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Poetry and Poetics in Tolkien's Middle Earth

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Poetry and Poetics in Tolkien's Middle Earth

Elisha Swett

Poetry and Poetics in Tolkien's Middle Earth

by Elisha Swett

J.R.R. Tolkien is one of the greatest fantasy writers of the 20th century. He ingeniously constructed an entire world with its own lands, creatures, and language. Both young and old are mesmerized by his stories as his creatures fight to overcome evil with good. Many scholars have devoted their lives to studying different aspects of Tolkien's world, Middle Earth. One trait of Tolkien's fantasy that is full of mystery and life, is his poetry. Tolkien was fascinated by ancient Medieval poetry and song, which he weaves throughout his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. The poetry adds an enchanting element creating a mysterious and intoxicating twist to the trilogy. Without the poetry, the creatures would seem incomplete, and if the poetry did not have the creatures, then the words would be empty. They exist together in such a way that they can not be separated. The creatures are able to express themselves and relate to other creatures through their poetry. Although the poems add a lyrical element to the trilogy, they also serve as a connection between the creatures in Middle Earth, and the humans who read about them. Scholar Mary Quella Kelly explains that the "verse modifies emotion

in the fantasy world and the reader's world" (Kelly 172). As the reader reads each line, the characters' souls are exposed in such a way that they connect with the human soul. The separation between life in Middle Earth and life on Earth is bridged through the poetry as each creature comes to life through ancient rhythm and rhyme in Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings*.

Tolkien utilizes two forms of poetry in the trilogy. They are Skaldic and French Romantic. Tolkien spent a great deal of time studying these forms of poetry because he found them fascinating. He was so familiar with their form that it was only natural he should use this ancient style for his ancient world. At times, Tolkien creates his own style of poetry by mixing and shaping the two patterns with his own conventions creating a signature mark. The poetry pulsates with life, which show Tolkien's passion for the French Romantic and Skaldic styles.

The poetry that exists in Middle Earth closely follows the earliest forms of recorded poetry. Because Middle Earth goes farther back than the origin of our world, it is only fitting that Tolkien styles his poetry after

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ancient verse. In 597, Pope Gregory sent missionaries to Germany in order to convert the Germans to Christianity. While they were there, the missionaries taught the Germanic tribes how to read and write. Before this time in history, the Germans “maintained oral literature” through poems that they chanted or sang, called “Gregorian chants” (Hargrove 1). Because this poetry was not recorded, the people needed a method that would help them remember the words. This was done through the use of alliteration. Alliteration is “the repetition of a speech sound in a sequence of words; usually applied only to consonants at the beginning of a word or a stressed syllable” (Abrams 7). A form of poetry that developed from this Germanic tradition, Skaldic poetry, places an emphasis on words rather than rhyme, yet it uses both, “because rhyming words tend to (hang together) in the memory” (Frank 322). The lines in a couplet are often linked together by alliteration. “The basic system of alliteration between two half-lines is always present” (Jackson 42). This means that the third beat alliterates with the first half-line, creating an alliterative meter. This form of poetry usually has four beats per line or a specific number of syllables for the entire poem. Skaldic poetry is often used to bestow a blessing, impart a curse, or elevate a hero, and it occasionally deals with love or dreams. (Katie VandeBrake, Lecture Spring 1999) *The Two Towers*, a poem by Treebeard, is a good example of this type of Skaldic Poetry.

Learn now the lore of living
creatures
First name of the four, the free
peoples
Eldest of all the elf children
Dwarf the delver, dark are his houses

Ent the Earthborn old as mountains
Man the Mortal, master of
horses . . .
(Two Towers 67)

This poem illustrates the form of Skaldic verse. The use of “l” in the first line pulls the reader along into the second line where the repetitious “f” sound reiterates that Treebeard is trying to remember four creatures. In both of these lines, “living” and “free” are situated so that they are the third beat alliterating with the first two beats in the first half of the line. The idea that alliteration helps the singer to remember the song is obvious in this particular poem.

