

Doctor of Destiny



MD

FANTASY

THROUGH FOUR CENTURIES, whenever their minds were filled with foreboding, men have turned to a physician-astrologer to find in his rhymed predictions some hope or solace.

He was a man named Michel de Nostredame, known in history as Nostradamus, whose followers firmly believed that he predicted events into the 40th century. In his own time, in the 16th century, he was both honored as a physician and feared as a seer of uncanny powers.

PHYSICIAN. Michel de Nostredame was born in Saint-Rémy in 1503, the second of three sons; his father was an educated man and a notary public, his younger brother became an attorney and member of the Provençal parliament and wrote a history of the poets and troubadours of Provence. As a boy, Michel was studious and possessed of a remarkable memory; his learned grandfathers taught him Latin, Greek, Hebrew, astronomy and mathematics, sent him to Avignon to study philosophy and then to Montpellier's famous school of medicine where François Rabelais had preceded him about a decade earlier.

The medical profession came to him from his grandfathers, of whom one was physician to René of Anjou, Count of Provence, titular king of Naples, Sicily and Jerusalem, and the other to René's son Jean, Duke of Calabria. Good King René, as he was called, maintained the chivalric tradition of Provence; he loved food, wine and knightly balladry, dabbled in Eastern science and attracted Arab scholars and Levantine merchants to his court. According to some accounts, the court physicians Pierre de Nostredame and Jean de Saint-Rémy were Jewish; their son and daughter, Nostradamus' parents, embraced Catholicism when Provence fell to the French crown after René's death. Nostradamus is said to have traced his ancestry to the Hebrew tribe of Issachar, traditionally gifted in prophecy.



Title page of Nostradamus' *La Grand' Pronostication*, 1557, published in Paris with royal approval. Opposite, a portrait of the physician-seer in 1550.

*Let those who read these lines with ripe reflection ponder;
Let the vulgar, ignorant and profane keep off their hands:
Let all astrologers, numbskulls, barbarians stand apart.
Cursed be he of Heaven who acts in other wise. NOSTRADAMUS*



Drawing, opposite top, shows Nostradamus foretelling that each of Catherine de' Medici's sons would mount a throne. All did and all died early. Standing beside the seer are Henry II and Catherine. Engraving, opposite bottom, shows the death of Henry II in a joust, as Nostradamus is said to have predicted earlier.

Michel was 21 and in his second year of medical studies when an outbreak of plague swept through southern France and the school was closed. The young student set out to help the stricken, avoiding the cities where noted physicians were bleeding and purging victims in the conventional therapy of the time. He tramped through the countryside, treated the sick in villages and farmhouses with such success that his reputation spread before him and he was welcomed as far west as Bordeaux.

As a medical novice, he was secretive about his treatment; years later, when he was again called to treat plague, he remarked that the standard methods were of no value for this disease. Modern authorities suggest that since the actual cause of death was often dehydration, through edema and hemorrhage, Nostradamus may have saved lives simply by abstaining from the conventional bloodletting and purgation.*

His medical mission continued for four years. When the plague subsided, he returned to Montpellier, passed his examinations, which were oral and held in public, to popular acclaim and was invested with the four-cornered hat, ermine-trimmed robe, golden girdle and ring of the physician.

At the demand of fellow students he was appointed to the faculty, but he was restless and after a semester of lecturing he resigned and again took to the road. His fame as a plague physician brought him patients and invitations to settle in city after city; he stopped in Agen as a guest at the château of the leading family, fell in love with a young lady of the town, married and established himself as head of a household and a practicing physician. When three years later his wife and two young sons died of an undesignated illness, he set forth again to seek consolation in solitary travel.

For the next ten years, Nostradamus wandered through southern France and Italy; in a journal (now lost) he evaluated the state of hospitals and medical practice in the cities through which he passed. His outspoken criticism of mercenary physicians in Avignon and ill-administered pharmacies in Marseilles won him many enemies. For three years, he worked with a physician of repute in Dauphiny, either in research or practice; he is also known to have spent some time in Milan,

*Modern treatment of plague includes a high fluid intake.

