Transcendence and toxicity:

The paradox of queerness in Indian classical dance


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[1] Figure 1: Stills of Kelucharan Mohapatra, from a performance of an Abhinaya ("Kuru Yadunandana") depicting heroine Radha acting as a dominant sexual figure over her partner, Krishna. Photos courtesy of SṚJAN.

Author's statement

I approached this project as a queer Indian classical dancer that has wanted to engage critically and thoughtfully with the discipline that has both enriched and alienated me to the fullest. Though I began this study as a more broad survey of the intersections between queerness and Indian classical dance in general, I became fascinated by the possibilities for queerness within the traditional, non-modernized versions of these dance forms; not only is the conflict the existence of these spaces creates fascinating, but acknowledgement of these pockets of queerness allows us to imagine the possibilities for these traditional dance forms to be inclusive and queer, without the need for upheaval, deconstruction, and disruption, as many queer artists today are committed to engaging in. I am a queer person in search of safe spaces, and also a sucker for the classic aesthetics of the Indian classical dance taught to me, and I reckon this, and other questions, with this project. I want to open questions more than answer them here, and begin to start conversations regarding queerness, tradition, modernity, reverence, and paradox.

As he slowly turns, taking the asymmetrical *bandhani* pose while holding an imagined *veena*, renowned Odissi exponent Padmavibhushan Kelucharan Mohapatra appears not as the shirtless man that he is, but as the graceful, romantic heroine Radha[2]. His physical appearance is clearly masculine; he dances shirtless, wearing merely pants, a sash, little makeup, few pieces of jewelry, and almost no hair. And yet, as he lights a metaphorical oil lamp and pulls an invisible veil across his face to shield it from the midnight breeze, he is undoubtedly a woman in love, a *nayika*, to his audience. As Mohapatra continues to embody this female character, his torso deflecting to form a pronounced s-shaped curve and his chin tilted fractionally to the side to present a striking image of shyness, he transforms, transcending his physical body and taking on a new identity. Mohapatra's world-renowned renditions of romantic poems, like this performance of *Yahi Madhava, Yahi Keshava*, are a prime example of the gender-bending, identity-molding

nature of the practice of *Abhinaya* on the Indian classical stage.

Mohapatra was a key player in the "revival" (perhaps more aptly described as the invention) of Odissi, one of India's eight classical dance styles, in the 1940s and 50s[3]. He went on to become one of the style's pioneering teachers and choreographers, helping create a definitive Odissi technique, repertoire, stylistic sensibility, and identity—an identity that hinges on the queerness of the dancer on stage through solo character work like the aforementioned Ashtapadi.

When we discuss queerness here, the idea encompasses more than simply an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ identities; queerness, as explained by anthropologist Margot Weiss by way of queer theorists Eve Sedgwick and Michael Warner, is a transgression, a set of transgressions, a

[2] Kelucharan Mohapatra, "200th Episode Anuvartanam (In tune with the times)," YouTube video, 41:45, posted by "SṚJAN," May 15, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KTz3SgKvwk.
[3] Alessandra Lopez y Rojo, "The Reinvention of Odissi Classical Dance as Temple Ritual," in *The Archaeology of Ritual*, ed. Evangelos Kyriakidis (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press at UCLA, 2007), 163-164.

means of thinking about gaps between, around, and overlapping definitions, and a "focus on transgression of, or exclusion from, normativities. Especially, but not exclusively, heteronormativity[4]." In this way, we can see the Indian classical dancer performing *Abhinaya* on stage as a queer body, and the stage itself thus being a queered space; the dancer's transgressive transformations into various roles (as we see with Mohapatra and *Radha*) and the stage's guarantee of a safe transition for the dancer renders them as such. Contrastingly, the (re)creation of Indian classical dance post-independence as a nationalistic, Hindu, hetero-patriarchal category of art establishes that the world of the dance is anti-queer and repressive of queerness. And thus, we are left with a fascinating conflict. Traditional Abhinayic Indian classical dance performance spaces are queer spaces by design, and yet, Indian classical dance forms were (re)constructed by Hindu artistic pioneers with anti-transgressive, anti-queer, nationalistic motives and values, reproducing anti-queer spaces in the studio and in other non-performance spaces in the lives of

dancers.

