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## LAUGHTER VERSUS SYMPATHY IN *ROMOLA* AND *FELIX HOLT*

By Louise Lee

I want to start with a *useful* rather than a funny question posed by the critic Hilary M. Schor: 'What acts of information-organization do we perform on the Eliot career?'<sup>1</sup> The answer is possibly a succession of familiar base-touchings: Eliot's Warwickshire childhood and family life, the loss of her evangelical faith, her London journalism and reviewing, the development of her artistic values through engagement with European art and literature – the works of Baruch Spinoza, Ludwig Feuerbach, David Strauss, and Auguste Comte – and, of course, her partnership with George Henry Lewes. Other notable Eliot 'themes' might include science, religion, history, natural history, gender, music, and Darwinism. In this endless list of possible configurations, a category we're most *unlikely* to come up with is Eliot and laughter.

The ideological shaping of Eliot's career talks to a wider bourgeois preference in the mid-Victorian period – and beyond – for lachrymose respectability, one that publicly, at least, occluded laughing or gelastic narratives, even when these were enjoyed *in camera*. While George Henry Lewes, for example, famously professed to admiring Eliot's 'fun' in her first work of fiction, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton' (1858), it was her 'pathos' that he ultimately plumped for.<sup>2</sup> Both Eliot and Lewes 'cried together' over the scenes of Milly Barton's deathbed, a marital act of affective communion that is tacitly invoked when Eliot published the story in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, in 1858. Her narrator directly addresses her readers with the words, 'I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles – to win your tears for real sorrow.'<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on 'real sorrow' connotes sympathy's peculiar grammar of affect, a generic predisposition for crying following from reading novels and letters that interfaces shared sympathies and weeping in a transactional exchange of ink for tears.

Yet despite this, Eliot participated in increasingly widespread debates about the ideological and aesthetic place of laughter in Victorian society, begun by writers like William Hazlitt, Charles Dickens, W. M. Thackeray, George Meredith, and continued by scientists and philosophers, Alexander Bain, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, James Sully and later Sigmund Freud. In 1856, writing anonymously for the *Westminster Review* in 'German Wit: Heinrich Heine', she quotes Goethe's comment that 'nothing is more significant of man's character than what they find laughable'.<sup>4</sup> Eliot, however, adds a notable modification: 'The truth of the observation would be more apparent if Goethe had said *culture* [my emphasis] instead of character.'<sup>5</sup> What is remarkable here, considering Eliot's enduring status as a canonically *serious* author, is her stridency about laughter's irreducible significance in the public realm.

What a society collectively finds ticklish *is*, she suggests, such a reliable indicator, such an accurate thermometer of a social body's hidden structures of feeling, that neither politics, nor art, nor religion can render such a complete and truthful picture. And there is an extent, surely, to which Eliot is right. What makes a society break into hilarity, to snort, to snigger, to guffaw, or to laugh inwardly, is far more symptomatic perhaps of a collective identity than the quieter and infinitely more containable pleasures of sympathy. While laughter, like sympathy, *can* be congenial and smooth, about social *politesse*, it can also be (unlike sympathy) riotous and bodily – causing potentially, rictus, loudness and even wetness; but most of all, because of its often involuntary nature, *upset*.

As James Wood argues in his elegant study of laughter and the novel *The Irresponsible*

*Self*, what causes laughter in Western culture has undergone many transmutations through the centuries. For the Greeks, to take one example, the image of the limping god of fire Haephaestus was enough to induce uncontrolled splutterings of wild amusement. In the age of Rabelais and Cervantes, as Wood observes, two men killing a sheep or vomiting into each other's faces was considered the very apogee of the comedian's art.<sup>6</sup> By the early nineteenth century, these visceral gags had softened into something subtler and more intimate. In Jane Austen's novel of conversations *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Elizabeth Bennett consecrates her marriage to Mr Darcy with two simple words: 'I laugh.'<sup>7</sup> In all these cases, laughter connotes a shifting social value, from Rabelaisian excess to Austenian *jouissance*, where the playfulness of matched laughter hints at shared pleasures to come, both cerebral and connubial.<sup>8</sup>