Another form of poetry that Tolkien uses in *The Lord Of the Rings* is rhyming verse. Rhyming verse had its origins in Church Latin in the “practical art of the chant” (Sisam xiv). Rhymed verse traveled from the medieval monasteries to the French court *trouvers*. *Trouvers* were medieval “poet-musicians” in North France whose songs included lyrics about love, romance and the heroic (*chansons de geste*). The *Trouvers*’ main purpose was to please their audience (Sisam xv). *Trouvers* wrote their lyrics set to a tune; however they were often performed by someone else. In order to get rid of long line monotony, *Trouvers* began to sing. French influence tipped the scale swiftly and decisively in favor of rhyme because rhyme is easier to sing and has romantic overtones. Alliteration became a “secondary principle” or a “casual ornament” (Sisam xiv). French poetry has short lines that have seven, eight, or ten syllables, set in stanzas that all follow the same rhyming pattern. The rhyming pattern usually follows *ababccdd* or a similar couplet sequence such as *aabbcc* (Akehurst 215). An example of

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rhyming verse can be seen in Gimli's poem in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

The world was young, the mountains
green
No stain yet on the Moon was seen
No words were laid on stream or
stone,
When Durin woke and walked alone.
He named the nameless hills and
dells;
He drank from yet untasted wells. . .
(*Fellowship of the Ring* 329)

There was a "high standard of metrical workmanship" which is apparent in the intricate usage of rhyme and meter in French poetry (Sisam xxi). While poetry was a part of life in France, it had nearly lost its appeal in England, when the imaginative poetry of the *trouvères* "found a new home in the West-Midlands of England" (Sisam xviii). Traveling musicians, known as Troubadors adapted to the French style of occitan (sung) poetry (Akehurst 216). The poetry of the Troubadors is imaginative and often reflects physical pleasures or the worth of a person. It was also used to describe the seasons (Akehurst 216). Tolkien incorporates both the Skaldic and French Romantic style in his poetry in *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy.

Author Richard Purtill writes that the "use which Tolkien makes of language in his fiction grows out of his professional concern with language, in interesting ways" (Purtill 61). Tolkien's fascination with words and word sequence is evident the Trilogy. The fact that he created the poetry as the creatures' "natural mode of expression" allows the reader to immerse themselves into the creatures' fantastical world (Kelly 172). The creatures that appear in the *Lord of the Rings* are

hobbits, elves, ents, Tom Bombadil, and man. These strange creatures are alive with feeling and emotion, which is found deep within the lines of Tolkien's poetry.

The hobbit creatures are ancient people who love peace and quiet and are becoming more and more rare in middle earth. They are "little people, smaller than Dwarves . . . ranging between two and four feet." The Hobbits "were merry folk" apt to "laughter, eating, drinking, and fond of simple jest" (*Fellowship of the Ring* 10-11). Throughout the trilogy, the Hobbits are busy trying to destroy the ring and conquer evil along with the other creatures of Middle Earth. Because they tend to prefer a peaceful quiet life, they sing along their journey as a way to cope with the hardships that they are facing. Kelly writes, "Hobbits sing when they are happy and comfortable, when they are sad and troubled, when they are fearful and desperate, and when they are angry and vexed" (Kelly 172). Hobbits are able to find happiness in everyday activities like walking, bathing, or even drinking. They have a tendency to sing or hum "softly" and "in a low voice" as they carry on their lives. Their poetry follows a trend that is "simple and occasional" (Kelly 172). They enjoy making up their own poems, but they also borrow or recreate old poems from their home, the Shire. The hobbit, Bilbo Baggins composed most of the poetry that comes from the Shire. For example, as the Hobbits start out on their quest, they sing a tune that Bilbo made up called the "walking song."