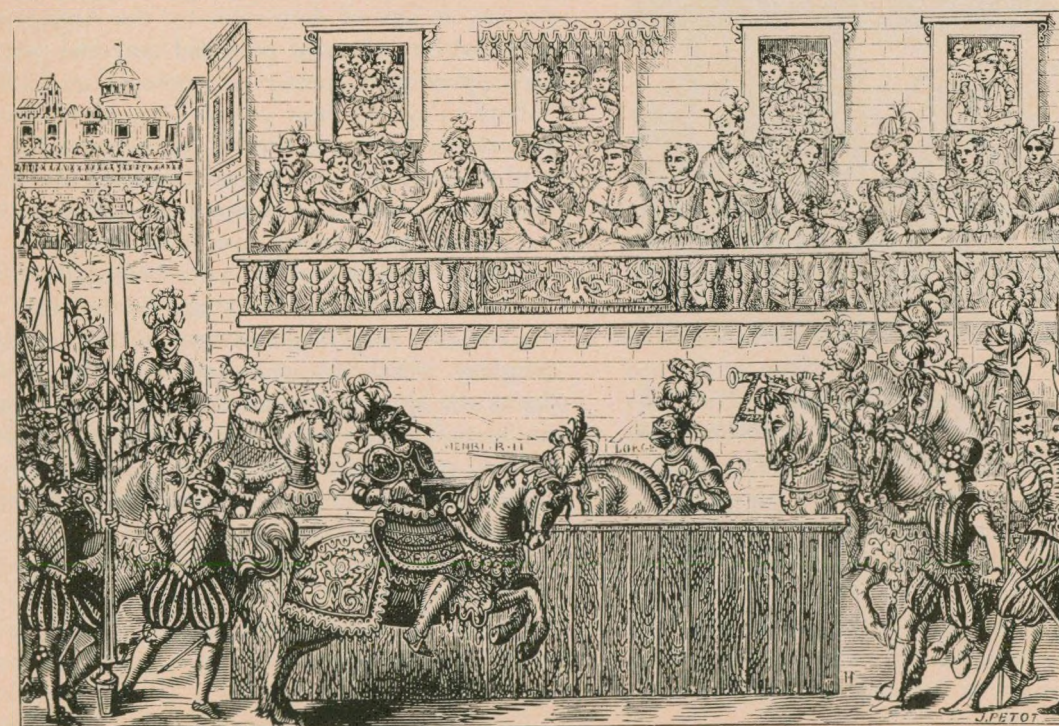
Genoa, Venice, and other leading cities.

The relative secrecy of these travels has been ascribed to the hazardous new studies in which he was presumably engaged: in this period, scientific investigation was readily linked with the black arts and subject to inquiry by the Inquisition. Chemistry was generally understood as alchemy; judicial astrology was accepted as "celestial science," the geocentric universe of Ptolemy was still unquestioned. Copernicus' description of the solar system, although not yet published, may have come to Nostradamus' ears among astrologers and physicians in Italy. Nostradamus' astrologic calculations of later years revealed that he measured planetary movements from equatorial rather than zodiacal armils, also that he calculated from elliptic rather than circular orbits and took account of the law of gravitation, indications that as an astronomer he may have been well in advance of his time.

In 1543, he returned to southern France in search of a permanent home: he declined invitations from Marseilles and other cities, settled in Salon and found a second wife. Anne Ponsard Gemelle (or Jumelle) came of good family and was said to be very rich; the couple moved into a sizable house in the Place de la Poissonière, with ample grounds bounded by a mill on one side and another private dwelling on the other. Of the six children who were subsequently born, the eldest, César, developed literary and artistic talents; a traditional portrait, taken from a sculptured bust by César, shows Nostradamus in his physician's hat and robe, with large thoughtful eyes in an ascetic face framed by a full beard. Another son became a Capuchin friar and was said to have inherited some part of his father's prophetic gift.

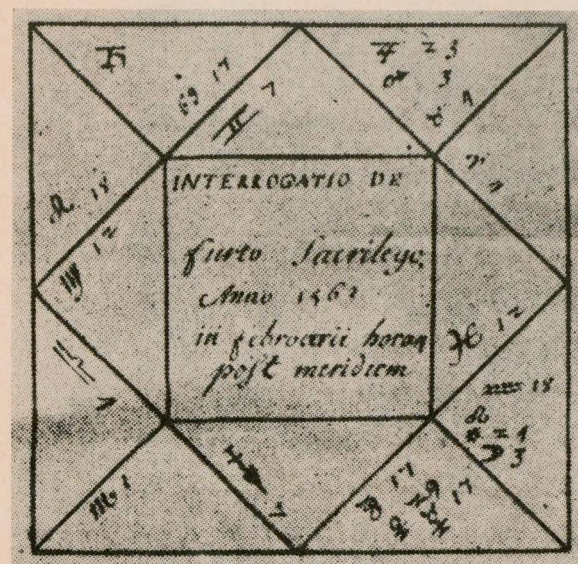
In 1546 came news of fresh outbreaks of *charbon Provençal*, the Black Death form of plague. Nostradamus was sent for by the town council of Aix; when the plague subsided, the citizens paid him handsomely for his nine months' service and awarded him a life pension. Lyons called him next, with similar success; his work is gratefully recorded in the municipal chronicles of both cities but his unorthodox treatments gave rise to rumors of sorcery and charlatanism.