### I. Joking Around in Renaissance Florence

It is Eliot's overtly scholarly concern to explore the cultural embeddedness and also the historical specificity of a certain kind of laughter that explains perhaps the rather deliberate, and not to say, painfully *un-funny* explication of the practical joke in the chapter entitled 'The Florentine Joke' in *Romola* (1863). Here, Eliot presents Florence at the beginning of the Renaissance as a city of laughter, full of festive spectacle and clowning, where the barber Nello, a source of much ribald amusement in the novel, entices the local quack doctor Maestro Tacco into his barber's chair, and through some silvery-tongued cajolery, while lathering up the doctor's face, sets him up for a fall, or what Nello calls 'a rare bit of fooling.'<sup>9</sup> He presents the unwitting doctor, still with soap on his face, with a young woman, a *Contadina*, who appears to have a sick baby – which is actually a monkey – in her arms, and which, it is said, is urgently in need of a 'miracle' cure. The 'baby' is very well wrapped up but is wriggling vigorously. As the mother quickly begins to unwrap the 'baby', out it jumps from amid the swaddling clothes, 'scratching, grinning and screeching' (167). The effect on the doctor is immediate:

Up started the unfortunate doctor, letting his medicine box fall, and away jumped the no less terrified and indignant monkey, finding the final resting place for his claws on the mane of the doctor's horse, while the doctor himself, out of his wits with confused terror at the devil, the possible stoning, and the escape of his horse, took to his heels with spectacles on nose, lathered face and the shaving cloth round his neck to the shouts and jeering laughs of those in the piazza. (167)

An important aspect of the prank here is the heterogeneous nature of the laughter it induces: the unified 'shouts and jeering laughs' of those viewing it. As the narrator explains: 'It was a scene such as Florentines loved from the potent and reverend signor going to council in his *lucco*, down to the grinning youngster, who felt himself master of all situations when his bag was full of smooth stones ...' (168). Yet although Eliot's stated interest might have been to explore the anthropological and social nuances of the comedic tableau, these complexities were lost on some of her contemporaries. In a letter of 1871, she expressed her intense frustration that her readers might have thought she *intended* this barbershop set piece to be funny, when actually it was rendered as an example of the historical situatedness or alterity of Florentine humour. As she wrote to a friend, rather testily:

The general ignorance [among my readers] of old Florentine literature and the false conception of Italy bred by idle travelling ... have caused many parts of *Romola* to be entirely misunderstood – the scene of the quack doctor and the monkey for example,

which is a specimen, not of humour as I relish it, but of the practical joking which was the amusement of the gravest old Florentines, and without which no conception of them would be historical. The whole piquancy of the scene in question, was intended to lie in the antithesis between the puerility which stood for wit and humour in the old Republic, and the majesty of its front in graver matters.<sup>10</sup>

*Not getting the joke here then is about experiencing the difference between Florentine and Victorian society, a risky authorial strategy perhaps, and one of the reasons why *Romola* continues to be, quite unfairly, one of Eliot's least-read novels.*

But the privileging of the historical moment over the comic can be seen again and again in *Romola* in Eliot's redeployment and contortion of epigrammatic and 'humorous' Italian phrases, which, transcribed into English, become unnatural and ungainly: 'You come as opportunely as cheese on macaroni' (39) says Nello, at one point, to one of his customers; or, as one female spectator tells the mountebank, 'Master Vaiano, she'll be back presently – as the toad said to the harrow' (100). These linguistic infelicities grant something like the smack of authenticity but also reveal the decidedly discomforted and un-homely place of laughter in *Romola*, where a punch line is perennially orphaned from the body of its own joke.

