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Milton's Eve and The Ramayana's Sita: Two Female Archetypes

Paradise Lost and the *Ramayana* both deal with mythological themes, which is not to say that the characters, events and ideas portrayed in the epics have no basis in reality but that these things have, whatever their historical reality, been transmuted into symbols and metaphors. In talking about myths of the type contained in or referred to in *Paradise Lost* and the *Ramayana* we are talking about stories that form the background for two diverse cultures. The myth of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden has been represented in countless stories, dramas, and paintings. The myth represented by Rama's search for Sita has its counterparts and analogues in Classical mythology.

In dealing with myths and symbols, particularly those that transcend the merely personal and that have some correspondence to the wider culture, it seems relevant to have some reference to the theory of archetypes. This theory, most often associated with C. G. Jung and his disciples, see myth as emanating from one or more symbols that are stored in the collective unconscious. Jung compares the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious with regards to their contents and says:

> The contents of the personal unconscious are chiefly the *feeling-toned complexes*, as they are called; they constitute the personal and private side of psychic life. The contents of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, are known as *archetypes*.[1]

It is characteristic of the archetype that it comes upon us while we are unaware, unconscious, of its influence. As Jung says "Archetypes are complexes of experience that come upon us like fate, and their effects are felt in our most personal life."[2] The myth of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden is one of those myths that has been subjected to various interpretations. One of these has been that it was literally true, a belief held by most Jews and Christians, including Milton, up until recent times, but which is now the belief, for the most part, of fundamentalists. Another view has been that the myth represents an historic event but one which is of broader significance, that is it represents a passage from a culture of hunters and gatherers to one of settled agriculture. A third view is that the myth is a series of symbols that represent an experience that is so far distant that its literal truth is not recoverable but that its meaning survives in the forms of symbols that are pervasive throughout one or more cultures and that are communicable because they partake of the universal.

The figure of Eve has been regarded as one of those symbols that are emanations from the unconscious. She has been widely seen as a figure of the *anima*, in some

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[1] Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol 9., Part 1. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 4.

[2] Jung, 30.

cases she has been seen as representative of one of the stages in the growth of the anima. This is the position taken by M.-L. Franz who sees her as the first or purely instinctual and biological stage of the development of the anima.[3] Jung himself comments on this quality of Eve as a representative of the anima. He says the anima is the soul, more particularly it is the soul of man, or a man (the female soul being the animus) and it is the soul, the anima or animus, which gives us life.

> Being that has soul is living being. Soul is the living thing in man, that which lives of itself and causes life. Therefore God breathed into Adam a living breath, that he might live. with her cunning play of illusions the soul lures into life the inertness of matter that does not want to live. She makes us believe incredible things, that life may be lived. She is full of snares and traps, in order that man should fall, should reach the earth, entangle himself there, and stay caught, so that life should be lived; as Eve in the garden of Eden could not rest content until she had convinced Adam of the goodness of the forbidden apple. Were it not for the leaping and twinkling of the soul, man would rot away in his greatest passion, idleness. [4]

Later on Jung says of the anima that she, the anima, is part of the realm of the numinous, the taboo, the magical. His description and comments bear more than a passing resemblance to Eve in both *Paradise Lost* and in the Biblical myth.

> With the archetype of the anima we enter the realm of the gods, or rather, the realm that metaphysics has reserved for itself. Everything the anima touches becomes numinous—unconditional, dangerous, taboo, magical. She is the serpent in the paradise of the harmless man with good resolutions and still better intentions. She affords the most convincing reasons for not prying into the unconscious, an occupation that would break down our moral inhibitions and unleash forces that had better been left unconscious and undisturbed. As usual, there is something in what the anima says; for life in itself is not good only, it is also bad. Because the anima wants life, she wants both good and bad.[5]

When Eve takes the apple in Book IX of *Paradise Lost* she defends her action by saying:

> For us alone
> Was death invented? Or to us denied
> That intellectual food, for beasts reserved?
> For beasts it seems: yet that one beast which first
> Hath tasted, envies not, but brings with joy
> The good befall'n him, author unsuspect,
> Friendly to man, far from deceit or guile.
> What fear I then, rather what know to fear

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[3] M.-L. Franz, "The Process of Individuation," *Man and His Symbols,* ed. Carl G. Jung, (New York: Dell, 1964) 195.