Upon the hearth the fire is red
Beneath the roof there is a bed
But not yet weary are our feet
Still round the corner we may meet
A sudden tree or standing stone
That none have seen but we alone

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Tree and flower and leaf and grass,
Let the pass! Let the pass!
Hill and water under sky,
Pass them by! Pass them by! . . .
(Fellowship of the Ring 86)

Each stanza in this poem has ten lines that can be divided into two sections. The first stanza of this song speaks about the comforts of home with a warm “fire” and a “bed,” but the second part explains how they have to leave those things behind as they set out on their journey. In the second stanza, they encourage each other that their travels will take them down “a new road” or through “a secret gate” that will take them “towards the moon and sun.” In the second part of the same stanza the Hobbits say that they will have to let go of the things they cherish in the Shire. The way that Tolkien emphasizes the hobbit’s emotions, which are mixed with excitement and hesitation, is by changing the beats in each stanza. The first five lines of each stanza have eight syllables as they sing about the exciting adventure they are about to take. The sixth line is about home and the things they are leaving behind. Tolkien takes a syllable out of this line which makes the reader have to consider the words before continuing. The Hobbits chant, “Apple, thorn, and nut, and sloe” as if they are realizing for the first time these things will not be available to them in their travels. The final six lines only have six syllables each slowing the poem down significantly. The Hobbits are excited about their journey but it is with hesitation that they are able to leave their comfortable homes, as they say, “Pass them by! Pass them by!” “Fare ye well! Fare ye well” (*Fellowship of the Ring* 86). The Hobbits, as well as the reader, must take time to dwell on the fact that their lives will change as Frodo, Sam, and the other

Hobbits embark on their journey away from the Shire.

The Hobbits also use poetry as a way to bring lighthearted relief in hard and awkward situations. Sam recites a particularly silly poem when Frodo and Sam are dealing with the horrible creature Gollum. Sam desperately wants to see an elephant like creature called an *oliphaunt* that he has heard about in the Shire. Although Frodo discourages him from ever thinking he will see one, Sam recites a Shire poem about this animal.

Grey as a mouse,
Big as a house,
Nose like a snake,
I make the earth shake,
As I tramp through the grass;
Trees crack as I pass.
With horns in my mouth
I walk in the South,
Flapping big ears.
Beyond count of years
I stump round and round,
Never lie on the ground,
Not even to die.
Oliphaunt am I . . .
(Two Towers 255)

The rhymed couplets in this poem make it lively and easy to recite. The lighthearted tone of this poem has a great effect on the reader just as much as it does on Frodo. Frodo “laughed in the midst of all his cares . . . and the laugh released him from hesitation” (*Two Towers* 255). The way that Sam is able to bring humor to a tough situation shows a great deal about his character. Just from this one little poem, the reader also is able to enjoy Sam’s jovial personality. Sam’s recitation of the oliphaunt poem is a great example of how the poetry in the trilogy can be used to relieve

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tension, not only for the Hobbits but for the reader as well.

The hobbits use poetry and song is because they love to, and because it is how they express their emotions. For example, there is one particular poem that is in the trilogy three times. By simply switching a few words, the poem takes on a whole new meaning for the Hobbits, Frodo and Bilbo, who recite it. The poem is about embarking on a journey.

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.
(*Fellowship of the Ring* 44)

The poem follows a pattern of four beats per line, which causes the poem to be continuous and steady, like an ongoing journey. Bilbo recites it for the first time as he is preparing to leave for his voyage at the beginning of the trilogy. Because the hobbits are creatures who are usually content to stay at home, the poem reveals to the reader that something has welled up inside of Bilbo that causes him to “pursue” the road “with eager feet” (*Fellowship of the Ring* 44). Frodo recites the poem again as he leaves to go on his journey. With the change of one word, the poem shows Frodo’s hesitation about leaving the Shire. Instead of “pursuing” the road “with eager feet,” Frodo “pursues it with weary feet” (*Fellowship of the Ring* 82). With this one slight change, both Frodo and the reader lose their zeal for travel as Frodo wearily starts on his journey. Bilbo recites the same poem for a third time at the end of the

trilogy. The Hobbits have returned to the Shire and Bilbo is finally ready to rest from his travels. He changes “eager” to “weary” like Frodo did as well as several other lines. The first time Bilbo recites the poem he says, “And I must follow, if I can,” and now he says, “Let others follow it who can.” He wants others to journey in his place. The poem is rearranged slightly, but it maintains the same beat. The last three lines change the meaning of the poem.