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[4] Margot Weiss, "AnthroBites: Queer Anthropology," interview by Jara M. Carrington, *AnthroBites*, The Society for Cultural Anthropology, October 15, 2018, audio, 18:49, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/anthrobites-queer-anthropology.

[5] Figure 2: Mythili Kumar's Abhinaya Dance Company performs Bharatanatyam, with various female dancers taking poses of male and female deities, as well as animals. Photo by Mukund Gunti.

The construction of dance, the construction of India

In order to understand the ways in which patriarchy and religious conservatism are baked into the identity of Indian classical dance forms, one must understand the construction of these modes of art and their relationship to the construction of the idea of India. In this case, we will look primarily at the classical dance forms of Odissi and Bharatanatyam and generalize cautiously from these two primary cases, as there is significant literature on both forms and the scope of this project does not allow for the depth and breadth of inquiry required to examine every Indian classical dance form in depth. The (re)construction of today's Bharatanatyam in Tamil Nadu in the 1930s was driven by ideas of Hindu purity, sanctity, and history, and appropriated by dancers of high caste[6]; Sadir, Bharatanatyam's stylistic precursor was more sensually free than the strict, devotional, codified Bharatanatyam, and was practiced primarily by lower caste artists. Bharatanatyam, (re)created by pioneering dance Rukmini Devi Arundale brought many movements of Sadir to what Devi viewed as pure, proper, Brahmin girls, stripping the precursor form of its transgressive expressions of sexuality and emphasizing Hindu stories

and upper-caste conservative Hindu values. Devi's Bharatanatyam can be characterized by its sharp footwork, long lines, full extensions, and thematic emphasis on Hindu storytelling and ideas; Bharatanatyam is also marketed as being an "ancient art form, when in reality, it has existed for less than a century, feeding into notions of Hinduism as being an an ancient, foundational tenet of the imagined idea of India. Nationalists used this newly imagined, "pure," and supposedly "ancient" dance form to push ideas of an unchanging "sanskritized Hindu spirit of India's past,[7]" a means of justifying Hinduism as a foundational tenet of Indian national identity. India itself was developing as an idea at this time, with independence less than two

[6] Pallabi Chakravorty, "From interculturalism to historicism: Reflections on classical Indian dance," *Dance Research Journal* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 113.
[7]Ibid: 113.

decades in the future, and the idea of India as an ancient, pure, innately Hindu nation was aided by new dance inventions that supported this ideology. This ideology was also resistant to transgression, expressions of sexuality, and "impurity," an idea articulated by Bharatanatyam exponent Rukmini Devi as implying the expressions of passion of love performed by non-Brahmin dancers[8].

Odissi has a similar history. Born in the eastern state of Odisha, today's Odissi takes inspiration from ancient temple sculptures, paintings, devotional and folk dance forms, and Sanskrit texts. Odissi is attributed by many to be directly descended from the dance of the Maharis, the dancing priestesses of the temple of Puri, Odisha[9]; Odissi, however, is an invented form that was created with little input or knowledge from the Mahari dancers, influenced by the temples of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist societies[10]. Today's Odissi is a graceful, intricate form with remnants of sensuality, characterized more by its juxtaposition of strong footwork with fluid and graceful upper body movements. The sexuality of the Mahari is downplayed in modern Odissi histories[11], while the devotion of the Mahari and the Odia people is emphasized; in a recent production by dancer Parbati Das, narration claimed that devotion to Jagannath, a patron deity of Odia Hindus,

is the be-all-end-all of not just all Odissi, but of all Odias[12]. Similarly, the recent Orissa Dance Academy production "Gatha Odissi" that claims to trace the history of the form depicts Mahari dancers as devotional priestesses, likening their dance to the modern Mangalacharan, a Hindu devotional intro piece in the Odissi repertoire; similar to the work of Das, narration in this production also claims that the Hindu devotion that undercuts all elements

