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KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S NOTORIOUS VIRGINS:
FEMALE SEXUALITY AND CATHOLICISM IN
"VIRGIN VIOLETA," "FLOWERING JUDAS," AND "OLD MORTALITY"

Christine L. Grogan

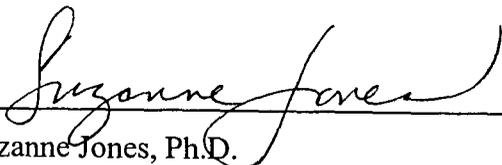
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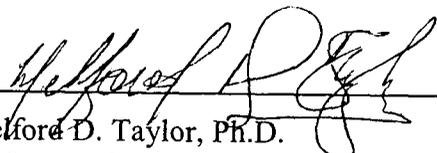
Abstract

The intersection of Roman Catholic ideology and female sexuality remains at the heart of Katherine Anne Porter's short stories, "Virgin Violeta" (1924), "Flowering Judas" (1930), and "Old Mortality" (1937). In these works, Porter implicitly suggests that the Catholic ideology of the early twentieth century has been reduced to a matter of sexuality, particularly female sexual purity. Through her portraits of the young virgin Violeta in "Virgin Violeta" and the frigid adult Laura in "Flowering Judas," Porter challenges the Roman Catholic emphasis on female chastity. In tracing the development of Miranda in "Old Mortality," Porter subverts Roman Catholic ideology by presenting a character who abandons her religion and the sacrament of marriage, denouncing the Church morality and teachings that shaped her perceptions. Despite their differences in showing how women come to terms with their sexuality and incorporate their religious values into everyday life, all three stories conclude with sexually confused and socially isolated female characters.

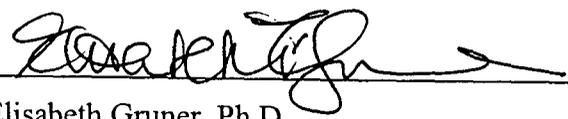
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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Mary [Doherty] was one of those virtuous, strait-laced Irish Catholic girls. . . 'born with the fear of sex.'

Katherine Anne Porter

With this description of Mary Doherty,¹ who presumably serves as the autobiographical source for Laura in “Flowering Judas” (1930), Katherine Anne Porter discusses the origin of her female character who attempts to retain the lifelong purity instilled by her Catholic upbringing. In “Flowering Judas,” Porter writes about a lapsed Catholic who strives to uphold the religious idealism embodied in female sexual innocence. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that Laura’s inability to be intimate leads to a life of moral disengagement from humanity. The fundamental Catholic attitude regarding female sexuality dictates that the female must remain a virgin until marriage: sex is “the deepest and most spiritual. . . form of communion” and is only to be used as a means for procreation and not for pleasure (Porcile 201).² Porter’s implicit suggestion is that the Catholic ideology of the early twentieth century has been reduced to a matter of sexuality, particularly female sexual purity.³ Although this contention is most poignantly seen in the character of Laura in “Flowering Judas,” it is also apparent in many of Porter’s other female characters, especially Violeta in “Virgin Violeta” (1924) and Miranda in “Old Mortality” (1937). In “Virgin Violeta” and “Flowering Judas,” Porter’s portraits of the young virgin Violeta and the frigid adult Laura illustrate how these females equate sexuality with sin, viewing virginity as their defining virtue. In “Old Mortality,” Porter traces the development of Miranda and presents a character who realizes that her sexuality is not her essence, and, therefore, rejects the Church morality and teachings that shaped her perceptions and abandons the sacrament of marriage.

Through her creation of the adolescent Violeta, the adult Laura, and the coming-of-age Miranda, Porter undermines the Catholic ideology that overemphasizes female chastity.

By and large the critical commentary on Porter's works has shied away from addressing Porter's conflicted religious stance. Thomas Walsh and Paul Giles are among the few who have focused on Porter's portrayal of Catholicism. In *Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico: The Illusion of Eden* (1992), Walsh analyzes Porter's early Mexican stories, tracing what he finds to be Porter's anti-Catholic sentiments and her anticlerical bias. In Giles's *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (1992), he views Catholicism as operating "as an aesthetic fiction, a beautiful idea," for Porter (353). However, Porter is not consistent in either rejecting or embracing her religion. It is evident from these opposing interpretations that the Catholic religion was a concern for Porter and also a subject she struggled with in her writing. Porter seems especially interested in the Catholic beliefs that young women, like herself, were brought up with at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴

Undoubtedly concerned with duality in womanhood, Porter emphasized the female's need for independence as much as love. Although the two could be integrated successfully at times, too often they were at odds. In *Katherine Anne Porter's Women*, Jane Krause DeMouy outlines the dynamics of femininity, explaining that the woman figure throughout history changed from the religious Great Mother image to pagan anthropomorphized goddesses, which in turn led to split personalities in the woman. She states, "[i]t was only a small further step for modern society to strip away the religious image and reduce woman to the types we recognize so easily in our literature: mother,

virgin, temptress, faithful wife, castrating bitch” (9). DeMouy further asserts that with the separation of the parts of the feminine character came the insistence that if the woman is body, she can not be soul, and vice versa. Although DeMouy rightly concludes, “[i]t is in this fragmentation and vulnerability that Porter writes,” much of Porter’s fiction illuminates the religious image of the Virgin Mary, highlighting female purity in an attempt to reconcile the dichotomy of body and soul (9).⁵ Her fiction is not stripped of the religious influence that society has done away with. Porter saw the importance of integrating the two essences of body and soul and believed that the female’s search for identity hinged on incorporating her religious values in her everyday life.

It is fitting that Porter’s female characters address the particular dilemmas inherent in being woman and being Roman Catholic, for Porter herself was often conflicted. Although not a cradle-Catholic, Porter converted to Catholicism while married to her first husband, John Henry Koontz. She found solace in the company of the priests that lived with the Koontz family, and she was formally baptized into the faith on April 5, 1910. Not only attracted to the aesthetics of the Catholic Church, Porter also understood the strict doctrines regarding female purity that her grandmother, Aunt Cat, instilled in her. However spiritually fulfilling Porter found Catholicism, she also saw the patriarchal institution irreconcilable with her feminist inclinations. In *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life*, biographer Joan Givner details Porter’s contradictory attitudes toward Catholicism, revealing her opposition to the Church’s view of women. Porter voiced her feminist aspirations and renounced the philosophies of the Catholic saints, such as St. Jerome and St. Paul, who believed that “death came through Eve” (101). She spoke condescendingly

about the Jewish religion, contending that Judaism tainted Christian perceptions. In addition, Porter's statements about sex indicate that she thought "the idea of sex as evil" was again "a Jewish poison foisted on Christianity," and not inherent in the Catholic faith (101).

