

Jane Austen's Appetite for Stewardship and Hospitality: Food in *Pride and Prejudice*

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A consideration of food and the appetite it satiates in Jane Austen's most popular novel *Pride and Prejudice* combines two hegemonies of her time: clerical teachings on biblical dominion and hospitality as shown in the idealistic country estate of Pemberley. In this paper, I examine Christian stewardship and biblical hospitality as disseminated by clergy when Austen was writing and apply them in combination to demonstrate Austen's ideal position on appetite as embodied in Darcy, Elizabeth, and the setting of Pemberley.

Eighteenth-century Anglican clerics asserted a benevolent intent in the dominion God granted to Adam in Genesis 1.28 to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the heaven, and over every beast that moveth upon the earth," a dominance intended as compassionate privilege, not exploitation. In 1776, the year after Jane Austen's birth, Humphrey Primatt, D.D., for example, objected to any abuse of the power granted to humanity, particularly to abuse in the name of Christianity: "I am sorry there should be any occasion to name *Religion* as in *any* respect contributing to this insensibility and indifference as to the happiness or misery of the inferior animals" (26). He continues, "Ungrateful Man abuses his Power and Dominion over these poor creatures" (143), regretting that such mistreatment is sometimes justified as biblical. Keith Thomas, who chronicles changes in English attitudes towards the natural world between 1500 and 1800, reports that most Anglican clergy taught godly kindness, warning that God "would require a strict account from man of the creatures entrusted to his care" (155). Dominion over the earth was defined not as selfish, abusive mastery, but as stewardship, the duty to fulfill the responsibility that God granted to Adam and Eve and their descendants. People are responsible for the preservation and maintenance of the nonhuman world and will one day be held accountable for their efforts. Indeed, as Jeffrey S. Chamberlain observes in his study of parish

preaching in the long eighteenth century, “obedience and the threat of punishment (even hell)” was dominant (55). The threat of punishment extended to stewardship over the animals given to our care.

Jane Austen would have agreed. Barabara Seeber, in *Jane Austen and Animals*, concludes from Austen’s letters that she considered animals perceptive beings, had affection for them, and judged animal cruelty as reprehensible (10). Her letters also reveal her reservations against the cruelty of hunting, despite the fact that her brothers hunted (13). Her favorite poet, William Cowper, was widely known for the theme of anti-cruelty arguments in his work. Austen even wrote a short story when she was young, “The Generous Curate,” in which a young boy entertains himself by throwing stones at ducks, in contrast to his brother who shares an affectionate bond with his Newfoundland dogs. The story offers a warning that those who are cruel to animals also learn to be cruel to humans.

The dominion God granted Adam not only encompasses animals but also land and the food products grown upon it. Genesis 2.8-9a specifies God’s gift of land to Adam: “And the LORD God planted a garden Eastward in Eden, and there he put the man whom he had made. For out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree pleasant to the sight, and good for meat.” Although growing conditions in Eden were ideal, Adam was still expected to labor: “Then the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden, that he might dress it and keep it” (2.15). The Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* of 1662, still printed and unaltered when Austen was writing, reminded Christians that they are ultimately responsible for the current state of the natural world, which had suffered collateral damage from Adam and Eve’s original sin: “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which the first-fruits groan within ourselves.” The prayer book Austen was intimately familiar with also taught Christians to act as stewards faithful to God’s word: “Let a man so account of us, as of the Ministers of Christ and Stewards of the mysteries of God.” Clergy such as John Ray stressed agricultural labor, who preached in 1714 that the creator “is well pleased [...] with regular Gardens and Orchards and Plantations” (164). The assumption of stewardship over the land is unmistakable. Food from trees and plants cannot be obtained if the vegetation is not generously cared for with water, access to sunlight, and elimination of weeds and pests. Stewardship of the land is not only expected by divine will but necessary to obtain food.