## II. Laughter & The Civic Body

This disjunct dramatizes, though, I want to suggest, a wider disquiet of Eliot's about laughter's place in civic society – a debate that Eliot was thinking through, for nearly the entirety of her career. One of Eliot's chief suspicions about laughter is the cultural vapidness and slightness it might induce in the public sphere. At one point in *Romola*, when, as the narrator tells us, Romola's suffering has made her more inclined against merriment than normal (after her father's death and Tito's treacherous decision to sell off Bardo's library), she discusses the burning of books in the Bonfire of the Vanities with the artist Piero di Cosimo. Noting with some approval that the comic works of Greek and Latin poets had been thrown into the fire, she comments: 'Men do not want books to make them think lightly of vice, as if life were a vulgar joke [my emphasis]' (399). Piero retorts that it is all very well for Romola to say this – when she has already had the benefit of being able to read the books before they went up in smoke. Nonetheless, the nightmarish world that Romola invokes – where life is just a 'vulgar joke' – is a theme that re-emerges in Eliot's last work of 1879, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. Here, the eccentric academic Theophrastus recounts what happened to a mythological society dedicated solely to the art of promiscuous jesting:

The Tirythians, according to an ancient story reported by Athenaeus, becoming conscious that their trick of laughter at everything and nothing was making them unfit for the conduct of serious affairs, appealed to the Delphic oracle for some means of cure. The god prescribed a peculiar form of sacrifice, which would be effective if they could carry it through without laughing. They did their best; but the flimsy joke of a boy upset their unaccustomed gravity, and in this way the oracle taught them that even the gods could not prescribe a quick cure for a long vitiation, or give power and dignity to a people who in a crisis of the public wellbeing were at the mercy of a poor jest.<sup>11</sup>

For the Tirythians, as for the Florentines, their 'trick of laughter at everything and nothing' causes all kinds of problems. Its lack of discrimination suggests social ties that do not bind; and work and thinking that cannot be done.

But the further effect of being at the ‘mercy of a poor jest’ is that it inheres (as with the practical joke against the quack doctor) not only in the creation of a *target* of the joke, but in communities of people who laugh *at*, rather than *with*. Both Eliot and her contemporary Alexander Bain, who published his ‘degradation theory’ of laughter in *The Emotions and The Will* in 1859, reprise the Aristotelian suspicion that laughter causes indignity, not only to the object of the joke, but also to the joker himself.<sup>12</sup> In Bain’s account, the indignity of laughter is implicit in the meretricious character of laughter itself – which requires a *necessarily* inferior target. ‘The laughable’, says Bain, must inhere in something ‘that is deformed and mean’ or else it would risk inspiring potentially nobler feelings like ‘pity, fear, anger or other strong emotion’ (257).<sup>13</sup> For Eliot, meanwhile, sketching out in ‘German Wit’ what a theory of ‘modern humour’ might look like, the laughter that is most to be feared, and most likely to coarsen the public sphere (or as Theophrastus Such later puts it, ‘debase the moral currency’), is raucous, historical, and above all, proletarian.<sup>14</sup>

In the early pages of ‘German Wit’, Eliot shows a surprising and striking antipathy to working class humour, asserting that the ‘last thing in which a cultivated man can have community with the vulgar is their jocularity’, adding the corollary that the joke ‘likely to shake the diaphragm of a coal-heaver’ is vastly different from the ‘highly complex pleasure derived from a real witticism’ (69). Continuing in this explicitly divisive and hierarchical vein, she discusses mediaeval peasant laughter:

A great deal of humour may coexist with a great deal of barbarism, as we see in the Middle Ages; but the strongest flavour of the humour in such cases will come, not from sympathy, but more probably from triumphant egoism or intolerance (69).

