaking, extending even to the slaves reversing the social order. But the reversal was somewhat a superficial one. It reversed the social order without subverting it. C. L. Barber has opined on Shakespeare's dramatic style that "The Old Comedy cast results from his participation in the native saturnalian traditions of the popular theatre and the popular holidays. [...] he used the resources of a sophisticated theatre to express, in his idyllic comedies and in his clown's ironic misrule, the experience of moving to humorous understanding through saturnalian release." (4) Barber has further explained this festival of excessive merrymaking in a patterned way and as a structure – "through release and clarification" (6). By 'release' he means experiencing revelry, unbridled joy and fun in a never ending holiday spirit. This part of the festival is undoubtedly occupied by the "lord of misrule", Sir Toby who, when Maria tried to correct him by making him aware of his limits: "you must confine yourself within the modest limits of order." (I,iii,8-9), promptly declined thus: "Confine? I'll confine myself no finer than I am" (I,iii,10-13). There Maria was right in foretelling him that "quaffing and drinking will undo" (I,iii,14) him one day. It is he who is determined to "drink [...] as long as there is a passage in my throat and drink in Illyria." (I,iii,38-40). One can support Toby and his troop when Toby blamed Malvolio: "Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale? (II,iii,120-122). But the same Toby's misrule and reckless propriety at once make the reader feel like throwing him out of the palace. 'Clarification' on the other hand "achieved by the festive comedies is concomitant to the release they dramatize: a heightened awareness of the relation between man and 'nature'- the nature celebrated on holiday." (Barber 8). It is a kind of reminder to alert the celebrating party about the real nature of their joy and the reality of the reversal. If in saturnalia the social orders are reversed and upturned, it is always a mere short-lived blow to the tradition of dividing society according to its members' positions and ranks. Even if in celebrating the particular day when the slaves and masters share an equal place in the festival what is ironic is that the whole festival, the carnival and feast are arranged by none other than the slaves themselves and the masters there play no role. Hence there is an apparent inversion but it is never subverted. Hence, Sir Toby with his unreasonable revelry and Malvolio with his ungrounded modesty are representing the two sides of an Elizabethan holiday, where both are at their excessive point and are to be reset on a balanced and proportioned base to make all people in general, celebrating holidays, consider the joy of nature and the naturalness of joy.

If celebrating saturnalia is alternating the conventional set roles of a society and breaking the hierarchy, then two instances of the same alteration can be traced in *Twelfth Night*. First, the very abusive jest played on Malvolio, a trap woven by Toby and Maria. convincing him to not to be "afraid of greatness" (II,v,148) as "some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em" (II,v,149-150). If he fails to upgrade himself to the very rank the lady desires,

then let her “see thee still, the fellow of servants, and not worthy to touch Fortune’s fingers.”(II,v,159-161). Finally the farewell statement of the letter throws a bright green light to the alteration:

“Farewell. She, that would alter services with thee.”(II,v,161)

Malvolio appeared before all just how the letter had asked him to do, resembling those Roman slaves who take the alteration of their positions with their masters for granted and engage their all to make the carnival perfect. As an obvious consequence, all his bubbles of dreams and hopes got pricked at the climax when Fabian unfolded the gimmick. Everything remained the same as before except Malvolio’s temper.

The other instance happens to be the wooing of the two couples. On one side Orsino, the count and Viola, one who has served the count and the other being Olivia, the countess and Sebastian, the mistaken Cesario, the person who once had served the duke. Substantially and apparently the holders of higher ranks are tying the knot with the holders of lower ranks. The Duke Orsino after knowing the real identity of Cesario and thereby Viola’s fathomless love for him (his so called “master”) declared the inversion and alteration of position on Viola’s part:

“Your master quits you; and for your service  
done him,  
So much against the mettle of your sex,  
So far beneath your soft and tender breeding,  
And since you called me master for so long,  
Here is my hand-you shall from this time be  
Your master’s mistress.”(V,I,321-327)

Wisely thus Coddon has said about the ostensible nature of this saturnalian reversal resulting in marriages:

“If in *Twelfth Night* the aristocratic order is ostensibly reasserted in the pairings of Orsino/Viola and Olivia/ Sebastian, the refusal of the play’s closing to recuperate two of its most disorderly subjects- Malvolio and Feste – suggest rather less than a wholesale endorsement of the privileges of rank and hierarchy.” (Coddon 309). Thus when all cats were taken out of the bags, it was clear as light that “the release of that one day was understood to be a temporary license, a ‘misrule’ which implied rule, so that the acceptance of nature was qualified.”(Barber 10)

Conclusion:

To conclude, it is now definite that all were mad, all had whims, all had dreams and all had played grotesque but the noticeable thing, as pointed out by E. Montegut, is that “in this multitude of dreams, Nature accepts only certain ones which are in harmony with grace [...] for Nature is essentially platonic [...] Hence it is that Viola’s secret dream comes true, while Malvolio’s is condemned to remain forever a

grotesque chimera.” (54). The play, started with “an imbroglio of charming and dangerous complications”(Monte`gut 52), reaches its highest point at the end which “brings into focus ,as part of the play, the significance of the saturnalian form itself as a paradoxical human need ,problem and resource.”(Barber 15). Thus the masking, deceptions, the foolery and the complications with which the journey of the festive comedy had started, ended merrily with everyone’s psychological satisfaction and into a united, unknotted ordered circumstances. The comedy reaches its end where calmness resides reminding the readers of Dante’s "comedy" i.e. an ordered universe, that order which was absence in the play from the very beginning:

*Twelfth Night* begins with music, but it does not express an ordered harmony; Orsiono, the lord of Illyria, longs for an ‘excess’ of it...His love knows no ‘order’... ‘...all as hungry as the sea’... (Brown 162-163)

With the marriages of the matches the play can be called a romantic comedy which started as a festive comedy with a mood to celebrate the “twelfth day of December”(II,iii,89) but ended as a “comedy” with the same festive mood but with sorted follies, solved deceptions, barred misrules. Perhaps Coddon has rightly argued:

“In *Twelfth Night* demarcations between male and female, master and servant, libertine and moralist come into festive – and not so festive – collision.”(309).

But E.Montegut has something else to define it:

“*Twelfth Night* is a masquerade, slightly grotesque, as befits a play thereof the title recalls one of those festivals which were most to the jocund humour[...] This festival was the day whereon in every family a king for the nonce was crowned after he had been chosen by lot; sometimes it fell to a child to be the ruler over the whole family, again a servant was crowned by his master, for the moment it was the world turned upside down, a rational hierarchy topsy-turvy, authority created by chance, and the more grotesque the surprise, the merrier the festival.”(Monte`gut 51).

All the actions and their reactions performed by the characters, nonetheless, can be justified through these words of Feste, the fool, that there is no ill, no folly, “no darkness but ignorance.”(IV, ii, 44) which lead human being into the state of illusion, delusion, misrule and misconception.

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