Austen herself grew up on a farm, intimately familiar with the growing of food. Her childhood home, Steventon Rectory in Hampshire, was virtually self-sufficient in the production of food. Reverend Austen farmed the three acres of rectory land and rented 200 acres nearby. As Maggie Lane in *Jane Austen and Food* establishes, “for the best part of forty years . . . the farm kept the Rectory supplied with pork, mutton, wheat, peas, barley and hops; it also supplied oats and hay for the horses” (1). In addition, they grew potatoes, vegetables, herbs, strawberries and grapes. When Austen moved to her final home, Chawton Cottage, not far from her childhood home, one of Austen’s first questions about

her new home concerned its kitchen garden. Austen was not only personally familiar with the growing of food but also its preparation, since one of her household responsibilities was preparing breakfast for the household. Lane evaluates Austen's mother as "a religious woman" who would have seen "the provision of wholesome food for her family" as a duty to God and her family (3) and taught her daughters to do the same.

For Austen, then, and for those living in her Regency era, food formed an integral component of Christian stewardship. After all, the food we eat represents one of our most immediate day-to-day contacts with vegetation and animals, a connection evident from God's placement of Adam and Eve in a garden. Austen herself was clearly "aware of the politics of food," such as arguments promoting vegetarianism (Seeber 98). There were calls during her lifetime for wider circles of benevolence to include the lower orders of life (Oswald ii) and links between the cruelty of butchering animals and enslaving humans (Ritson 89). Austen employed similar morality connected to food when writing her novels, particularly when writing scenes set in hospitable frameworks.

Food has always been irretrievably linked to hospitality, also prominent in scriptural teachings. The gifts of hospitality, such as food, drink, and shelter, are obtained from the natural world of agriculture and animals. Christ placed hospitality at the very center of his teachings. In one of his parables, he clearly divides all people into two groups. The first offers hospitality: "For I was ahungered, and ye gave me meat; I thirsted, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in unto you" (Matthew 25.35). The second group does not offer the same: "For I was ahungered, and ye gave me no meat; I thirsted, and ye gave me no drink" (Matthew 25.42). The eternal fate of each individual rests on the choice to extend hospitality, for the inhospitable "shall go into everlasting pain, and the righteous into life eternal" (Matthew 25.46). Finally, Christ's last act before his betrayal and crucifixion was the Last Supper in which he served as host, distributing bread and wine, even to Judas, his betrayer. For Christians, no greater call to hospitality need be made. Anglican clergy reinforced the obligation of hospitality. One such example is Reverend Moore, who in a 1783 sermon encouraged "tender and pleasing ties of friendship and sociability...hospitality and neighbourly love" (398). Dr. James Fordyce, author of *Sermons to Young Women*, which Austen directly references in *Pride and Prejudice*, wrote of "the sacred rites of hospitality" (123), highlighting its godly significance.

Austen herself believed in biblical hospitality. One of the world's foremost scholars on Austen, Juliet McMaster, indicates that Austen could not tolerate hospitality that is reduced to "a matter of bargain and sale" (52). For her, acts of hospitality unquestionably manifest themselves as a measure of morality. McMaster explains the importance of hospitality to Austen:

Host and guest, like husband and wife, or like a lady and gentleman in the dance, have entered into a contract of mutual agreeableness; and like all the intricate social contracts in the novels it is one that epitomizes the delicate balance

that must be maintained between the will of the individual and the needs of the community. (53)

McMaster's description places hospitality within a system of morality that demonstrates true regard for others. Austen lived in a community governed by countless rules of conduct which recognized and maintained social status, but more importantly, these rules also regulated conduct so that consideration for others took precedence over selfish desires as commanded in the Bible: "submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (Eph. 5.21).

Reading Austen's novels within a context of Christian hospitality allows the reader to assess the morality of characters, provides divine motivation for behavior, and provides a frame of reference for humanity's hospitality to the nonhuman world. Regard for the welfare of others is desirable, of course, and contributes to a more peaceful, well-run society. However, regard for the welfare of others as a demonstration of God's love adds eternal significance. McMaster elucidates each seemingly trivial encounter with other characters: "nothing in the Jane Austen world is insignificant, because every little incident is indicative of a whole set of moral and social and psychological relations; each coming together of the characters [in hospitable settings] is a microcosm for the whole narrative" (53). In other words, "in Jane Austen's novels everything matters" (53). If everything matters, holding divine implication, then even an offering of food and drink to guests matters, morally and biblically.