Unlike Mikhail Bakhtin’s later idealization of popular festive culture, Eliot declares herself to be, outwardly, at least, highly suspicious of unregulated communal laughter but particularly, its tendency to what Eliot sees as unthinking scorn. The account of laughter given above (‘triumphant egoism or intolerance’) is the specifically *ad hominem* variety of ‘superiority theory’, which, as Thomas Hobbes famously argued, arises from the ‘sudden glory’ or feeling of ‘some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others ...’<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that although ‘German Wit’ locates this roving form of unthinking cruelty firmly within the cackling bosom of an unsophisticated and quasi-bestial working class in the 1850s, by the end of Eliot’s career, the source of dangerous gelastic contamination had changed. Theophrastus Such, for example, decries the new generation of thoughtless *middle* classes bringing their children up to habits of ‘contempt and exultant gibing’ (85), a new manifestation of superiority theory that works against the ‘reverent gratitude of ages’ (85). The pursuit of levity at all costs, suggests Theophrastus, is ‘the new impoverishment that threatens our posterity: – a new Famine, a meagre fiend with lewd grin and clumsy hoof [that] is breathing moral mildew over the harvest of our human sentiments’ (85).

### III. ‘Modern Humour’ & ‘Amused Sympathy’

So, could there ever be, then, in Eliot’s terms, or indeed, in Theophrastus’s, a kinder form of ‘modern humour’ more befitting the mood of Eliot’s humane nineteenth century; one that does not cause ‘moral mildew’ or take a ‘clumsy hoof’ to its objects? Certainly, this aesthetic aspiration is problematic: as seen in ‘German Wit’, the vexed relation between laughter and cultural power is ironically underlined by the fact that despite Eliot’s stated concern to conceive

a more expansive and ethical form of laughter, she sets up the working class as a new fall-guy for the joke. Laughter, in Eliot's account, *always* has a target – which is also the implicit conclusion when she displaces the class anxiety in 'German Wit' onto a quasi-evolutionary narrative and suggests the laughter of superiority was one of the ancient pleasures of chortling cave dwellers dining on 'acorns to beechmast and back again to acorns' in the troglodytic age:

Strange as the genealogy may seem, the original parentage of that wonderful and delicious mixture of fun, fancy and philosophy and feeling which constitutes modern humour, was probably the cruel mockery of a savage at the writhings of a suffering enemy... (70)

The spectral presence of past comedic brutalities is evoked here – as laughter's inalienable atavism – even as the new world of modern utopian humour with its 'wonderful and delicious mixture of fun, fancy and philosophy and *feeling* [my emphasis]' is engendered. Eliot suggests that the benefits that an evolved civilization can bring to laughter are not callousness but what she calls elsewhere in the essay the 'sympathetic emotions' (71).

But I want to take Eliot's idea of a 'feeling' laughter to consider its affective viability in an important scene from *Romola* where Tito is walking through Florence on a festival day and comes across Tessa being taunted by a mountebank; the same character who would later perform the mock marriage between Tito and Tessa:

Tito was preparing to turn aside into an adjoining street when amidst the loud laughter, his ear discerned a distressed childish voice crying, 'Loose me! Holy Virgin, help me!' which at once determined him to push through the knot of gazers. He had just time to perceive that the distressed voice came from a young Contadina, whose white hood had fallen off in the struggle to get her hands free from the grasp of a man or cerretano or conjurer who was making laughing attempts to soothe and cajole, evidently carrying with him the *amused sympathy* [my emphasis] of the spectators. These by a persuasive variety of words, signifying simpleton, for which the Florentine dialect is rich in equivalents ... At the first moment the girl's face was turned away, and he saw only her light brown hair plaited and fastened and then he saw the baby features of Tessa, her blue eyes filled with tears ... (99)

The key aspect here is the description of 'amused sympathy' of the laughing spectators, viewing the teasing of Tessa. 'Sympathy' suggests both a degree of horizontality between observers of the joke and its subjects, and, also, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines one of its meanings, as affective fellowship: a 'feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other'. Unlike the barbershop scene with the quack doctor, the reaction of the crowd is not jeers and insults but benevolent curiosity. The Florentines are convinced, erroneously as it turns out, by the apparent power dynamic – 'the persuasive variety of words' used by the mountebank – and laugh in a way that does not suggest either hatred or the unthinking scorn of superiority theory towards either character. (Dramatically, it is essential that the crowd regard the encounter as 'safe' so that Tito can perform the 'rescue' of Tessa and engender the trust that would bring about their 'marriage'.)