[8] Janet O'Shea, "'Traditional' Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretive Communities," *Asian Theatre Journal* 15 no. 1 (Spring 1998): 47.
[9] Lopez y Rojo, "The Reinvention of Odissi Classical Dance as Temple Ritual," 169.
[10] Ibid: 155.
[11] Anurima Banerjee, *Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State* (Odisha: Seagull Books, 2019), 48.
[12] Ibid: 47.

of Odissi is an inherent part of Odia culture, invoking Hindu nationalism and implying that both the dance of the Maharis and Odissi are fundamental, ancient elements of Odia culture. Similar to Bharatanatyam, modern Odissi is advertised as being an ancient form, when in reality, it is quite new. Odissi today is presented as a fabricated Mahari ritual, an overtly Hindu dance form invented in part to reflect Odia and Hindu nationalism[13], once again pushing an argument of an unchanging lineage of Hindu arts native to the subcontinent. Thus, as the concept of India as a unified Hindu nation was forming in the years just before and just after Independence, classical dance was both a reflection for these ideas and a vehicle by which they were performed, shared, and reproduced[14].

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[13] Lopez y Rojo, "The Reinvention of Odissi Classical Dance as Temple Ritual," 172.[14] Chakravorty, "From interculturalism to historicism," 111.
[15] Odissi dancer Sonali Mishra performs Mangalacharan. Photo by J'adore Andy Photography, courtesy of Navatman.

The dual inventions of Odissi and Bharatanatyam as "ancient" Hindu dance forms, near the time of independence and coinciding with a growing sense of national Hindu identity, establishes these recently created dance styles as imagined relics. This thus provides the Indian people with what is marketed to them as centuries-old cultural treasures to which they are connected, reinforcing ideas of Hindu nationhood and Hindu "purity" as reflected in the newly consecrated dance styles and their narrow definitions of Hinduism. Classical dance forms became an integral part of a new national identity: the new invention of India. This emphasis on purity is as much a product of colonialism as it is a product of inborn conservatism. The exoticization of Indian dance and of the Indian temple dancer (the "Bayadere," "Mahari," Devadadsi," or any number of other terms for them) by non-Indian colonials led creatives in India to embrace these exotic notions of a constructed and falsified history when (re)creating

their dance forms[16]; the idea of these art forms and of Hinduism as ancient, inherent, and unchanging draws many of its roots from these colonial notions. This happened through direct contact with westerners and their opinions, including those of Anna Pavlova, in the case of Bharatanatyam[17]; Pavlova famously told Rukmini Devi to stick to traditional "temple dance" rather than experiment or express modern western sentiments that went against the colonial, orientalized view of India at the time. With Odissi, the reproduction of western ideas of the temple dancer appear to be driven by Indians, likely affected by colonial thoughts. And though the "temple dancer," was both sexualized and sanctified, as mentioned previously, all references to sexual transgression were removed from the dance forms as they were (re)constituted, a product once again of both conservative Indian ideas and the lasting effects of colonial efforts like the Anti-Nautch Campaign, an attempt by the British to eradicate the Devadasi and her art

[16] Chakravorty, "From interculturalism to historicism," 110.
[17] Banerjee, *Dancing Odissi*, 24.

form[18]. Thus, the sanctification, construction, and "purification" of these dance forms was at once nationalistic and transnational, the product of Indian desires and the desires of the world for India.

The female face of Indian classical dance today seems to be the submissive, feminine, religious hindu woman, a docile dancer considered exotic but no longer associated with prostitution, sexuality, or any form of transgression; the dancer and her dance forms are locked in a bygone era in many respects. The male dancer also underwent a period of redefinition by "revivalists" like Rukmini Devi, leading to the presence of a hyper-masculine man in classical dance pieces[19]. Particularly, the emphasis on the dancing god Shiva and the casting of men in heavily masculinity roles in dance-dramas pushed an image of male dancers as macho, binding them in their gender. Once again, this process is a transnational one, owing its outcome to the interaction between Indian ideas and those of the country's colonizers; the western notion of an

effeminate south Asian man and Indian efforts to debunk these supposedly impure, shameful assertions led to the creation of a unique gender niche for the male dancer.