However, Porter often disclosed intimate details of her life that revealed her ambivalence toward sex. She claimed that she "was boy crazy but afraid of boys and sex because she had been taught to be."⁶ In an interview with Enrique Hank Lopez, she told about her rebellious spirit and reckless nature, including the time she supposedly ran away from the convent school and eloped to spite her father. In a very honest account, she commented on her first husband, Koontz:

'I don't like to talk about it, and I never mention it. But it was twenty-six years before I married again. For a long while I couldn't stand anything to do with sex. I was frigid as a cucumber and never did really get over it altogether.' (32)

Despite the self-proclaimed years of celibacy,⁷ Porter also bragged about having four husbands and thirty-seven lovers (qtd. in Givner 16). Overall her feelings about sex seem to have included disgust and fear, resonating with the views she imposed on her female characters Violeta, Laura, and Miranda. From her strict upbringing and her unhealthy first marriage, Porter most likely formed an aversion toward sex and anything to do with it. She revisited this topic on many occasions, quite possibly using her fiction to work out her own feelings and beliefs.

In "Virgin Violeta," Porter uses her protagonist to convey her own thoughts on female puberty and emerging womanhood. Perhaps the most evident facet of Violeta's dilemma is the sexual tension that she experiences at quite a young and impressionable

age. At fourteen, Violeta's maturation into womanhood is literally sealed with a kiss, as she engages in a sexual encounter with her cousin Carlos, who has been flirting with her sister, Blanca. Her initial experience with the opposite sex results in her confusion about her sexuality and her rejection of the convent school. Filtered through the eyes of a young girl, "Virgin Violeta" exposes the female protagonist's naiveté; Violeta's entry into adulthood is inundated with conflicted feelings and mixed messages. From the beginning, Violeta recognizes the incompatibility between Catholic teachings and female sexuality. The painting of the Virgin Mary, although small in size, dominates the room where the cousins read: "[t]he Virgin, with enameled face set in a detached simper, forehead bald of eyebrows, extended one hand remotely over the tonsured head of the saint, who groveled in a wooden posture of ecstasy" (23). Violeta is aware of the mingling religious and sexual tensions, as illustrated when she watches Carlos, who stares with almost voyeuristic desire at the painting and only diverts his eyes to glance at Blanca.

Moreover, Porter represents Violeta as an emotionally distraught girl torn between her repressed urges and her disciplined religious teachings:

She had the silence and watchfulness of a young wild animal, but no native wisdom. She was at home from the convent in Tacubaya for the first time in almost a year. There they taught her modesty, chastity, silence, obedience, with a little French and music and some arithmetic. She did as she was told, but it was all very confusing, because she could not understand why the things that happen outside of people were so different from what she felt inside of her. Everybody went about doing the same things every day, precisely as if there were nothing else going to happen, ever; and all the time she was certain there was something simply tremendously exciting waiting for her outside the convent. (23-24)

By comparing Violeta to a "young wild animal" with "no native wisdom," Porter illustrates both her innate desire for freedom and the suppression of her animal-like

impulses by the nuns who teach the young Violeta about woman's virtue (23).

Interestingly, although not coincidentally, Porter lists modesty and chastity first, suggesting that above all else, young Catholic girls are instilled with a respect for and fear of their sexuality.

In fact, growing up surrounded by nuns unconsciously alters Violeta's perceptions of female sexuality. She reads stories and tucks them into her church missal. One story in particular attracts her: "[t]here was one about the ghosts of nuns returning to the old square before their ruined convent, dancing in the moonlight with the shades of lovers forbidden them in life, treading with bared feet on broken glass as a penance for their loves" (24). Readily, the young Violeta identifies with the nuns: "[s]he was certain she would be like those nuns someday. She would dance for joy over shards of broken glass" (24). And again, "[s]he was even one of the nuns, the youngest and best-loved one, ghostly silent, dancing forever and ever under the moonlight to the shivering tune of old violins" (25). Although she aligns herself with the nuns, she does so in a romanticized manner, involving forbidden lovers: she imagines herself as a nun, who sins by loving. Even a young Violeta realizes that the nuns' celibate lives do not coincide with her dreams of love, and furthermore, that the convent life does not coincide with the outside society. In sum, Violeta feels trapped and confined by the institution in which she is being reared.

Violeta's cloistered life is further complicated because she is on the brink of puberty. For the first time in her life, she experiences a sexual desire for a boy. By capturing Violeta's thoughts, Porter probes the psychology of the young Catholic female,

which for Violeta is quite troublesome because her traditional religious training places women on a pedestal. In the Catholic faith, the Virgin-Mother Mary embodies the ideal woman. During the time that Porter was writing "Virgin Violeta," she would have witnessed the major changes in the self-perception and self-definition of women.

Timothy G. McCarthy touches on the theology of Mary: "[s]he has been presented as a passively obedient handmaid, a woman of unparalleled holiness and purity, a submissive and subjugated sorrowful mother, and the male projection of idealized femininity [sic] both as an asexual virgin and as a domestically all-absorbed mother in a patriarchal family" (346). While growing up Catholic, the young Violeta was most likely taught that sex and love reside only in the context of holy matrimony. Her idealized and romantic dream of love remains intact until her initial experience with Carlos. In an ironic passage, Violeta's thoughts of Carlos overcome her while she is in church:

Sometimes she cried in church when the music wailed terribly and the girls sat in veiled rows, all silent except for the clinking of their beads slipping through their fingers. They were strangers to her then; what if they knew her thoughts? Suppose she should say aloud, "I love Carlos!" The idea made her blush all over, until her forehead perspired and her hands turned red. She would begin praying frantically, "Oh, Mary! Oh, Mary! Queen Mother of mercy!" (26)