But I at last with weary feet
Will turn towards the lighted inn
My evening-rest and sleep to meet.
(*Return of the King* 266)

These lines make it clear to all those in Middle Earth and to the reader, that Bilbo’s travels are finally complete. When the hobbits recite this poem, the reader has to draw close to the pages to catch every word because Bilbo sings it “in a low voice to himself . . . softly,” and Frodo silently said it “slowly” (*Fellowship of the Ring* 44 & 82). This poem was meant to be recited in a soft voice, which is only fitting as the hobbits are, after all, small creatures.

The hobbits are creatures who do not have great aspirations or ambitions, therefore they simply use poetry as an expression of their simple life style. Robley Evans says that “the hobbits probably see poetry as not suitable for the serious-minded and businesslike” (Evans 104). Their poetry is about walking, drinking, bathing and even sleeping. Each poem opens a new window into the creature’s simple soul. Although the hobbits loved their poetry, there were other creatures whose poetry was an even more important part of their lives—the elves.

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The most beautiful poetry in the trilogy comes from the elven creatures. It is so lovely that the other creatures love to hear and recite elvish poetry. Their poetry is more musical than any of the other poetry within the trilogy. Despite the fact that their poetry is beautiful, it tends to produce feelings of remoteness for the creatures and the reader (Kelly 182). As the oldest creatures in middle earth, the elves are becoming extinct. Their poetry reflects the fact that all they have left to hold onto is their past. It tells of people and places from the beginning of middle earth. According to the history of Middle earth, the elves are the bearers of light, therefore their poetry is full of images that relate to light and brightness, especially starlight (Kelly 183).

The elves also love to sing about romantic love and physical beauty due to the fact that they are beautiful creatures and infatuated by love (Kelly 183). One of the most beautiful poems in the trilogy is the first one sung by the elves who are telling Frodo, Sam, and Pippin about their ancient Queen, Elbereth. The poem's sound and sense reflects tremendous light and beauty.

Snow-white! Snow-white! O Lady
clear!
O Queen beyond the Western Sea!
O Light to us that wander here
Amid the world of woven tree! . . .
O stars that in the Sunless Year
With shining hand by her were sown,
In windy fields now bright and clear
We see your silver blossom blown!
(*Fellowship of the Ring* 89)

Because the elves came into being before the sun and the moon, they had to bear their own light, which is reflected throughout the lines of this poem. When they walk there is "starlight

glimmering on their hair and in their eyes" (*Fellowship of the Ring* 89). This poem tells the story of their pure and lovely queen for whom they have great adoration. The elves emphasize her purity and light throughout the poem. There are three lines that start "O Queen" "O Light" and "O stars." Tolkien addresses the objects in this poem through the use of the "O." In this particular poem, the "O" serves to introduce an apostrophe, which is a convention used to address something that is a non-person as if that object could respond. The "O" pushes these three words stand more than the others, which makes them the focal points. Not only does this poem tell a story, but it brings honor to their queen and glory to the elves themselves who bear the light of the stars. The elves also have their own language that is not understood by the other creatures, however they are moved even when they do not understand the words. The elves sing their poetry to each other "in a clear voice" trying desperately to cling to their dwindling past.

A Elbereth Gilthoniel,
Silivren pena miriel
Na-chaered palan-diriel . . .
(*Fellowship of the Ring* 250)

Even though the other creatures can not understand the poetry, it still stirs their souls. Frodo "stood still enchanted, while the sweet syllables of the elvish song fell like clear jewels of blended word and melody" (*Fellowship of the Ring* 250). Even though the words are unclear, the beat stirs the soul in such a way that all who hear them ache for the elves who miss their home and their queen, Elbereth. Over and over again the elves use poetry to express their love for times past and the sadness that they bear because they know their time in Middle Earth is almost over. Every

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poem of the elves has a sweet aroma and richness that can not found in any other poetry of Middle Earth. It is so beautiful, yet so sad and somber allowing all creatures to feel the elves' passions and pains.