Such biblical offering as the bread and wine of communion, a sacrament of the Anglican Church, Austen took seriously. In *Jane Austen's Anglicanism*, Laura Mooneyham White confirms that Austen participated regularly and even "asked for and received communion on her deathbed" (53). Communion combines food and hospitality, memorializing the evening of Christ's betrayal. He first washed the feet of his disciples to demonstrate humility, then gave them bread and wine representing his body and blood. Christ's humility as a servant, followed by his death on the cross, memorializes his act of propitiation to atone for the original sin of Adam and Eve—the consumption of forbidden fruit. A host, then, who offers food and drink in a spirit of humility imitates Jesus Christ while also demonstrating Christian stewardship and biblical hospitality, re-enacting on a smaller scale the Last Supper itself. As such, since "everything matters" in Austen's novels, food offered in humble hospitality takes on divine significance.

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is based, from the first scene to the last, on hospitality. The novel opens with the arrival of single young men to Netherfield, welcomed by the women in the Bennet family as potential suitors. The novel concludes with a list of who is and is not welcome to enjoy Pemberley's hospitality. As the frame to a novel filled with a succession of hospitable occasions, hospitality serves as a theme of primary importance to Austen, culminating with Darcy's role as host at Pemberley, a position he deliberately utilizes to win Elizabeth's love. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the moral worth of characters is based on how well each one fulfills Austen's expectations on the humble offering of food in stewardship and hospitality. Many fail her test. For

example, Mr. Hurst, brother-in-law to Darcy's best friend, "merely *looked* the gentleman," for he neglects any attempt at hospitality (10, emphasis added). When he first meets Elizabeth Bennet, who joins him as a guest at Netherfield, he says "nothing at all" to her because he was "thinking only of his breakfast" (36). After meals, he has "nothing to do, but to stretch himself on one of the sofas and go to sleep" (60). Austen's narrator dismisses him completely: "as for Mr. Hurst, by whom Elizabeth sat, he was an indolent man, who lived only to eat, drink, and play at cards; who, when he found her to prefer a plain dish to a ragout, had nothing to say to her" (38). Mr. Hurst provides an example of a man who has failed Austen's expectations of stewardship. He is not at home overseeing his own land; and he fails in hospitality for he offers nothing except proud contempt to the guest Elizabeth. His appetite is large, his generosity nonexistent.

Some similarities exist between Mr. Hurst and Mrs. Bennet, mother of Elizabeth and hostess of Longbourn, in regard to food. Both overvalue food, but in far different manners. He thinks only of eating. She prides herself on the food that she serves in hospitality settings. She haughtily informs guests that her girls do not cook, flaunting pride in her social position through her separation from the kitchen. She rebukes Mr. Collins for his query on which daughter cooked the meal, emphasizing her point by arrogantly informing guests that although Charlotte Lucas, a family friend, may be needed at home to make mince pies, her own daughters are brought up without that necessity (73, 48). She also worries about the impression her meals have on other people, priding herself that "she always keeps a good table" (135). For example, she takes care to plan two full courses for Mr. Bingley's visit, even though it is only a family dinner, fretting that she cannot impress her guests (374). Her constant agitation over food lowers our sense of her moral worth. As Maggie Lane assures us, "To take an interest in food in a Jane Austen novel is to be almost certainly condemned as frivolous, selfish or gross" (78).