Quite naturally, Violeta is embarrassed for having what she has been taught to call impure thoughts. However, Porter turns embarrassment into guilt, as is evident when Violeta experiences such thoughts in a religious setting and then prays to the Virgin Mary, "Queen Mother of mercy," to forgive her (26). Violeta implores the help of the Virgin Mary, highlighting her preoccupation with female purity and virginity. Without

ever having sinned sexually, Violeta already feels she is guilty and needs the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

But despite the guilt she feels, Violeta has not yet learned how to control her emotions and actions or to discern reality from fantasy, which is evident when Carlos kisses her. Whether Carlos takes advantage of his young cousin or Violeta wills the encounter to occur, the kiss awakens her latent sexuality. While this budding relationship with Carlos could have a fairy-tale ending, Porter does not end it happily-ever-after. Instead, Violeta is belittled and chastised by both Carlos and Mamacita. After the kiss, Violeta associates the feeling in the pit of her stomach with the one she experiences when she must “explain things to Mother Superior” (29). Immediately and almost unconsciously, she places her sexual experience in a religious context, which shows how thoroughly she has been indoctrinated to think of sexuality as sinful. When Carlos continues to blame Violeta for the kiss, she accepts responsibility: “[s]he was shamefully, incredibly in the wrong. She had behaved like an immodest girl” (30). The young Violeta thinks she committed a terrible sin because of the guilt that her Catholic upbringing has instilled in her. To confirm her shame, Mamacita reprimands her by telling Violeta that she must learn to “control her nerves,” echoing Papacito’s warning that Violeta’s “moral nature needs repairment” (31, 25).

Burdened with shame and rejection, Violeta is left frustrated, even more than before the kiss. When Carlos comes in to tell her good-night, emotion overtakes her and she screams out hysterically, releasing her repressed anxiety. But Mamacita hushes her. The virgin Violeta is more vulnerable and sexually confused as a result: “[s]he seemed to

be asking questions about very hidden thoughts – those thoughts that were not true at all and could never be talked about with anyone. Everything she could remember in her whole life seemed to have melted together in a confusion and misery that could not be explained because it was all changed and uncertain” (31). Violeta can not even vocalize her doubts and concerns. Instead, she is left with an unresolved conflict, leading her to view all males as threats to her defining qualities, her modesty and chastity. As Robert Brinkmeyer notes, “[d]espite her romantic longings for a life outside the Church, Violeta has not denounced Church morality and teachings and indeed is still strongly under their sway” (50). The short story concludes with Violeta hating the convent and wishing for release, carrying with her the belief that she can not simultaneously love a man and retain her virtue. However, her desire to flee the convent where “nothing [is] to be learned,” does not indicate a healthy progression for Violeta (32).

Through “Virgin Violeta” it is quite apparent that Porter did blame the Catholic patriarchal system for sexism.⁸ While Mamacita, Papacito, sister Blanca, and cousin Carlos accept their places in society, the young Violeta can not so easily integrate herself in a world in which a disparity exists between her outer and inner realities. Because she cannot reconcile her sexuality and spiritual beliefs, she is overridden with guilt: she never achieves reconciliation or happiness. Vanashree persuasively argues that the story depicts “the motives of repression and guilt as an adolescent girl’s response to the established assumptions of chastity and modesty” (13). In addition to feeling betrayed by Carlos, she feels betrayed by the Church. By creating a story that delineates a girl’s puberty and focuses on her initial encounter with a boy, Porter not only probes the young female’s

psychology as she emerges into womanhood, but also comments on the devastating effects of placing too much emphasis on virginity.

Perhaps the story that most compellingly shows the devastating effects of overemphasizing female virginity is Porter's "Flowering Judas." The female protagonist, Laura, can be seen as a grown *Violeta*, or a "professional virgin" (DeMouy 87). The twenty-two year old Laura embodies sexual innocence, even in the presence of the overly sensual revolutionary leader, Braggioni, and many other suitors (97). Much like *Violeta*, Laura is torn between her sexual impulses and the religious training that denies her physical nature. She too recognizes "the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be" ("Judas" 91). In trying to maintain her sexual purity, Laura becomes in effect the secular nun who loses her faith in both the Roman Catholic Church and the Mexican Revolution. Her alienation from the Church, coupled with her inability to be a wholehearted revolutionist reaches fruition in Laura's dream of Eugenio, who commits suicide presumably because he has lost the hope of winning Laura's love.

Serving as Laura's foil, Braggioni is characterized as the lustful, self-indulgent leader of the revolutionary movement. He seduces the virginal Laura, offering the ultimate test of her devout idealism. While this can be read as a story of the virgin confronting her seducer, Porter makes it more than that: she presents Laura as a constricted virgin who has restrained herself emotionally as well as physically to prevent the violation of soul as well as body; however, she does so to the point of catatonia. Quite naturally, Braggioni, who is defined by his sexual nature, repulses her. As Dorothy S. Redden argues, "he resembles nothing so much as a huge tumescent phallus, the opposite

of everything romantic, sentimental, and ‘harmless’” (196). And, according to Vanashree, Braggioni threatens her virginity quite possibly because “his powerful sexual presence stirs [Laura’s] own repressed, latent sexuality” (19). While Braggioni suggestively strings his guitar, Laura seems repelled by his crude sexuality, determined to resist sex to the end. This is illustrated in her knees, which cling together under her heavy nun-like attire, in contrast to the spread knees of Braggioni. Porter emphasizes Laura’s nun-like qualities, suggesting that Laura wishes everything about her to appear virginal.