There is one creature in middle earth who is different than any other. His name is Tom Bombadil. Not only is his appearance different that the others, but he has a unique personality. He is a singular creature in a singular world with singular poetry. His wife, Goldberry calls him the "master of water, wood and hill" (*Fellowship of the Ring* 135). Tom represents nature, therefore he is the "voice of nature" (Kelly 179). His songs have an "irregular and nonrational rhythm" that are "uncontrived and untainted as the nature which Tom Bombadil represents" (Kelly 181). Tom's words don't always make sense, but he is always happy as he sings them.

Hey dol! Merry dol! Ring a dong
dillo!

Ring a dong! Hop along! Fal lal
willow!

Tom Bom, jolly Tom, Tom
Bombadillo!

(*Fellowship of the Ring* 130)

This has a merry tune that is full of the / sound like a tongue twister. The silly words bring light heartedness to the hobbits who are in great danger when Tom finds them in the woods. They find Tom to be awkward like his songs, but they are very grateful for his kindness. Before the hobbits continue on their journey, Tom Bombadil gives them a gift in the form of a poem. If they are even in trouble, all they have to do is recite the poem and Tom Bombadil will rescue them. This poem is easy to remember with only four lines and an *aabb* rhyme scheme. This poem is a special treasure

as it identifies the mysterious powers of Tom Bombadil as the only creature of his kind, and the hope, which it gives to both the creatures and the reader.

Ho! Tom Bombadil, Tom
Bombadillo!

By water, wood and hill, by reed and
willow,

By fire, sun and moon, harken now
and hear us!

Come, to me Bombadil, for our need
is near us!

(*Fellowship of the Ring* 145)

The travelers are by no means warriors; therefore, the poem equips them with a defense mechanism against the enemy as they continue to build up their own strength. Tom Bombadil promises the group that whenever they are in grave danger they should chant this poem. By doing so, Tom promises to aid them in their distress. Soon after the group leaves Tom, they find themselves in a horrible situation. As he promised, Tom comes to their rescue when they started chanting. Tom Bombadil is a unique character with unique poetry, which expresses his personality so well that you want to see him and follow him through the woods.

Another odd creature is the Ent. Ents are tree-creatures that happen to be the oldest creatures in Middle Earth. They have a distinct, clearly structured poetry that has a tendency to be long and repetitious (Kelly). The ents' tree-like existence is captured in the lines of their poetry. One example of ent poetry is in the form of a chant. The ents loudly chant a poem on their way to the battle of Isengard.

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To Isengard! Though Isengard be
ringed and barred with doors of
stone;
Though Isengard be strong and hard,
as cold as stone and bare as bone,
We go, we go we go to war, to hew
the stone and break the door;
For bole and bough are burning now,
the furnace roars—we go to war!
(*Two Towers* 88)

Although Treebeard, the ent leader, explains that “ents do not like being roused,” they become angry when their lives are endangered; therefore they are willing to fight. (*Two Towers* 88) This poem contains harsh consonant sounds such as *d g b & t*. These sounds strike like the beating of a drum and are cold to the bare bone. All the creatures and the readers can feel the spirit of war rising forth from the ents who will passionately fight to save their lives. The picture of a great army marching of to war fills the mind as the ents loudly chant the lines of this poem.

The ents also share a beautiful elvish poem with the hobbits that talks about the seasons. This recitation is a great example of how the creatures love the elvish poetry and enjoy sharing it with each other. This particular poem follows very closely to the French romantic style. The poem has an *aabbcc . . .* pattern as it speaks of the past *and* the seasons. One aspect of this poem is uncharacteristic of elvish poetry. Treebeard says “it is lighthearted, quick worded, and soon over.” Unlike the somber elvish poetry found throughout the trilogy, this poem fills the soul with delight.