[4] Jung, 26-27.

[5] Jung, 28.

> Under this ignorance of good and evil,
> Of God or death, of law or penalty?
> Here grows the cure of all, this fruit divine,
> Fair to the eye, inviting to the taste,
> Of virtue to make wise: what hinders then
> To reach, and feed at once both body and mind? (IX, 766–79)[6]

Eve sees the apple not as something which is evil in itself but as an opportunity to grown and become wise. Empson's view, that Eve sees the fruit as part of a puzzle and that she thinks that the test is not whether she will obey the commandment but whether she has the courage to break the commandment and pass on to a new relationship with God is not completely foreign to this view of Eve. In commenting on the serpent's lines:

> …will God incense his ire
> For such a petty trespass, and not praise
> Rather your dauntless virtue, whom the pain
> Of death denounced, whatever thing death be,
> Deterred not from achieving what might lead
> To happier life, knowledge of good and evil. (IX, 692–97)

Empson contends that

> …she [Eve] feels the answer to this elaborate puzzle must be that God wants her to eat the apple, since what he is really testing is not her obedience but her courage, also whether her desire to get to Heaven is real enough to call all her courage out. I think this the most likely motive because it is the most sublime, thus again following principle of Mr Rajan that the characteristic virtue of the poem is sublimity.[7]

Empson does not comment on Eve as a female archetype, but what can be seen quite clearly is that Eve, whether regarded as a representative of the anima or not does not, in the view of some critics, regard the test of the apple as a test of obedience but rather as a symbol of knowledge. To Jung the eating of the fruit is a symbol of immersion into life and to Empson the fruit represents a possible challenge to Eve's powers of reasoning. The test, in Empson's view is a test that is rooted in hermeneutics, Eve disobeys because she doesn't really believe that God meant what he said but that he meant something else. Both, however, agree in seeing the fall as being rooted in Eve's desire. Eve, it should be noted, does not choose to eat the apple because it is evil or forbidden, she sees it as the gateway to another good. In this respect she differs from Satan who had said "Evil be thou my good" (IV, 110) and agrees with the Platonic and Socratic concept that men choose good, or what they perceive as good.

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[6] John Milton, *Paradise Lost: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Scott Elledge, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 202. All subsequent reference to *Paradise Lost* are to this edition and are cited by book and line number in the text.

[7] William Empson, *Milton's God,* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961) 159.

So far we have seen that Eve is widely regarded as an archetype of the anima. This approach is useful, to some extent, to the student and critic of literature and Northrop Frye suggests that the study of myths and archetypes is important. He groups myths into three categories:

> First, there is undisplaced myth, generally concerned with gods or demons, and which takes the form of two contrasting worlds of total metaphorical identification, one desirable and the other undesirable. These worlds are often identified with the existential heavens and hell of the religions contemporary with such literature. These two forms of metaphorical organization we call the apocalyptic and the demonic respectively. Second, we have the general tendency we have called romantic, the tendency to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience. Third, we have the tendency of "realism"…to throw it the emphasis on content and representation rather than on the shape of the story.[8]

Milton's representation of the Garden of Eden and of Eve clearly belongs to the first category by virtue of Milton's literal treatment of the myth. Frye also points out that we should be cautious in approaching literature through the use of Jungian analysis and the theory of the collective unconscious.[9]

The question remains, however, how did Milton's predecessors regard Eve and to what extent did he share that view.