In his own account of the plague, Nostradamus observed that neither bleeding nor medical cordials were effective; his sole remedy was a troche made mainly of roses freshly picked at dawn,



together with a distillation of green cypress wood, iris of Florence, clove, sweet flag and ligni aloes; the ingredients were blended, shaped into small patties and dried in the shade. He wrote: "All who carried it in the mouth were preserved."

ORACLE. Some said that Nostradamus prophesied by witchcraft and cured by sorcery, that those whose lives he saved would pay the penalty in everlasting fire. But in a century when witch-burning was a commonplace, no official doubt was ever raised during his lifetime of the respectability of short, plump, rosy-cheeked Dr. Nostradamus with his grandfatherly long beard, his cheerful good humor and his occasional irascible temper. He was a devout Catholic, with no sympathy for the freethinking followers of Mar-



Astronomic figure prepared by Nostradamus for the Canons of the cathedral of Orange in reference to the recovery of sacred objects stolen from the cathedral.

tin Luther; he prayed, fasted, gave generously to the poor, was devoted to his comfortable wife Anne and his six children, three boys and three girls.

In his study at the top of his house in Salon, he wrote several works in the tradition of learned medical men: a treatise on cosmetics (*Traité des Fardemens, la Vraie et Parfaict Embellissement de la Face*, published at Lyons in 1552), another on jams (*Des Confitures*, 1557), a paraphrase of Galen (1558); the two treatises were combined in a posthumous publication (*A Little Work of Several Exquisite Recipes*) which has been described as a forerunner of Brillat-Savarin. The second of the two volumes contained his description of the plague at Aix and the formula for his antiplague troche.

About 1550, he began to issue a series of annual almanacs, in which one scholarly source said: "He adroitly mingled the true and the dubious, reproduced therein certain of his recipes and announced impassively the direst catastrophes for the new year." Finally in 1555, he published his first book of prognostications, *Les Vrayes Centuries*, a collection of rhymed quatrains in groups of a hundred. He projected an eventual work of seven centuries, later expanded it to 12; the first edition comprised either seven or three and one-half centuries. He dedicated the work to his infant son César, born early in the same year.

The next year came a royal summons to Paris and an audience with Henry II. According to César's history of Provence written many decades later, the king was prompted by his queen, Catherine de' Medici, a delver in the occult and herself a skilled astrologer. The long journey was made painful by Nostradamus' gout and arthritis; what service he performed at court is not known but probably he practiced judicial astrology and drew up decumbency charts (astrologic prognoses) for members of the court who were ill. He returned home laden with gold écus and two remunerative appointments, as physician-in-ordinary and privy counselor to the royal family.

In 1558, he published the second, enlarged edition of the *Centuries*, dedicating the work this time to the king with a lengthy epistle which itself bristled with prophecies. He predicted wars, famines, pestilences, naval battles that would turn the seas red, strange birds crying in the air, an age of desolation by the Antichrist, followed by an age of gold and universal peace. He appended a species of apologia in Latin: "Many things, O most potent king, of the most remarkable kind are shortly to happen, but I neither could nor would weave them all into this epistle; but in order to comprehend certain facts, a few frightful destinies must be set down."

Nostradamus is credited with having foretold the bizarre manner of the king's death when, at the end of a long day's journey in honor of his daughter Elizabeth's marriage to Philip II of Spain, the king challenged the young captain of his Scots Guards, later the Earl of Montgomery, to break one more lance with him.

Nostradamus' quatrain, reputedly one of those published in 1555, read:

*The young lion shall overcome the old
On martial field in single combat;
He will pierce his eyes in a cage of gold,
Two strokes in one, then to die, a cruel
death.*

Both combatants bore the device of the lion;

the king wore a gilded helmet ("cage of gold"). Montgomery's lance struck below the king's vizor, shattered and drove a splinter into Henry's right eye and brain (lance and splinter, "two strokes in one"). Henry lingered in agony for ten days, bearing out Nostradamus' prophecy of a cruel death.

Catherine allegedly demanded of Nostradamus during his visit a forecast for her three young sons; he answered ambiguously that each of the princes would mount a throne. This pleasing prophecy was tragically fulfilled: Francis II, already married to Mary, Queen of Scots, succeeded his father, reigned for one year and died at 16; her second son, Charles IX, died at 24; her third son, Henry III, was assassinated at 38 after a disastrous reign which ended the Valois dynasty.

For Catherine, Nostradamus prophesied a more promising future: she would mourn her husband for seven years, then enjoy a long life and regency. This came to pass; when she celebrated the end of her mourning by a progress, she and Charles, who by then had succeeded his brother, visited Nostradamus in Salon in 1566, at which time the boy king confirmed (or first granted, according to some authorities) the appointments as royal physician and counselor.