But Laura’s passionless exterior does not coincide with her inherent sensual nature. She is a walking paradox, a virgin with the body of a voluptuous goddess: “[s]he is almost thin except for the incomprehensible fullness of her breasts, like a nursing mother’s” (97). Ironically Laura is far from motherly, but she does assume the role of the subservient woman when she oils and loads Braggioni’s pistols. John Edward Hardy points out the irony of this encounter: “[i]n the description of her dutiful submission to his request that she clean and oil his pistols, the phallic symbolism of the guns is overt. She will not sleep with Braggioni, but her fondling of the deadly weapons is, if anything, more obscene” (74). The handling of the pistols suggests Laura’s sexual frustrations. Although she wishes to be rid of Braggioni, for fear of her sexuality, she knows that she needs his money and power to help the revolutionaries.⁹

Although Porter highlights the significant differences between Laura and Braggioni in their views on sexuality, she also suggests that they are alike in that Laura’s high-minded frigidity is no less inhumane than Braggioni’s crude sexuality. Braggioni warns her, “[w]e are more alike than you realize in some things,” and Laura admits, “[i]t

may be true I am as corrupt, in another way, as Braggioni, as callous, as incomplete, and if this is so, any kind of death seems preferable” (93). Interestingly, Laura would rather physically die than experience the psychological death that, as she has been taught by her Catholic upbringing, accompanies the loss of virginity. Although Laura acknowledges her misguided ways, she does not do anything to change them. Instead, she continues to distance herself from Braggioni and others.

Laura’s detachment stems from her fear of becoming sexual. Vanashree argues that she is a character who has “encased her sexuality and earned a reputation for it” (20). Braggioni calls her a “cold *gringita*” and speculates about her “notorious virginity” (97). Her lack of personal relationships is revealed numerous times, for it is said that nobody touches her and that “she is not at home in the world” (95, 97). Furthermore, the children she teaches remain strangers to her, and she keeps an emotional distance between the prisoners and herself (97). Only once has Laura returned a romantic gesture: she threw a flower at a youth who sang to her, suggesting that she desires a romance but will not involve herself romantically. Instead, she sublimates her repressed sexual urges in her ill-conceived revolutionary intentions.

Laura’s attraction to the aesthetics of the Catholic Church, particularly her fetish for fine handmade lace, further illustrates her conflicted sense of purpose regarding the revolution and her distorted religious beliefs. The scene in which Laura enters the church demonstrates how her pure intentions for prayer are diverted by her attraction to the drawers of the male saint:

She was born Roman Catholic, and in spite of her fear of being seen by someone who might make a scandal of it, she slips now and again into

some crumbling little church, kneels on the chilly stone, and says a Hail Mary on the gold rosary she bought in Tehuantepec. It is no good and she ends by examining the altar with its tinsel flowers and ragged brocades, and feels tender about the battered doll-shape of some male saint whose white, lace-trimmed drawers hang limply around his ankles below the hieratic dignity of his velvet robe. (92)

Because the Catholic Church is regarded as one of the greatest enemies of the revolutionary movement, Laura knows that even by entering the Church, she is suspect as a traitor to the revolution. Laura's guilt, however, does not stem from her deceit in the revolutionary cause, but rather from her erotic reactions to her physical surroundings. She uses the aesthetics of the Church to sublimate the sensuality that the Church denies her. However, the rosary she recites is "no good" because she focuses on the "lace-trimmed drawers" of the male saint (92). Like Violeta, whose prayers are diverted by thoughts of Carlos, Laura's prayers are also diverted by impure thoughts. The lace-trimmed drawers are of particular importance because Laura admits her fetish for the fine handmade lace: she acknowledges that her private heresy is not buying or wearing lace made on machines. Hardy persuasively argues that the fetish for handmade lace not only distracts her from her religious devotion but also makes her a heretic to the revolutionary faith. The lace of her collars, which she hides away in her secret drawer or wears high around her neck, symbolizes the desperate privacy of her eroticism. She is unable to reconcile or properly channel her erotic impulses, leaving her religiously, politically, and sexually impotent.

Although Laura admits her perverted love of the handmade lace, she never admits any love for human beings, as in the death of Eugenio, who presumably kills himself because he lost the hope of winning Laura's love. As a man who measures women only

by their sexuality, Braggioni is not able to comprehend that a woman would work so hard for the revolutionary idea unless she loves some man who is in it (100). However, Laura denies her emotions, not admitting any feelings for Eugenio, an innocent man who presumably loves her so much that he would rather die than live without her love.

Although Eleanor Clark argues that Laura is “a sensitive but inhibited girl who is in love with a young Mexican revolutionary [Eugenio],” there is no real evidence in the text that Laura loves him (27). Her years of repression make her seemingly incapable of either expressing or feeling love. All in all, Laura’s conscience is stirred when she learns that Eugenio, one of Braggioni’s adherents, has killed himself with an overdose of sleeping pills that Laura gave to him. Although Laura seems devoid of love, she does respond to Eugenio in her dream, suggesting her subconscious and subterranean desires.

The blending of the sexual and secular, as well as the political and religious, manifest themselves not only in Laura’s dream, but also in the feast day celebration. Juxtaposed in the middle of the revolution is the Catholic feast day in honor of the Virgin Mary. In addition to the festival for Mary, the Socialists also celebrate their martyrs on that day. As Braggioni tells Laura about the May-day disturbances, it becomes apparent that the clash between the Catholics and the Socialists mirrors the clash between religion and politics, two topics Porter seems preoccupied with. In addition to the religious and political tension, the focus on the Virgin Mary parallels Laura’s virginity, which David Madden suggests is “neither spiritual nor quite natural” (287). Because Laura’s virginity is her principal virtue, she abides by her religious beliefs in order to maintain her sense of self.

Much like “*Virgin Violeta*,” “*Flowering Judas*” does not end on a reassuring note: Laura’s dream of Eugenio does not result in self-revelation, but rather her self-delusion persists at the end, showing that she is still bound to the lifelong habit of denial. While trying to convince herself that Eugenio committed suicide because of his despair at his continuing imprisonment and not because he had lost hope of winning her love, Laura puts on a white linen nightgown and goes to bed only to confront the truth through her dreams. When commenting on her white nightgown, Madden rightly asserts, “[h]er virginal uniform of white mocks her sterility” (285). The dream, which consists of a mock communion, makes it clear that Eugenio pursued Laura and that she was unconsciously attracted to him: “without a word, without fear she rose and reached for Eugenio’s hand” (102). Laura subconsciously equates Eugenio with the Judas tree, with his flesh and blood as the blossoms of the tree and the fingerbones of his skeletal hands as the twigs. However, as Laura eats of the flowers, she realizes that he embodies her hunger for both spiritual and sexual nourishment.