These images of gender are reproduced by both the western gaze on Indian classical dance[20] and by internal teaching; the primary method of learning, the guru-shishya-parampara is instrumental in enforcing obedience and counteracting transgression against the fabricated traditions of Indian classical dance. In fact, the guru-shishya system of learning was adapted to the arts from the Brahmin tradition of teaching spiritual wisdom to trainee priests[21]; it thus is obvious how conservative Hindu ideas could be baked into this method of learning. In this model

[18] Avanthi Meduri, "Bharatanatyam as a Global Dance: Some Issues in Research, Teaching, and Practice," *Dance Research Journal* 36 no. 2 (Winter 2004): 13.
[19] Hari Krishnan, "From Gynemimesis to Hypermasculinity*: The Shifting Orientations of Male Performers of South Indian Court Dance," in *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, ed. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 384.
[20] Chakravorty, "From interculturalism to historicism," 110.
[21] Anil Sooklal, "The Guru-Shishya Parampara: A Paradigm of Religio-Cultural Continuity," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 3, no. 2 (September 1990): 15.

of teaching, the guru has supreme authority over the shishya, the disciple[22]; though the guru is said to have earned this unquestioning loyalty, the expectation that the student will never question or dissect what they are told by their teacher can continually reproduce old ideas about dance forms, allowing these ideas and values to be inherited by generation after generation and continually passed on without critique or change. The institution of the guru-shishya-parampara, according to scholar Clarence O. McMullen[23], is itself built upon many of the tenets that rule conservative Hindu society: caste hierarchies, obedience, worship, and Brahmin domination[24]. These same ideas are, as seen previously, foundational in the (re)constructions of classical dance forms—reproduced by the authoritative nature of the system of instruction and baked into the structure of this system itself.

Though the guru-shishya system has begun to fall out of favor in recent times, and the hold gurus have over students has somewhat weakened, the method of teaching classical dance forms was built upon an authoritarian model requiring obedience and prohibiting transgression;

though teachers are beginning to change this narrative[25], the recency of the creation of these forms makes it such that today's teachers are not far removed from the original sources, and many still carry significant elements of their training into their classrooms. Thus, the values of the styles' founders and founding eras are continually reproduced; though they may be losing a little steam with each passing generation, they are not losing enough to disrupt the factory of production.

[22] Ananya Chatterjea, "Training in Indian Classical Dance: A Case Study," *Asian Theatre Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 69.
[23] Ibid: 72.
[24] Ibid: 72.
[25] Ibid: 80.

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Queering the performer, queering the space

Despite the creation and reproduction of both Bharatanatyam and Odissi as anti-transgression, and thus anti-queer, dance forms, there exist spaces within both that can be seen as queer by design—or at least, queerable by performers. Though dance dramas and idealized images of dancers have created hyper-gendered roles to bind artists and their work, the

[26] Figure 4: Bharatanatyam dancer Christopher Gurusamy takes the stylized pose of a maiden. Photo courtesy of The Hindu.

practice of solo *Abhinaya* has been, arguably, a queer space since the birth of these dance styles.

Abhinaya is the narrational, gestural, and expressive aspect of Indian classical dance that allows, and usually requires, dancers to transform into a character or many characters onstage, using various techniques to bring life to their role(s) and subtly interpret the guiding poetic text explaining the character's actions and thoughts[27]. Thus, the nature of performing *Abhinaya* allows performers to transcend their physical bodies and take on a new one for the span of a piece, or sometimes even multiple roles over the span of a single dance; these roles, as seen earlier in the example of Kelucharan Mohapatra, do not need to be the same gender, age, or creed as the dancing performer, allowing for dancers to have temporary freedom to become someone they are not on stage. As one dancer described, the performer loses themself onstage, trading their identity for that of another being—their character[28]. Dancers do not merely play roles, they become them; men becoming women, women becoming men, and everything in-between[29]. Embodiment is central to this process, and *Abhinaya* thus can be seen as an embodiment of an alternate persona and a method by which dancers can construct a new identity[30], rather than the act of re-enacting the experiences of a character.