Worse, as Seeber observes, Mrs. Bennet's insecurities over food offered in hospitality, combined with her anxiety to marry off her girls, even lead to a boast that effectively lowers her daughter's human status to an animal for sale in the marketplace by stating her equal pride in Jane's beauty and the meat at dinner (100). She exults in the "remarkably well done partridges," Jane's "great beauty" and the venison: "everybody said they never saw so fat a haunch" (379). The implied correlation between Jane and the meat furthers an insinuation of Jane's sexuality when noting that the word "haunch" is used for both human and animal. Mrs. Bennet's aggressive promotion of her daughter's beauty onto single young men throughout the novel confirms Dr. Fordyce's warnings about young women. "There is nothing so engaging as bashful beauty," he exhorts; "the beauty that obtrudes itself, how considerable soever, will either disgust, or at most excite but inferior desires. Men are so made" (72). Mrs. Bennet, in her eagerness to offer Jane to the wealthiest gentleman possible, likens Jane to an object of consumption, amplifying her distorted appetite for engineering her daughters' marriages by

exploiting the food God has provided and the hospitality she offers Darcy and Bingley.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh also exploits food offered in hospitality. Her motivation is to exercise power over not only her daughter, like Mrs. Bennet, but all within her sphere of influence: the natural world, food, and people. Lady Catherine objects to being kept waiting for her dinner. She orders her guests to admire the view, the landscape over which she exerts control. During dinner, the narrator pointedly indicates that “the gentlemen did nothing but eat and admire” (184), except that at this meal, unlike Mrs. Bennet’s, the gentlemen admire the novelty of the food rather than her cowed, sickly daughter. Lady Catherine’s control of the natural world is emphasized throughout all of the occasions in which she offers hospitality. She instructs Mrs. Collins on the care of her cows and poultry and criticizes her joints of meat as too large. The narrator even ironically notes her apparent control over the weather. Before leaving, “the party gathered round the fire to hear Lady Catherine determine what weather they were to have on the morrow” (188).

Lady Catherine’s power extends to the people in her parish. The reader is told that “she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into harmony and plenty” (190). It may be that her advice is sound, resulting in acceptable treatment of animals and profitable crops; however, her motivation is clearly to execute power and control, not Christian stewardship and certainly not humility. She exercises dominion in the most dictatorial sense of the word. Her hospitality merely provides opportunities to elicit compliments and gratitude rather than provide benevolent care. Her authoritarian control is emphasized when she arrives as an uninvited guest at Longbourn, Elizabeth’s home, late in the novel. She angrily refuses to accept hospitality by not asking for introductions to her family, criticizing their home, rebuffing refreshment, and behaving “more than usually insolent and disagreeable” (389, 390, 391). Whether as host or guest, she attempts to pridefully exert power even over those who live outside her sphere of influence.

Her lack of biblical hospitality contrasts greatly with that of Darcy, who exhibits true Christian stewardship and hospitality at Pemberley. Elizabeth’s approval when she approaches his estate for the first time is evident:

They gradually ascended for half-a-mile, and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the wood ceased, and the eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abruptness wound. It was a large, handsome stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. (271)

Austen's description of Pemberley, particularly notable since she rarely describes land or houses in detail, demonstrates her ideal of the human and nonhuman world existing in harmony. The estate is ordered according to Christian stewardship and biblical hospitality, mirroring the Anglican Church teachings which Austen found indispensable to her life and writing. His housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, who has known him and the estate intimately since Darcy was four years old, praises him highly: "He is the best landlord, and the best master . . . that ever lived. Not like the wild young men now-a-days, who think of nothing but themselves. There is not one of his tenants or servants but what will give him a good name" (276). Elizabeth's musings after touring the house demonstrate her understanding of Darcy's role:

The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!—How much of good or evil must be done by him! (277)

Elizabeth observes that Darcy acts responsibly toward his family, servants, and tenants as he makes decisions for his estate, running Pemberley as a representative of God on earth. The love, respect, and intimacy demonstrated at Pemberley reflect the intimacy Adam and Eve experienced before the Fall and are extended to the nonhuman world as well, as illustrated by the care of the land Elizabeth sees as she drives through the park.