Diane Kelsey McColley, in her book *Milton's Eve* provides a useful summary of the views of Milton's predecessors. First of all the painters and poets, exclusive of Milton, "usually depict prelapsarian life, if at all, as idle, sumptuous, and brief, and the first woman as inherently deficient in virtuous enterprise…."[10] Secondly, Milton's predecessors either blamed Eve for the woes of the world, or contend that Eve was a mistake, a "fair defect of nature" but to contend that the fall was fortunate. Thirdly, the conception of Eve, except for Milton, was rooted in dualism. McColley contends that:

> readings of *Paradise Lost* in which Eve appears to be inclined toward sin before the Fall have been colored by expectations that Milton hoped to reform, and that his portrayal of her stands in radiant contrast to the sly or naive temptresses who bore her name in the works of Milton's predecessor's and contemporaries. Her prelapsarian words and acts, including those represented in the separation scene, are not foreshadowings of necessary sin, but illustrations of actual and potential virtue; they prefigure not only a possible fall, but the work of regeneration, in which a fall is always possible but never inevitable.[11]

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[8] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957)139–40.

[9] Frye, 111–12.

[10] Diane Kelsey McColley, *Milton's Eve*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983) 1.

[11] McColley, 3–4.

Milton's prelapsarian Eve differs from the popular conception of her in several important ways just as she differs from the postlapsarian Eve by virtue of her innocence. This is pointed up by the distinction that occurs between the lovemaking of Adam and Eve before the fall and the sensuality of their coupling afterwards. Eve is described by Milton in terms that suggest the distinction sometimes made by art historians between the naked, those for whom being unclothed is unnatural, and the nude, those who are naturally unclad.

> She as a veil down to the slender waist
> Her unadorned golden tresses wore
> Disheveled, but in wanton ringlets waved
> As the vine curls her tendril, which implied
> Subjection, but required with gentle sway,
> And by her yielded, by him best received,
> Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
> And sweet reluctant amorous delay.
> Nor those mysterious parts were then concealed,
> Then was not guilty shame, dishonest shame
> Of nature's works…. (IV, 304–14)

The lovemaking that follows this description is characterized in bucolic terms, there is a "cool Zephyr", the meal is vegetarian, and Adam and Eve are linked in "happy nuptial league". (IV, 329–39) This contrasts sharply with the description of their first postlapsarian union. Adam's desire is described thus:

> … but that false fruit
> Far other operation first displayed,
> Carnal desire inflaming, he on Eve
> Began to cast lascivious eyes, she him
> As wantonly repaid; in lust they burn…. (IX, 1011–15)[12]

The innocent lovemaking of Book IV is replaced by something darker and more sinister:

> There they their fill of love and love's disport
> Took largely of their mutual guilt the seal,
> The solace of their sin, till dewy sleep
> Oppressed, wearied with their amorous play. (IX, 1042–45)

When they awaken from their post-coital nap they find what the knowledge of good and evil has really meant:

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[12] Milton does not distinguish between the naked and the nude in the fashion of art historians. In fact the OED lists *nude*, as applied to art, as first occurring in 1708. The term *the nude* as applied to art first occurred in 1760. Both dates are obviously post-Milton but the distinction does seem to be implicit in Milton's description. For a further comment on Milton's distinction between unfallen and fallen sexual relations in *Paradise Lost* see C. S. Lewis, *Preface to* Paradise Lost, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 122–24.

> Soon found their eyes how opened, and their mind
> How darkened; innocence, that as a veil
> Had shadowed them from knowing ill, was gone,
> Just confidence, and native righteousness,
> And honor from about them, naked left
> To guilty shame: he covered, but his robe
> Uncovered more.… (IX, 1053–59)

They emerge from their lovemaking with a sense of shame, as Lewis points out they have lost their chastity.[13] Milton contrasts their pre- and postlapsarian relations of Adam and Eve through the use of a number of classical allusions. McColley discovers in the comparison of Eve to Proserpina a contrast that signals the possibility of resurrection and regeneration. Further, Raphael's use of the word *Hail* and the reference to Mary suggests that the unfallen Eve is potentially the equal of Mary as a source of grace.[14] The difference between the fallen and unfallen relations of Adam and Eve is shown, according to McColley, in two passages (IV, 492–502; IX, 1037–45) that allude to the same episode in the *Iliad*, Juno's seduction of Jove. In the earlier description of Adam and Eve their love is creative, the comparison implies that flowers spring up as a result of this union. In the later description the flowers form a couch, a passive instrument. McColley sees this as a contrast with between unfallen and fallen sexuality.