Nonetheless, the problem about 'amused sympathy' is that it is based entirely on the crowd's misreading: there *is* a victim and although Tessa is not the 'mean or deformed subject' imagined by Bain's account of Aristotelian laughter, it operates both as a contradiction in terms, and also a false consciousness, that signally ignores Tessa's 'distress' rather than

demonstrating thoroughgoing participatory feeling. Indeed, Eliot's account of laughter here is more pessimistic than even the goading of the quack doctor as the statement of *apparent* sympathy belies the actuality of the crowd's detachment and pleased blankness.

#### IV. Eliot & Bergson

What I am suggesting then is an ideological fault-line between Eliot's theory of 'sympathetic amusement' and its practice. Rather than the joyful inter-subjectivity suggested by Eliot's 'modern humour', *Romola* presents us with an epistemologically unsettling, and even uncanny, experience of laughter where characters bear what the narrator later calls 'the half-smiling half-humiliated expression of people who are not within hearing of the joke which is producing infectious laughter' (206). As with Tessa, who does not fully apprehend the 'joke' of her false marriage to Tito, laughter creates asymmetries of knowledge, power and feeling.

A generation later than Eliot, however, Henri Bergson, in 'Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic' (1900) modified and qualified this suspicious treatment of laughter in a significant way. Like Eliot, Bergson was concerned with the social dynamics and communities of people who laugh. He also postulated the idea that laughter was predicated on the desertion of feeling, or, as he asserted, a 'momentary anaesthesia of the heart'.<sup>16</sup> But, writing on the cusp of modernism, Bergson is alert to the *temporary* nature of this apparent desertion:

Indifference is [laughter's] natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case, we must *for a moment* [my emphasis] put our affection out of court and impose silence on our pity.<sup>17</sup>

The indifference of laughter that Bergson posits here does not necessarily require a permanent shift in values. Indeed, Bergson's account, which gestures towards the psychological 'relief' theories of Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, suggests what you *care* about most ('pity' and 'affection') you are also likely to laugh about most. It is this psychic structure of intense emotional investment followed by a moment's disinvestment that can explain a riotous belly laugh, just as much as contempt or feelings of superiority.

In the same essay, Bergson attempts to imagine what an excessively *emoting* consciousness would be like, one that is *not* prone to laughter:

Try for a moment to become interested in everything that is being said and done, act, in imagination with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion: as though at the touch of a fairy wand you will see the flimsiest objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue spread over everything.<sup>18</sup>

The construction of the 'feeling' self, touched here by a 'fairy wand' of both Bergsonian intensity and Eliotian sympathy is redolent of Eliot's 'serious Sunday afternoons' at her London home, the Priory, near Hyde Park in the 1860s, recalled by Anne Thackeray Ritchie. Here, she met Eliot, dressed in black satin, surrounded by her German books and ivory paper cutters. Remembering the gravity of the 'author of good and benevolent impulse', Ritchie reports a sentence voiced at Eliot's hearthside: 'We ought to respect our influence ... we know by our own experience how very much others affect our lives, and we must remember that we, in turn, must have the same effect on others.'<sup>19</sup> Eliot's comment tessellates experience,

influence and memory in such a way that it is well nigh impossible to cast off personal responsibility, even for one irreverent moment, either in the present or for futurity. For Eliot, and for Bain, then, as for many educated mid-Victorians, it was better *not* to get the joke, to remain honourably *hors de combat*. Catching oneself out in the act of laughter constitutes a potential dereliction of sympathy that, at mid-century, causes acute anxiety, conflating class hierarchies with prior assumptions about ethical awareness.