That same ethic of benevolent care is extended toward the food grown on the land at Pemberley. In all of Austen's novels, the physical appearance of food "almost always helps illustrate character—the character in whose speech the detail occurs, and sometimes the characters spoken to, or of, as well" (Lane xi-xii). Everyone connected to Pemberley is generously provided for. Elizabeth and, through her, the novel's readers, think highly of him, not only because of his philanthropy but also his stewardship. He especially values Mr. Wickham, Sr., steward of Pemberley's resources, who exercises careful stewardship in Darcy's name, multiplying with interest the talents God has allocated to him. Darcy bestows the best Pemberley has to offer on Elizabeth and her family, including rare and delicate hot-house fruits, with no untoward display of pride or egotism. As "a rare mealtime set-piece" (Lane 146), Austen must have regarded Darcy's hospitality as significant: "cold meat, cake, and a variety of all the finest fruits in season," identified more specifically as "pyramids of grapes, nectarines, and peaches" (Austen 296). Pemberley's natural riches allow Darcy to offer its agrarian yield for the benefit of his guests, the house offers refreshing views from every window, and Mr. Gardiner savors fishing in the trout stream, thereby allowing guests to experience renewal through food, beauty, and recreation, and illustrating the truth that "a man's house is a reflection of his values" (Lane 143). The marriage resulting in part from hospitality unites two people whose altruism establishes a model for human/nonhuman relationships as well as relationships between humans.

Elizabeth is identified as the ideal partner for Darcy early in the novel because of her close affiliation with the natural world, demonstrated by her long walk to Netherfield to care for her ill sister. To do so, she walks over land whose owners demonstrate stewardship over agriculture and animals by “crossing field after field” and “jumping over stiles” (36). Although Austen has a reputation for espousing culture and civility, land and agriculture play a significant role in her work. The word “culture” itself, up to the end of the eighteenth century, referred first to a cultivated field and second to the act of cultivating the land. The term was only beginning to be used in the sense of improving one’s mind through education, in the same way that soil is improved through tillage (Bate 543). Austen’s use of “culture” in *Emma* clarifies the implications of Elizabeth’s walk through the fields so important to elucidating her affinity with the land. Emma, describing the view of Donwell Abbey and Abbey-Mill Farm, defines it as exemplifying “English verdure, English culture, English comfort” (391). The description, directed at the beauty of the fields, uncut timber, and meadows, is crucial for appreciating the significance of Elizabeth’s walk as an indicator of her preparation to join Darcy as partner in stewardship of Pemberley’s land.

The narrator specifically chronicles Elizabeth crossing fields. Although the specific types of fields are not defined, the fact that she climbs stiles implies that animals such as cattle must be kept out of those fields, perhaps as a form of protection, further implying that Elizabeth crosses fields used to grow crops. She is connected, then, to food and to the soil that food is grown in. Austen may have been signaling agreement with Samuel Johnson, one of her favorite writers, who declared that “the best garden” was one “which produced most roots and fruits” (Piozzi 169). As more of the country was brought under more symmetrical cultivation in the late 18th century, Keith Thomas observes a typical belief that “the practice of planting corn or vegetables in straight lines was not just an efficient way of using limited space, it was also a pleasing means of imposing human order on the otherwise disorderly natural world” (263, 256), a form of stewardship over a world disordered at the Fall. Elizabeth identifies with such ordered fields by choosing to walk through them rather than on roads or walking paths to reach her destination.

Fordyce, in the sermons referenced earlier, also wrote at length about women’s relationship to fields by expounding on scripture from Proverbs 31:

15. “She riseth also while it is yet night; and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.” With such spirit and vigour does she proceed, that, instead of indulging herself in overmuch sleep, she rises before break of day, to make provision for those who are to go abroad to work in the fields, and to set her maidens their several tasks at home.

16. “She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.” So far is she from wasting her husband’s estate, that by her frugality and capacity she is continually improving it; first purchasing a field fit for corn, when she meets with one that on due inspection she finds worth the price,

and then from the fruit of her own labours adding to it a vineyard, which she takes care to have well planted. (214-15)

Elizabeth's walk through the fields identifies her as a woman capable of fulfilling Fordyce's explication. She demonstrates a closeness with the earth when she arrives at Netherfield with muddy petticoats and "a face glowing with the warmth of exercise" (36). She bears evidence on her body of the earth itself, with "dirty stockings" and her petticoat "six inches deep in mud," literally embodying, through her dirt, sweat, and brightened eyes, God's expectation for human stewardship (36, 39).