What we see here is that Milton has taken Eve, who is an archetype, a symbol, and through his comparison of her to other mythical figures has developed the symbol so that it becomes more than a symbol from the unconscious, whether collective or personal. The process endows Milton's Eve with qualities that distinguish her from Eve as traditionally conceived and remove her from the primitive, unconscious archetype and make her into a more literary figure.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a literary epic, and the portrait of Eve is a literary portrait that is the conscious effort of one man with a definite and knowable personality and system of beliefs. The *Ramayana*, however, is a non-literary epic and although it is, in its grand design, the probable effort of one man, that man is not known and his personality and system of beliefs is not knowable. Further, the epic is overlaid with the work of other hands, all of them as unknowable as the primary author. The *Ramayana* is, therefore, a more collective effort than *Paradise Lost.*[15] Since the *Ramayana* is a collective effort in a way that *Paradise Lost* is not it can be expected that the characters in the epic will be closer to a collective portrait than Milton's characters. In other words the characters may be more fully representative of the unconscious archetypes than a purely literary creation.

Sita is the primary female character in the *Ramayana* and as such she offers a contrast to Milton's Eve. She is more clearly an archetype of fertility and agriculture as is indicated in two passages from the *Ramayana*. In the first she says that "…—

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[13] Lewis, 127–28, *et passim.*

[14] McColley, 68, 72–73.

[15] J. L. Brockington in his study of the *Ramayana* provides a discussion of the evolution of the epic. For further details see J. L. Brockington, *Righteous Rama: The Evolution of an Epic,* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984) 16–62 and 305–46. It is Brockington's contention that the text evolved over five stages and that this evolution extended from about the fifth century B. C. to the twelfth century A. D.

Saintly Janak saw my birth,/Child of harvest-bearing furrow, Sita sprang from Mother Earth…."[16] In the second she implores her mother, the earth, to take her back into itself:

> If unstained in thought and action I have lived from day of birth,
> Spare a daughter's shame and anguish and receive her, Mother Earth!
> If in duty and devotion I have labored undefiled,
> Mother Earth! who bore this woman, once again receive thy child!
> If in truth unto my husband I have proved a faithful wife,
> Mother Earth! relieve thy Sita from the burden of this life![17]

Sita, like Eve, is, as a mythic symbol, linked to fertility and to agriculture but she has much in common with some of the women of classical myths. Like Persephone, the daughter of Ceres or Demeter, she is connected to agriculture by virtue of her parentage. (Ceres is the goddess of agriculture). Like Eurydice, Persephone, and Helen she is the cause of an anguished search, and like Helen she is the cause of a war. She differs from Eurydice and Persephone in that she does not go to the underworld. She is like Persephone and Helen in that she was abducted by someone who was unlawfully in love with her. The common element, the archetypal substance, of all of these myths is one of the loss of love, or of a loved one, and of search and recovery. In its broadest sense then the *Ramayana* is one of these stories. Because it is closer to being a genuine folk epic by virtue of the centuries of growth and the accretions of time that adhere to the basic story it is tempting to regard Sita as being more of an ideal type, more of an archetype, than MIlton's Eve. It is, of course, possible that Sita is as fully individualized and less of an ideal type than we expect from the nature of the epic.