The mock communion, which blends religious and sexual details, reveals Laura’s unspoken desires. Eugenio’s words to take and eat, “this is my body and blood,” echo the words of Christ at the Last Supper just before Judas betrayed Him. Laura engages in a symbolic sexual encounter as she greedily eats the body of Eugenio. As Hardy suggests, “[t]he dream’s mock communion, with the body and blood of Judas substituted for that of Christ, might be seen as embodying Laura’s suppressed conviction that her association with the revolutionary movement is a betrayal of her first Lord. Or the imagery will as easily support an opposite interpretation. Perhaps Laura feels guilty about her continuing,

furtive flirtations with Catholicism, seeing them as a betrayal of the revolutionary cause” (75). In the end, Laura betrays herself and her own humanity in refusing to love. Her alienation is not only from human contact but from herself as well. Porter’s implicit suggestion is that the sexual frigidity instilled in Laura from her rigid Catholic beliefs results in a spiritual frigidity, encompassing dehumanization and inhumanity.

While most critics¹⁰ perceive Laura as a character aligned with Judas the betrayer, Helge Normann Nilsen revisits the ending of “Flowering Judas” and sees Laura quite differently: “the main point is that Laura does save herself by means of Eugenio, or, more precisely, she uses her love for him to renew herself and get in touch with the life-affirming impulses within herself” (155). Although Nilsen convincingly defines Laura’s dilemma as a struggle against patriarchy and sexism, there is no real evidence that Laura loves Eugenio or that she saves herself in the end. However, Nilsen is correct in that Laura is “a withdrawn creature” whose alienation is *not* her own fault. By using a feminist lens, Nilsen skillfully points out that most critics fail to recognize the independent pressures that bear upon Laura. Although she generalizes the overarching patriarchal society in which the Braggionis of the world flourish as the cause for Laura’s subsequent rejections and isolation, she does not name the Catholic Church as the main culprit. She contends that “[t]he church is simply another patriarchal institution which has neglected to address the concerns of women and relegated them to a subordinated and inferior position” (149). However, it seems as if the Church is *the* hindering factor, and that Laura’s “no” is not a “life-affirming impulse” against patriarchy and sexism, but a denial of the life she has learned to live because of her faith (149).

Much like Violeta and Laura, Porter's Miranda in "Old Mortality" shares in a rigid Catholic upbringing, but Miranda loses her virginity and rejects her religious faith, which includes the sacrament of marriage. George Hendrick correctly labels Violeta "a prototype of the character of Miranda" (38). But Miranda is beginning to have some inkling of what Violeta and Laura do not know about sexuality – that virginity is not a woman's sole prize possession and marriage should not be her only goal. Like "Virgin Violeta," "Old Mortality" is filtered through the eyes of the younger daughter who lives in a confining environment and attends school at the convent. Miranda also grows up in an atmosphere in which women are placed on pedestals, but in this story Porter makes the causes more complex by adding the Southern belle ideology to Catholic beliefs. Unlike Violeta, who voices her desire to escape from the convent, Miranda actually does it. "Old Mortality" probes the inner psychology of the female experience but goes beyond the other two stories because it traces the development of the young Miranda into the grown-up married Miranda, who by the end of the story realizes that the Catholic Church and Southern culture foster an unrealistic view of love.

From the beginning of the story, it is evident that the young Miranda is growing up motherless and that the legend of her perfect Aunt Amy constitutes her female role model. The legend of Aunt Amy centers on the allure of the sexually attractive woman whose death was premature and whose life is constantly scrutinized by her family. Aunt Amy embodies the paradox of the Southern belle, a prototype that combines flirtation and chastity. As Brinkmeyer convincingly points out, "Miranda's problem focuses primarily on the question of how to interpret the life of Aunt Amy, a woman who died young and

whose life, depending upon who is telling the story, was filled with either mystery and glamour (the family's version) or with deceit and sexual obsession and repression (Cousin Eva's view)" (165). Becoming aware of these opposing views, the young Miranda internalizes the dilemma, as she grows to reject her family's traditional view and seems to pattern her life after Cousin Eva's.

Much of Part 2 is essential to understanding the role that Catholicism plays in Miranda's subsequent rejection of marriage. At the beginning of the section, readers learn that Miranda and her older sister Maria attend convent school. As did Violeta, Miranda feels utterly "immured" by the rigid religious impositions, a word she picks up from the stories she reads during her vacations:

The stories were about beautiful but unlucky maidens, who for mysterious reasons had been trapped by nuns and priests in dire collusion; they were then "immured" in convents, where they were forced to take the veil – an appalling rite during which the victims shrieked dreadfully – and condemned forever after to most uncomfortable and disorderly existences. They seemed to divide their time between lying chained in dark cells and assisting other nuns to bury throttled infants under stones in moldering rat-infested dungeons. (193)

Much like Violeta, Miranda readily relates to the stories of the "unlucky maidens" who get drawn into the cloistered life (193). Even the young Miranda, who presumably is still a virgin, realizes that she does not want to live a life strictly adhering to religious beliefs. The description of the "cells" blends grotesque and religious images, illustrating the fear of being punished for transgressions that is instilled in the young Miranda (193). Despite the horrible conditions described in the story, Miranda isolates the word "immured," romanticizing the situation: "Immured! It was the word Maria and Miranda had been needing all along to describe their condition at the Convent of the Child Jesus, in New

Orleans, where they spent the long winters trying to avoid an education” (193). Although the young girls are in fact “hedged and confined,” there are no “infested dungeons” or “dark cells” at the Child Jesus (194, 193). On the contrary, the convent is a little oasis of beauty outlined with greenery and flowers. But the young, restless Miranda is bored not only with the nuns but also the entire convent: “[t]hey were very dull good-natured women who managed to make the whole dormitory seem dull. All days and all things in the Convent of the Child Jesus were dull, in fact, and Maria and Miranda lived for Saturdays” (194). Miranda espouses the same belief as Violeta: the confined, repressed convent world does not coincide with outside sensual society. And just like Violeta, Miranda wishes to escape from her cloistered life; however, Miranda succeeds.

Unlike Violeta, Miranda does not associate herself with the nuns. She does think about joining the sisterhood, but only as a passing thought: “[n]o one had even hinted that they should become nuns. On the contrary Miranda felt that the discouraging attitude of Sister Claude and Sister Austin and Sister Ursula towards her expressed ambition to be a nun barely veiled a deeply critical knowledge of her spiritual deficiencies” (194). Although Miranda is not serious about becoming a nun, the nuns do provide another competing image of the ideal woman. Whereas Violeta and Laura cling to this virginal figure, Miranda has no intentions of remaining chaste and thus rejects this model.¹¹ Even though Porter includes the nuns, she suggests that Miranda never gave this image too much credence.