This ability to transform is queer; it is a transgression against standards of gender and caste, and a means by which dancers can become something outside the boundaries of the conservative, heteronormative dance space[31]. As dance anthropologist Sara Azzareli writes, "In *Abhinaya* performances, social actors can adorn and reshape themselves, tell their stories and

[27] Meenakshi Iyer Gangopadhyay, "Language and Literature in Indian Classical Dance," *Gap Bodhi Taru* 3, no. 1 (January 2020): 19.
[28] Banerjee, *Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State*, 129.
[29] Ibid: 130.
[30] Sara Azzarelli, "Dancing Across Gender Boundaries: Queer Experiences in Bharatanatyam Abhinaya" (Masters diss., Choreomundus, 2014), 21.
[31] Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee, "Solidarity – rasa/autobiography – abhinaya: South Asian tactics for performing queerness," *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 4, no. 2 (October 2012): 141.

their worlds, and attempt to change them.[32]" Androgyny and gender fluidity is embodied and celebrated here[33]. Thus, we can view engaging with *Abhinaya* as a queer act. The queerness of

the act of *Abhinaya*, and the stage's facilitation of a safe transformation for the dancer into whichever role they portray, renders the stage what we can call a queer space: a place in which queerness is safe and protected. This idea has been expanded upon by dance scholars Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee, where they reimagine the *Rasika*, the educated audience member, as an "ally," a "viewer of 'radical openness.[34]'"

The imagination of the Indian classical dance stage as a queer space draws parallels to Victor Turner's ideas of liminality, and the existance of liminal spaces that safely facilitate the ritual transformation of inhabitants from one state of identity to another[35]. In many ways, these spaces are analogous, and the performance space Turnerian: the Indian classical stage is a facilitator of transitions, a space rendered ritualistic by myths of construction, and a space within which participants lose their external identities. Turner himself argues that the performed ritual space is a public manifestation of the liminal[36], and Desmond argues that *Abhinaya* is a liminal space for queer performers[37]. However, the queerness of this space differs from Turner's idea of the liminal in the temporariness of the transition; while liminal spaces facilitate a lasting change in a subject's life, the queer space allows for change only within the space itself. Dancers may be transgressive, transformed, and boundless on stage, but as soon as they step outside the world of the performance space and the performance of solo *Abhinaya*, they must be participants in the fixed, regressive institutions of the Indian classical world once again. Even on stage, they are

[32] Azzarelli, "Dancing Across Gender Boundaries," 22.
[33] Uttara Asha Coorlawala, "Darshan and Abhinaya: An Alternative to the Male Gaze," *Dance Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (September 1997): 23.
[34] Chatterjee and Ling Lee, "Solidarity," 141.
[35] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge, 1969), 359. [36] Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 4 (December 1979): 465.
[37] Azzarelli, "Dancing Across Gender Boundaries," 53.

participants in this institution, but just as Vatican City retains its sovereignty while being surrounded by Rome, the stage of the Abhinayic dancer exists as a queer haven, surrounded and enclosed by the antiqueer nation of Indian classical dance.

And thus, we are left with the great central paradox of queerness and the Indian classical dancer: while dance forms were constructed to be repressive of queerness, there exists a sacred space within this toxic world for queerness to survive and thrive, reproduced through performances and supported heartily by proponents of the conservatism that permeates the rest of the Indian classical world. It is important to note that this queer space is created and consecrated by and for the performance of solo *Abhinaya*, and much less so in the group dance drama; in this mode of expressional performance, dancers are assigned roles often aligning with their gender assigned at birth or physical features, as seen prominently in the Kalakshetra dance dramas of Rukmini Devi[38]. Transgression against societal heteronormativity is inhibited when casting is carried out to uphold these ideas. However, in the solo space, where the dancer becomes every character that is brought into the performance space, transgression and queerness can live in the dancer and the space.