When Spring unfolds the beechen
leaf, and sap is in the bough;
When light is on the wild-wood

stream, and wind is on the brow;
When stride is long, and breath is
deep, and keen the mountain air,
Come back to me! Come back to
me, and say my land is fair!
(*Two Towers* 87)

This poem tells the history of many ents who were separated from their entwives and desperately desire to be reunited. Treebeard and his entwife chanted this poem together. Each of them sing a stanza about spring, summer and winter. This poem also poses some elements of skaldic poetry, which makes it easier to remember. This poem alliterates at different point, particularly in the stanzas about wintertime. Treebeard says, “When Winter comes, the winter wild that hill and wood shall slay.” The Entwife says, “When winter comes, and singing ends; when darkness falls at last” (*The Two Towers* 81). Both of these lines are full of the *w* sound, which sounds as if the words are blowing in the cold winter wind, sending a shiver through all those who hear it. Of course, they do not leave anyone feeling cold at the end of the poem. The ents chant, “Together we will take the road that leads into the West, And far away will find a land where both our hearts may rest” (*The Two Towers* 81). The ents like this particular poem not only because it deals with their history, and they can relate to the repetitious style, which makes it easy for them to remember. After the ents recite this poem, everyone is able to go to sleep. This elvish poem seems to bring peace to all that hear it.

The men in the trilogy have their own poetry as well. Aragorn, although he is half elf, is the “kingly poet” of the trilogy (Kelly 194). His poems are songs, which are both unusual and effective. The mix of his elvish and human heritage, makes his poetry truly royal. At the

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funeral of his friend and companion, Boromir, Aragorn sings a beautiful poem.

Through Rohan over fen and field
where the long grass grows
The West Wind comes walking, and
about the walls it goes.
'What news from the West, O
wandering wind, do you bring to
me tonight?
Have you seen Boromir the Tall by
moonlight or by starlight?' . . .
(*The Two Towers* 19)

This poem follows the skaldic form of poetry. There are over 30 alliterations made within the lines of the poem and the words elevate Boromir as a hero (Kelly 194). When Aragorn speaks to the wind, the wind blows across the page with his alliterative use of *w*'s throughout the entire poem.

The men of Rohan also recite poetry that is skaldic in style. They describe the battle scene at the Mounds of Mundburg.

We heard of the horns in the hills
ringing,
The swords shining in the South-
kingdom/
Steeds went striding to the
Stoningland
As wind in the morning. War was
kindled . . .
(*The Return of the King* 124)

This poem also follows the skaldic form of poetry. The men of Rohan sing this song to honor King Theoden who died a hero at the Mounds of Mundburg. Every line has three alliterating words, which keep the poem going like a long battle. The *h* sound bursts out like a horn, and the *s* sound smashes swords

together against each other in the thick of battle. The *b*'s at the end of the poem make blood ooze off the pages reminding all who hear this poem about the reality of war. This poem reveals the strength and valor of the great warrior men from Rohan. The reader can feel the passion within the warrior as he fights to defeat the enemy and can feel his pain when he loses his king, Theoden.

Other creatures in *The Lord of the Rings* use poetry as well. The Wight's are creatures who were once human but became evil spirits. The hobbits hear them chanting a poem that "chilled them to the marrow" (*Fellowship of the Ring* 152). Their poem is a great example that exemplifies the connection the reader can feel with the Hobbits. The words are chilling and as cold as death, which send chills down the spine.

Cold be hand and heart and bone,
And cold be sleep under stone
Never more to wake on stony bed,
Never, till the sun fails and the Moon
is dead . . .

Death resounds through the words of the Wight's song. The sharp consonant sounds like "cold," "stone," and "bone" all lend to the harshness of the evil that the Wights bring with them wherever they go.

When Richard Purtell says, "for Tolkien speech is personality," he truly captures the essence of the trilogy. Every aspect of Tolkien's work reiterates the fact that Tolkien is completely fascinated by language. The poetry Tolkien weaves throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, seems to possess a mysterious quality as it brings the reader deep into his fantastical world. Tolkien's love for ancient poetry flows naturally through the creature's poems and songs, which are full of beautiful

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rhyming patterns, stories, and alliteration. As the reader journeys with the creatures through Middle Earth, the poetry bridges the gap between their worlds as the creatures unreservedly express their inmost feelings time and time again through the poetry in *The Lord of The Rings*.

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