Defining womanhood for Miranda rests on her ability to integrate her family’s Catholic and Southern roots into her own life. Aunt Amy is the major influence on

Miranda's perception of women's sexuality. The epitome of a Southern belle, Amy is renowned for her beauty, charming smile, dark curly hair, and slim physique. Being bred in the manners of the South, the Southern belle was taught to lure men but remain a virgin until marriage. Amy, whose appearance and sex appeal are always noted, seems to have mastered the art of feminine mystique. However, the mystery of her life revolves around her virginity. She is torn between remaining a sensual but chaste coquette or becoming a married woman and a mother. She has flaunted her sexuality but has most likely resisted forbidden intimacy. As DeMouy persuasively argues, "[w]hile she probably has little understanding of sex as a physical act, she intuitively recognizes that her physical attributes attract men and that she can entice with impunity, even irresponsibility, as long as she retains her virginity" (148). Amy is aware of her sensuous allure that is often at odds with her required virginity, making her the quintessential Southern belle.

As Miranda grows up in the wake of the Aunt Amy legend, she receives mixed messages and convoluted stories about her aunt's sexuality. In recognizing her power over men, Amy attends the Mardi Gras ball in an outfit accentuating her womanly figure: "Amy copied her costume from a small Dresden-china shepherdess which stood on the mantelpiece in the parlor; a careful copy with ribboned hat, gilded crook, very low-laced bodice, short basket skirts, green slippers and all" (185). Wearing her costume, which "stresses Amy's attraction to sin, passion, and a satyr-inspired sex," she goes to the ball with Gabriel but leaves with former fiancé, Raymond (DeMouy 149). Although Porter

never discloses what occurred between Amy and Raymond during the long interlude, the “disgraceful affair” leads to gossip and speculation regarding Amy’s virtue (187).

Miranda follows in Amy’s footsteps when she elopes from the convent and marries at a young age, suggesting that she believes marriage and sex will lead to happiness and fulfillment. It seems almost imperative to Miranda that one of the first rites of passage into womanhood is an abandonment of her Catholic religion in order to rid herself of the constant surveillance of the nuns. Miranda views marriage as not only a way to fulfill her fantasies and relive the Amy legend, but also as a proper means to express her sexuality. Suzanne Jones persuasively argues:

Miranda has unconsciously patterned her life after Amy’s by eloping from her convent, a fact that Porter surprises her readers with in part 3. The romantic Amy legend and the forbidden reading material about the convent have mingled in Miranda’s mind to produce a plot and an ending very close to the fictional ones she has been brought up with: spirited young woman, immured in convent, is rescued by dashing young man. (290)

At this stage in her development, Miranda certainly aligns herself with Amy, choosing marriage as a means of escape, and quite possibly, as a sanctified way to pass out of maidenhood. Unlike Violeta and Laura, Miranda consciously dismisses her religion and denounces Church morality and teachings: she is no longer “under their sway” (Brinkmeyer 50). But, her rational side is clouded by the emotional, fairy-tale world she thinks will come with marriage.

The foil to Aunt Amy, Cousin Eva also influences and affects Miranda’s developing perceptions of her own sexuality. Whereas Amy represents the ideal lady, Eva

represents the outspoken feminist. Eva is initially introduced in the story as Cousin Molly Parrington's "ugly daughter":

Eva, shy and chinless, straining her upper lip over two enormous teeth, would sit in corners watching her mother. She looked hungry, her eyes strained and tired. She wore her mother's old clothes, made over, and taught Latin in a Female Seminary. She believed in votes for women, and had traveled about, making speeches. (178)

In this passage, it is clear that Eva is the stereotype of the early twentieth-century woman who assumes the burden of spinsterhood in order to pursue a career and fight for women's equality. In contrast to Amy's beautiful hair and smile, Eva's defining qualities are her misshapen chin and buckteeth. Interestingly, the young Miranda looks past most of Eva's flaws but isolates the fact that Eva teaches Latin in a Female Seminary. For this reason, Miranda and her sister "felt [Eva] belonged to their everyday world of dull lessons to be learned" (178). To Miranda, Eva may as well have been a nun, for the description of the nuns and Eva are similar. Eva seems to align more with the cloistered, boring world of convent life and its abundance of homely girls.

Miranda, who has chosen to emulate Amy, subscribes to marriage as the traditional ending for women only to find that it has brought neither happiness nor fulfillment. As reality sets in and a significant transformation occurs in Miranda between Parts 2 and 3, she clearly learns that while "beauty goes, character stays" (215). Miranda is on the brink of realizing that in focusing so much on virginity, Catholicism and the cult of the Southern belle overemphasize sexuality as well as marriage to the detriment of the woman's character and career. Part 3 opens with Miranda, who is eighteen and married, returning home for the funeral of Uncle Gabriel, Amy's former husband. On the train ride

home she meets Cousin Eva, who still resents her childhood treatment. Eva takes out her frustration with woman's choices on the deceased Amy in front of Miranda. Eva accuses Amy of being a "bad wild girl" who was "too free," implicitly attacking Amy's virtue and allure (214). Furthermore, Eva expresses her frustration with a society that has placed unfair demands on women's good looks and charm:

I never believed for one moment. . .that Amy was an impure woman. Never! But let me tell you, there were plenty who did believe it. . . . But I used to say to such persons that, no matter what the appearances were, I had faith in Amy's virtue. Wild, I said, indiscreet, I said, heartless, I said, but *virtuous*, I feel certain. But you could hardly blame anyone for being mystified. The way she rose up suddenly from death's door to marry Gabriel Breaux, after refusing him and treating him like a dog for years, looked odd, to say the least. . . . And there was something very mysterious about her death, only six weeks after marriage.' (211-12)

Although deceptively narrating the story to portray herself as defending Amy's name and honor, Eva nonetheless focuses attention on Amy's virtue and puzzling death and suggests that Amy conceived a baby in wedlock by a man other than Gabriel (perhaps Raymond) and killed herself to escape disgrace: "[s]he got into trouble somehow, and she couldn't get out again, and I have every reason to believe she killed herself with the drug they gave her to keep her quiet after a hemorrhage" (214). In a jealous rage, Eva not only condemns Amy's virtue to Miranda but reveals much about herself when she concludes, "[i]t was just sex, . . . 'their minds dwelt on nothing else. They didn't call it that, it was all smothered under pretty names, but that's all it was, sex'" (216). In suggesting that Amy got pregnant outside of marriage and that Amy and the other girls were concerned only with sex, Eva exposes her own preoccupation and obsession with sex and female sexuality. Everything comes down to the woman's purity. For example, when

commenting on Miranda's mother, Eva remarks, "[y]our mother was a saint" (217). With that assertion, the conversation ends, leaving Miranda to process it all.