So far, we have engaged with queerness as an idea separate from the notion of queerness as an identity, but these two varieties of queerness cannot be separated. The necessity of queer spaces for the safety and wellbeing of queer individuals is paramount. For queer-identifying South Asian dancers, the queerness of the Abhinayic space allows these dancers to explore their identities and engage in activism to combat their marginalization in Indian society[39]. The possibilities of queerness in Bharatanatyam is a common denominator when viewing how

[38] "Classical Dances of India/Ep-11/Kalakshetra/Panchali Sabadam/Janarthanan/Indian Imprints," YouTube video, 17:00, posted by "Indian Imprints," May 17, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBjRvyI98OA.[39] Azzarelli, "Dancing Across Gender Boundaries," 34.

diverse queer people and groups in Tamil Nadu use performance to assert and affirm their identities[40]. According to Azzarelli:

> Dance seems to have a threefold role in their life: it is something that shapes their identities, it is something in which they can experience and explore their sexuality and

> gender attitudes, and above all it is something through which they can concretely show people how the creation of a space that transcends the mainstream dichotomy male man/female woman as well as the mainstream heteronormativity is indeed possible[41].

It is necessary to note that openly queer people, especially members of traditionally queer communities in India, rarely have the chance to engage with classical dance, as their marginal position in society and their sexual deviance means that they are, in most cases, barred from learning or performing "purified" classical dance forms. However, for the lucky few that have the chance, *Abhinaya* provides them with a means of performing their identities that is within the boundaries of social acceptability. For the average, non-openly-queer dancer, *Abhinaya* allows them to queer their bodies for a short duration and express themselves in transgressive ways, a freeing prospect in a heavily heteropatriarchal society even for those who may not identify as queer.

[40] Azzarelli, "Dancing Across Gender Boundaries," 37.
[41] Ibid: 35.

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Performing queerness, reproducing conservatism

Thus, we are left with conflict and tension. Though Indian classical dance forms were created to uphold, share, and reproduce conservative religious values and customs, the space for solo *Abhinaya* performance housed within this normative construction holds incredible possibility for queerness and transgression within the bounds of of the dance forms. So, is this space queer if queerness is socially acceptable in this context? The transformations this space facilitates act against the moral norms of the nationalized dance world, and yet, these transformations are acceptable within this framework. Beyond this, though the performance of *Abhinaya* allows artists to transcend their physical state, does it simultaneously reinforce

[42] Figure 5: Odissi exponent Bichitrananda Swain's all-male Rudrakshya Foundation troupe's performances are often ripe with queer imagery—same-gender partnering, overt sexuality, and thematic transgression against the traditional Odissi repertoire. Photo courtesy of SṚJAN.

stereotypical, binary notions of gender expression through its character work? When we draw parallels between this space and that of the Turnerian liminal, does this come with the

implication that just like liminal spaces[43], Abhinayic spaces also reinforce hierarchy by their temporary dissolution of it? It is in these tensions that ideas of queering these dance forms entirely arise[44]; this varied, experimental process that some modern artists have begun includes efforts to decentralize values, notions of authority, allegiance to Hinduism, heterosexual narratives, and gender as a defining feature of characters[45]. However, it is important to remember the potential for queerness that exists in the traditional iterations of these forms, as discussed in this paper. As these dance forms continue to evolve, it remains to be seen how queer these worlds can become, or perhaps, conversely, how saliently conservative values may continue to be reproduced. As for today, we are left with contradictions, contrasts, and tension, the makers of the central paradox of queerness and the realm of Indian classical dance. And it is through embracing this tension that we can begin to understand the conflicting, tangled, incongruous reality of the intersections between the world of Indian classical dance and the realms of queerness.

[43] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 373.
[44] Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee, "'Our Love Was Not Enough': Queering Gender, Cultural Belonging, and Desire in Contemporary *Abhinaya,"* in *Queer Dance,* ed. Clare Croft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 47.
[45] Azzarelli, "Dancing Across Gender Boundaries," 55.

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