If Milton's Eve is, arguably, a projection of Milton's ideal woman and hence is truly Milton's Eve, is Sita also in some sense a projection of an ideal and is she as sharply differentiated as Eve in *Paradise Lost?*

Sita's first appearance in the *Ramayana* occurs at the wedding and Janak introduces her in the following words:

> This is Sita child of Janak, dearer unto him than life
> Henceforth sharer of thy virtue, be she, prince, thy faithful wife
> Of thy weal and woe partaker, be she thine in every land,
> Cherish her in joy and sorrow, clasp her hand within thy hand,
> As the shadow to the substance, to her lord is faithful wife,
> And my Sita best of women follows then in death or life![18]

Several things are noticeable here. First Sita is referred to as faithful, an epithet which is applied to her with great regularity. The term faithful wife is used twice in six lines; this usage of the phrase foreshadows Sita's trials and her resistance to Ravan's overtures. Secondly, the wife is compared to the husband's shadow. this usage suggests that the wife and the husband are inextricably linked, a linkage that resembles that of Genesis, "flesh of my flesh". It also suggests a secondary role, that of shadow, to

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[16] Romesh C. Dutt, trans., *The Ramayana and the Mahabharata*, (London: Dent, 1910) 139.

[17] Dutt, 151–52.

[18] Dutt, 10.

the masculine substance. The poet will return to these ideas later, when Sita tells Rama that she will accompany him into exile she says:

> For my mother often taught me and my father often spake,
> That he home the wedded woman doth beside her husband make,
> As the shadow to the substance, to her lord is the faithful wife,
> And she parts not from her consort till she parts with fleeting life.[19]

It is Sita herself that uses the comparison of the wife to the husband's shadow and uses the epithet "faithful wife". Later on, when they cross the Ganges, Sita is described as "pious Sita", an epithet that is repeated when they cross the Jumna. Sita is further characterized as "soft-eyed" and "sweet-eyed".[20]

The effect of these accumulated epithets is to give a portrait of Sita that is highly idealized. She is characterized in terms of her salient qualities, which are her gentleness, her piety, and the softness and sweetness of her eyes. This last quality is probably linked to her gentleness as described by the poet. The only times that Sita breaks out of this idealized portrait are when she urges Rama to go after the deer and when she urges Lakshman to go after Rama. In the first instance she says:

> I would tend this thing of beauty,—sharer of my forest life!
> I have witnessed in this jungle graceful creatures passing fair,
> *Chowri* and the gentle roebuck, antelope of beauty rare,
> I have seen the lithesome monkey sporting in the branches' shade,
> Grizzly bear that feeds on *Mahua*, and the deer that crops the blade
> I have marked marked the stately will bull dash into the deepest wood
> And the *Kinnar* strange and wondrous as in sylvan wilds he stood
> But these eyes have never rested on a form so wondrous fair
> On a shape so full of beauty, decked with tints so rich and rare….
> If alive that beauteous object thou canst capture in thy way
> As thy Sita's sweet companion in these woodlands he will stay….[21]

Later on she says that if Rama cannot capture the deer alive that he should bring her its body to use as a rug. When Rama goes after the deer and Sita hears what she thinks is a cry from an injured Rama the poet says of her:

> Sparkled Sita's eye in anger, frenzy marked her speech and word,
> For a woman's sense is clouded by the danger of her lord….[22]

Sita, in these passages, has fallen victim to desire and anger. She is consumed with a desire for the deer, a desire that is so strong that it doesn't matter if she only has the dead body of the deer. She is angry with Lakshman because of his refusal to go after Rama. Both of these emotions are viewed in Hinduism as disturbances that

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[19] Dutt, 34.

[20] Dutt, 43, 47, 65 *et passim*.

[21] Dutt, 80.

[22] Dutt, 82.

hinder divine union. Krishna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is of a somewhat later date than the *Ramayana*, says:

> There are men who have no vision, and yet they speak many words. they follow the letter of the Vedas, and the they say: 'there is nothing but this.' Their soul is warped with selfish desires, and their heaven is a selfish desire. They have prayers for pleasures and power, the reward of which is earthly rebirth.[23]

A little later the poet gives the cause of anger:

> When a man dwells on the pleasures of sense, attraction for them arises in him. From attraction arises desire, the lust of possession, and this leads to passion, to anger.[24]

The last quote perfectly exemplifies Sita's actions and the results arising from them. She is attracted to the deer by its beauty, despite being told that it is most likely an illusion, a product of *maya;* she then desires to have the deer and sends Rama out to look for it; when Rama seems to be hurt she sends Lakshman out to look for him and when he hesitates she becomes angry.