While Part 3 should be Miranda's reintegration with her family, a time to reconcile with Eva and bury Amy's legend at Gabriel's funeral, it is instead a moment of rejection in which Miranda denies her relatives and her ingrained ideas about womanhood and leans toward Eva's philosophy on women. Although she is becoming aware that beauty is fleeting and that character remains, Miranda wishes to have strong character but not quite like Eva's. Miranda thinks, "[i]t was a dreary prospect; why was a strong character so deforming?...she truly wanted to be strong, but how could she face it, seeing what it did to one?" (215). As Jones notes, "[t]he independent Eva, who has reduced love to hormones and marriage to economics, lives alone, but she is unhappy and bitter, and Miranda seems to be following in her footsteps" (291). Although not fully cognizant of her actions, Miranda is now patterning her life after Eva's, which suggests that Miranda thinks marriage and family prevent female fulfillment. Miranda's "vague distaste" of marriage gives way to utter disdain:

She did not want any more ties with this house, she was going to leave it, and she was not going back to her husband's family either. She would have no more bonds that smothered her in love and hatred. She knew now why she had run away from marriage, and she knew that she was going to run away from marriage, and she was not going to stay in any place, with anyone, that threatened to forbid her making her own discoveries, that said "No" to her. (220)

By rejecting her house, her past, and all of the forces that have stifled her, Miranda rejects her entire upbringing, convent and marriage included. At places where she should have been taught the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, love and hate,

her home and the convent failed in its responsibility to foster her inner and outer growth. Miranda concludes, “[b]ut what was good, and what was evil? I hate love, she thought, as if this were the answer, I hate love and being loved, I hate it” (221). By saying, “as if this were the answer,” the narrator undercuts Miranda, which suggests that giving up on her relatives and following Eva are not the answers. Although seeming to sanction Miranda’s questioning of womanhood, Porter does not endorse everything Miranda thinks and does. Miranda consciously chooses to leave her husband and embark on a life of freedom, which the narrator notes often entails isolation and loneliness. Porter’s final sentence expresses her doubt that Miranda can even know the truth: “[a]t least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance” (221). The last word, “ignorance” (not to be confused with innocence) carries with it a sense of immaturity. Even more than Violeta and Laura, Miranda has received a life-long lesson on female sexuality with opposing stories of the ideal woman. At age eighteen, she realizes that the view of love and marriage instilled in her from her upbringing fails her. Instead of espousing Catholic and Southern ideologies, she rejects both.

Whereas she does not feel the guilt that Violeta and Laura do, Miranda is troubled in a much more profound way: her search for identity and freedom has left her apathetic and alone. Her quest for the truth does not make her any wiser or happier. In detailing the impulses within Miranda, “Old Mortality” goes beyond “Virgin Violeta” by showing the progression from the idealism of childhood to the realism of adulthood. As Miranda outgrows her traditional realities, she experiences an estrangement with her loved ones.

Unlike Violeta and Laura, Miranda has tried sexual fulfillment, equating it with personal fulfillment but finds it lacking and so leaves her husband and seems to embrace a pseudo-virginity, as suggested when she states her intentions to “run away from marriage” and never “stay in any place, with anyone that threatened to forbid her making her own discoveries” (220).

While far from a blatant feminist work, Porter’s story does provide philosophical statements about the human experience from a woman’s point of view. It is essential that Porter provide limited options for Miranda – convent, marriage, or autonomy. Not surprisingly, Miranda’s struggle is met with frustration and failure: she must escape from the paternalistic Southern and Catholic culture in which she grew up. In many ways, “Old Mortality” can be read as a story about a woman wanting the rights and dignity of a mature woman in a society that upholds the “Miss,” or the eternal virgin, and in doing so denies the virtues of sexual and personal fulfillment. Miranda needs to learn how to incorporate her romantic ideals with the harsh realities, not denying but rather engaging her past experiences in order to blend sexual and spiritual love successfully and achieve self-actualization.

“Old Mortality” hits on a crucial realization both in Miranda’s life and in Porter’s. The date of Part 3, 1912, signaled a change in Porter’s life as she grew apart from her first husband, Koontz. Because Koontz traveled with his job, Porter experienced and enjoyed the taste of freedom. After she separated from him, her father disowned her. Jones remarks on the comparison between Miranda and Porter’s life:

Katherine Anne Porter must have felt in 1912 as Miranda did in 1912, that the beautiful fantasies of romantic love that young girls grow up on can be

dangerous. Eva's declaration that the family is a 'hideous institution...the root of all human wrongs' (p. 217) must have been rather close to Porter's own assessment. (293)

As a result of her first failed marriage to Koontz, a man who most likely physically abused her, Porter gained the strength and determination to cut all ties that prevented her from being truly free (Givner 91). She married him at the young age of sixteen and endured an unhappy nine-year marriage. Although many reports state that Porter refused to consummate the marriage, most likely it was consummated but Porter presumably was unable to respond sexually (Givner 92). She was not only frigid but also barren, never to have children. She frequently refrained from discussing the painful marriage to Koontz. It seems probable that Porter learned the hard way that sex and marriage are not the end all and be all for women. Her desire to rid herself of restricting ties, which she articulates through her character Miranda, mirrors her unfulfilled desire for love as well as her first flight into a life of rootless wandering.