Elizabeth's appreciation of Pemberley's landscape as viewed through well-placed windows also demonstrates her worth as Darcy's mate. She looks first at a "hill, crowned with wood" and deems it "beautiful" (272). Genesis 2.9, "For out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree pleasant to the sight, and good for meat," specifies trees first as "pleasant to the sight" and second as "good for meat," referring to the nuts they produce. The verse declares that beauty is not only important but superior, because it is listed first, to sustenance. Elizabeth, walking through fields to Netherfield and then through the gardens at Pemberley, responds to both beauty and sustenance. If the beauty of creation merits specific comment in the creation narrative, then Elizabeth's appreciation of that beauty places her in position to join with Darcy in responsibly representing God on earth. Cultivation of the natural world as stewardship implies the direct engagement of human beings, modelling Eden's beauty and the command to "dress it, and keep it." At Pemberley, fields are plowed and planted, trees are not cut down for profit, and people are valued. Pemberley's land, utilized for beauty and nourishment for animals and humans, defines Austen's ideal of Christian stewardship.

Darcy's ideal use of food indicates the moral worth of its owner. For Mr. Darcy, food indicates worth through stewardship, benevolence to the poor, and hospitality. Pemberley's worth as a bountiful estate, reflecting the worth of its owner, is evident from Elizabeth Bennet's first view of Darcy's home, one that she is prepared for from her own communion with the natural world. Sacrificial hospitality prevails as Darcy imitates the self-sacrificing character of God as host. As Allison Searle, author of "The Moral Imagination: Biblical Imperatives, Narrative and Hermeneutics in *Pride and Prejudice*," describes it, "In true biblical spirit, her characters are obliged to acknowledge principles higher than their own happiness, often requiring a denial of self: 'For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it' (Mark 8.35)" (21). His hospitality even meets the biblical command of humility. Darcy tells Elizabeth that although he formerly acted with "pride and conceit" (16), her influence taught him to act otherwise: "By you, I was properly humbled" (410). He concedes that his motivation during her visit to Pemberley was humility: "My object *then* . . . was to shew you, by every civility in my power, that I was not so mean as to resent the past; and I hoped to obtain your forgiveness, to lessen your ill opinion, by letting you see that your reproofs had been attended

to” (410). His sacrificial hospitality, bestowed for Elizabeth and her family, constitutes Pemberley as a symbolic heaven on earth, a vision of perfect felicity, a place where the pride and prejudice that inhibit the recognition of self and love are banished, and a place where the ideals of church teachings on food and humble hospitality are realized. Readers view Pemberley as a place where the lion can lie down with the lamb, a preview of the afterlife Austen’s church taught her to expect.

Notes

¹As Michael Dobson notes in book on Shakespeare and amateur performance, the capacious field of Shakespeare performance studies often neglects small-time Shakespeare as an object for critical inquiry. He identifies his book, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (2011) as the “first ever sustained examination” (1) of non-professional Shakespeare performance. Dobson devotes an entire chapter to the nineteenth century, focusing on the period’s invention and embrace of “amateur dramatic societies,” which would put on full-play productions. Georgianna Ziegler, in her work on women and Shakespeare in the nineteenth century, has also worked to remedy this neglect, as she discusses the period’s domestic reading practices. Shakespeare performance and reading in the nineteenth-century schoolroom and in home education, however, is a topic left underexplored.

²See similar arguments in Green, Lane, and Nyborg. Green sees Caroline as instructing Robert in a “romantic form of reading” that is “key to her revisionary feminist Christianity” (361). Lane argues that Caroline teaches Moore to recognize and overcome his misanthropy, Nyborg, to improve his professional service skills. All focus on what Robert Moore learns, however, and assume that Caroline has him read for his own edification only, not, as I argue, for her own.

³For more on Walker’s use of Shakespeare, see Edwards.

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