## V. Conclusion: Eliot's Sense(s) of Humour?

But there is a significant caveat to my argument. Eliot is no dour gelatophobe. There can be few more devastating wits in the nineteenth century, or, in any century, for that matter. If, to take just one example, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (1856) were the only comic prose she had ever written (a work which George Levine recently described as 'dazzling'), it would still justifiably take its place as one of the funniest essays in the English language.<sup>20</sup> Even that most serious-minded of novels, *Middlemarch*, had Victorian readers rocking in the aisles, as Barbara Bodichon observed, in a letter to the author:

I hear people say it is so witty amusing and lively [sic] so it is but all is shadowed by the coming misery to me. I can't help feeling it desperately ... I feel a sort of horror at your story as if it were real and going on at this moment. I do not know if you meant to produce this sort of terrible foreboding of inevitable misery.<sup>21</sup>

'Witty, amusing and lively', are adjectives that do not stir twenty first century critics, however, when they turn to *Middlemarch*: indeed, the scholarly monographs on Eliot's humour are few and far between. This may be because, like Bodichon, modern readers deterministically focus on 'foreboding' and 'inevitable misery'; or else, the comedy of *Middlemarch* (like that of so many of her novels and essays), is so taken as read that readers and critics simply forget to comment on it. A similar amnesia has been diagnosed by James Kincaid, who describes how critics laugh out loud at a savagely funny novel like *Oliver Twist* but then write articles about its 'bleak effects.'<sup>22</sup>

To ignore the humour of Eliot though is to misread the pervasive vocabulary of bathetic incongruity that is everywhere (but also, apparently, nowhere) in her work, structuring the architecture of her realism and authorial art. Like Mrs Transome, who, in *Felix Holt*, 'laughed' at the *Lyrical Ballads* and found the 'ridicule of Biblical characters very amusing', Eliot's humour is both radical and conservative: she is both social enforcer and challenger.<sup>23</sup> And while due attention has been paid to the domestic comedies of the Poysers in *Adam Bede*, or the Dodson sisters in *The Mill on the Floss*, and any number of watering holes in her novels, very little work has been done on the inveterately anthropomorphic nature of Eliot's humour, which, as well as assimilating the discoveries of Victorian natural history, also operates as a strategic displacement and de-politicization of difficult subjects, like class and gender.

In 'German Wit', Eliot imagines a particularly humourless ancient race of people who 'went about their business and their pleasure as gravely as a society of beavers.' (69). The heavy-set faces of those beavers, stolidly marching with a human sense of purpose, and even self-importance, is imagined here, along with the incessant thrum of their society, working and thinking, but never laughing. It is an irony of the kind that Eliot might have made much of, that no more apposite image could be found for the way that Eliot herself is now regarded by contemporary academe: beaver-faced and resolute in an age, where, as the critic Harold Orel

once observed, ‘the miracle of Victorian humour may lie in the fact that it existed [at all]’.<sup>24</sup> Yet taking Eliot’s levity seriously, and attempting to answer a central conundrum in her *oeuvre* – that of the ‘dazzling’ Victorian wit who *feared* certain kinds of laughter – grants new structures of feeling in her work, new conflicts and resolutions, new echoes and textures, and alternate worldviews that pivot between the ideal and the material, and between stated and un-stated affinities.

#### Notes

- 1 Hilary M. Schor, review of *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine, and the *Oxford Reader’s Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall, *Victorian Studies*, 46:1 (Fall 2003), 111-114.
- 2 Gordon Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 212.
- 3 George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Thomas A Noble (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2009), p. 46.
- 4 *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), pp. 69-106 (p. 69). All subsequent references are to this edition.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (Pimlico: Random House, 2005), p. 5.
- 7 Ibid., p. 6.
- 8 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), particularly chapter three, ‘Popular-Festive Forms and Images in Rabelais’.
- 9 George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Andrew Brown (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1994), p. 162. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- 10 J. W. Cross, *George Eliot’s Life as Related in Her Journals and Letters*, 25 vols (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), XXV, p. 85.
- 11 George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ed. Nancy Henry (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), p. 86. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- 12 Alexander Bain, *The Emotions And The Will* (West Strand: J. W. Parker & Son, 1859), p. 246.
- 13 For Bain, the key aspect of laughter is the fall from dignity to indignity – ‘meanness’ itself, Bain asserts, is not funny.
- 14 *Theophrastus Such*, p. 86.