Through her fiction, Porter addresses the competing forces in her own life and in the lives of women who try to reconcile Catholic beliefs and female sexual impulses. She writes about the complex dilemmas of womanhood in which woman's inherent desires are subsumed in patriarchal and church-dominated ideologies. By isolating the religious aspect, Porter pinpoints the Roman Catholic ideology that reinforces the culturally-established double standard that women should not have premarital sex, but it is acceptable for men. She seems to place most of the blame for sexism on the Catholic religion, at least in the first two stories. And she sees the issue as more cultural – the Southern belle – in the Miranda story. Her portraits of the notorious virgins, who are

reared in a restrictive religion that denies their sexual nature and focuses exclusively on sexual purity, suggests that patriarchal and religious institutions lead to female fragmentation and vulnerability. Instead of fostering the integration of spiritual and sexual love, they further complicate the duality of the feminine experience by placing too much attention on female virginity and subsequently on marriage. In an attempt to adhere to religious doctrine, Porter's Violeta places so much emphasis on virginity that she comes to equate sexuality with sin. Porter's prolonged maiden, Laura, retains her libidinal energy, which in turn withers her capacity to experience neither sexual nor spiritual fulfillment. And Porter's Miranda passes out of maidenhood through the sanctified means of holy matrimony, only to discover that marriage does not totally fulfill her but instead frustrates her ability to love at all. Through her art, Katherine Anne Porter probes the psychological impulses within her female characters as well as in herself as she challenges the assumed feminine roles of her notorious virgins.

Notes

¹ Porter qtd. in an interview with Enrique Hank Lopez, dated 1965, Katherine Anne Porter Library, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

² Although the Catholic ideal of virginity applies to both males and females, it is most pointedly directed at females.

³ Catholics have always seemed preoccupied with female sexuality. J. R. Powers worded it brilliantly when he said, “[t]he church never forgave Eve for giving that apple to Adam. Women have been under suspicion ever since” (*Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?* 1975). In the history of Christian theology, Mary, the “Virgin Mother” of Jesus, has always been renowned for her perpetual virginity. But Mariology, the Church’s teaching about Mary, presents an unattainable female model. In 1854 the Immaculate Conception became dogma, placing Mary on an even higher pedestal. Uta Ranke-Heinemann has been one to oppose “traditional Mariology:” “[t]raditional Mariology does not deserve its name. It has become a sort of anti-Mariology, since although it purports to exalt the greatness and dignity of a woman and to paint them in scholarly fashion against a cold background, in reality its clumsy fingers crush what constitutes feminine dignity in particular (Mary) and in general (all women)” (*Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, p. 345). Porter, aware of the excessive pressures placed on women by the Catholic Church, writes about the unfair demand to either stay a sexless creature or become a shadow of a wife and mother.

⁴ According to Timothy G. McCarthy in *The Catholic Tradition: Before and After Vatican II, 1878-1993* (1994), devotion to Mary has been “a hallmark of the Catholic tradition” (343). He claims that there were three apparitions of Mary that had a significant influence on the twentieth-century Church: Guadalupe (1531), Lourdes (1858), and Fatima (1917). The *Uncollected Early Prose of Katherine Anne Porter* (1993) includes “The Fiesta of Guadalupe” (1920), where Porter expresses her disappointment with the Catholic Church’s teachings and their misplaced faith in the Virgin Mary.

⁵ In fact, Porter contemplated the Virgin Mary and her Immaculate Conception, as illustrated in some of her uncompleted fiction, Katherine Anne Porter Library, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries [ca.1930-1931]:

“Feast of the Imaculate [sic] Conception of the blessed Virgin Mary
 Do you know the meaning of the words Immaculate Conception?
 Yes, it means conceived without stain of original sin.
 Do you know the meaning of the words original sin?
 Yes, it was when Eve ate the apple and gave it to Adam
 And what was the meaning of eating the apple?”

It was original sin, said Miranda, deperate y [sic], feeling cornered.

Father said, 'Remeber [sic] this; it must be som whe e [sic] in your physiology books. No human being was ever born into this world but by the natural way, born of his mtoheretc [sic].... and any one who tells you anything else is telling you a lie....

Miranda's horro [sic] ... etc"

In another sketch, Porter wrote:

"Don't ever let me hear you talking any of that nonsense about the slavery of women,' said her father, 'I wishall [sic] you women who talk about slavery had to be turned into men for just one day.... Then you'd know the meaning of slavery. 'He wrapped his ragged old bathrobe around him and and [sic] started down the hall. 'Just look at me with my elbows out trying to keep a houseful of women in silk stockings [sic]. Where are you going at this time of day.[sic] anyhow!'

Mirand [sic] loved her father when he took that tone with her, and she answered a little primly, thinking she was going to please him: 'I'm going to mass.

'It's the feast of the immaculate conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary,' said Miranda, (a double of the first class with common octave) One always goes to Mass...'

'Do you know the meaning of the words immaculate conception! asked her father in quite an everyday voice, which left her unprepared for what was to follow...

'Yes, it means that the Blessed irgin [sic] Mary was conceived without the stain of original [sic] sin,' gabbled miranda [sic], prissily.

Point of this: 'If Jesus was not the son of Joseph,' said father, etc, very deliberately, 'why then he was the son of some other man....[sic] The laws of nature, he said have never been reversed, even in one instance...the sooner you get that firmly fixed in your mind, the better off you'll be,' he said...'

Mirand [sic] horrified, and confused and ashamed..[sic] Expected the floor to open and swallow him. What a mean, horrible, evil minded man he was! She ran,,[sic] her head roaring and her face scarlet..."

⁶ Katherine Anne Porter, marginal notes in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 345, Katherine Anne Porter Library, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

⁷ Because Porter often edited the story of her life, some of Lopez's unofficial biography contains erroneous biographical information. Most critics have observed that one must regard Porter "with almost the same caution with which one regards Faulkner" (Madden 279).

⁸ For a discussion of feminism and "the disservice of idealism," see Darlene Unrue's chapter on "Ideals" in *Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985), pp. 115-21.

⁹ This double bind mirrors the feminine bind in which the female desires autonomy and independence, but also wants love and commitment.

¹⁰ Critics such as John Edward Hardy, George Hendrick, Harry Mooney, and William Nance.

¹¹ By using variant names of Mary, Porter quite possibly suggests that Miranda rejects the Mary lifestyle.

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