It is as a result of Sita's unprotected vulnerability that Ravan is able to kidnap her and take her to Lanka and as a result of this the war between Rama and Lanka ensues. The situation here parallels that in *Paradise Lost*. There is a desire for a good that proves illusory and there is a separation of the woman and her protector during which the woman is vulnerable to temptation, as in *Paradise Lost*, or to capture as in the *Ramayana*.

Both stories have a similar thematic content: loss is engendered by a woman's desire for something other than the highest good and as a result a number of unhappy consequences ensue, in one case the loss of Eden and the inheritance of Original sin, and in the other a terrible war. Unlike Eve in *Paradise Lost*, however, Sita in the *Ramayana* is individualized only after she has lost her temper at Lakshman. Milton's Eve is characterized by her growth from the moment of her creation as in her address to Adam in Book IV:

> That day I oft remember, when from sleep
> I first awaked, and found myself reposed
> Under a shade on flowers, much wond'ring where
> And what I was, whence thither brought, and how.
> Not distant far from thence a murmuring sound
> Of waters issued from a cave and spread
> Into a liquid plain, then stood unmoved
> Pure as th' expanse of heav'n; I thither went
> With unexperienced, and laid me down
> On the green bank, to look into the clear
> Smooth lake, that to me seemed another sky.
> As I bent down to look, just opposite,

[23] Juan Mascaró, trans., *The Bhagavad-Gita,* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1962) 52.

[24] Mascaró, 54.

A shape within the wat'ry gleam appeared
bending to look on me, I started back,
It started back, but pleased I soon returned
Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love; there I had fixed
Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire.... (IV, 449–66)

Shows an incipient narcissism but Eve, warned by the voice quickly outgrows this as McColley points out.[25] Sita, on the other hand, never, except for the incidents leading up to her capture by Ravan, never deviates from perfection. Her final call to her mother, the earth, is a witness not just to her chastity but to her moral perfection.

Milton's Eve then has affinities with the Biblical archetype and the image that she has received from previous poets and artists but she is sharply differentiated from any of the traits of Eve as seen by the larger culture. She works at tending the Garden, she is chaste in her sexual relations with Adam, she is more than simply a temptress or an object of desire. Her eating the fruit is, like the Jungian anima, linked with the desire for knowledge but it is these qualities of individuation and differentiation that make her more than merely a cultural symbol or archetype. To the extent that she is an archetype or symbol of an ideal she must be regarded as Milton's portrait of an ideal woman in both her unfallen and in her potentially regenerated state.

Sita is somewhat different. She is more of an ideal character and less sharply individuated than Eve. The myth of the field furrow that lies behind her attribution of parentage to the earth is presumably an agricultural one and the symbolism of the child of the earth is common to other, particularly Classical, myths. The psychological reality that lies behind the story of Sita and her loss is the same one that lies behind the myths of Ceres and Persephone, Orpheus and Eurydice, and Admetus and Alcestis, the loss of a loved one and a journey undertaken to recover the loved one, a journey that involves war, as in the *Ramayana* or a crossing over into the house of death, as in the classical myths. the sense of loss is also present in the Biblical myth of Eden. Since the *Ramayana* is apparently the work of more than one hand the individual elements, the elements of the author's personality or of his ideals and aspirations that he might project upon his characters, tend to be suppressed so that what emerges is a folk epic in an almost literal sense. It is because of this that Sita is less sharply individualized than Eve. She is also, as a collective effort, closer to the cultural archetype than Milton's Eve.

The two female characters of these epics thus derive from common or archetypal sources but the character in the literary, or secondary epic, is less symbolic and more individual than the character of the folk, or primary epic. It is through the individual poet's capacity for projecting his own ideals onto the character that the one becomes less of an archetype and more of a flesh and blood human being.

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[25] McColley, 74.

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