The king followed this visit with a summons to Arles; Nostradamus' arthritis and gout had increased in severity but he made his second difficult journey at a royal command. He returned with a rich reward, presumably having executed some mission for either the king or the queen mother.

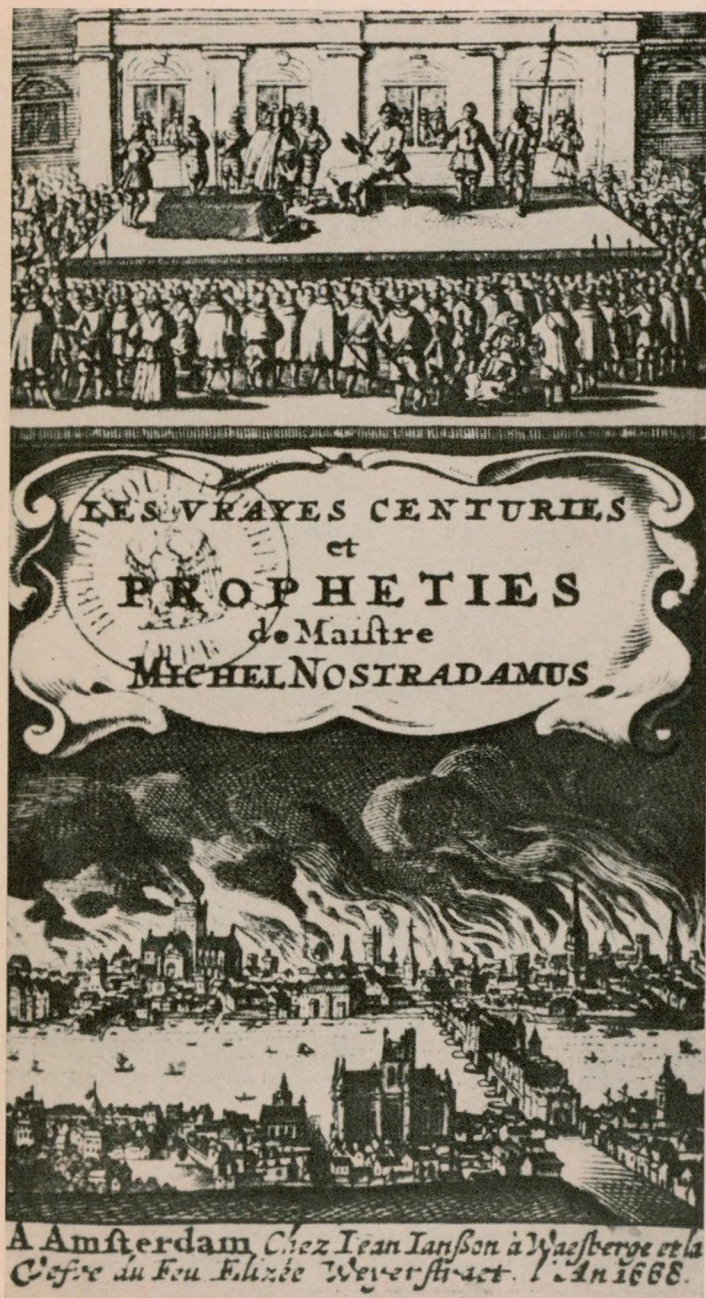
In mid-June, shortly after his return, Nostradamus developed dropsy. Among his quatrains is this one:

*Returned from an embassy, with a gift from
the king, all in order,
He will do no more; he will have gone to God;
By nearest relatives, friends, blood brothers,
Found dead, near to bed and bench.*

That he foretold his own death to the day and hour was afterward asserted by his disciple Jean-Aymés de Chavigny, a doctor of law and theology who resigned a magistracy at Beaune to join Nostradamus' household as his secretary. According to Chavigny, Nostradamus the year before had written in his copy of the *Ephemerides* of Jean Stadius, beside the date June 30, *Hic prope mors est* (Here death is near). On June 30, he summoned the notary and made his will. Bidding his pupil goodnight on July 1, he said, "You will not see me alive at sunrise." The following morning, July 2, 1566, Chavigny found his master dead at his bench.



Seventeenth century monument in Brittany commemorates end of a plague. One cause of Nostradamus' high reputation was his successful treatment of plague victims.



Title page of an edition of Nostradamus' *Les Vrayes Centuries* published in Amsterdam in 1688. Illustrations show beheading of England's King Charles I and the London fire, both of which he is said to have foretold.

Nostradamus died a relatively wealthy man, possessed of house and land, furnishings and assets of 3444 écus in gold; a precise man, he described the money coin by coin in his will. He listed bequests to religious orders and the poor, specified the number of écus each for his widow and three daughters, left his books, letters, notes and manuscripts to the son who would prove most studious.

As he had requested, so that none might walk over his grave, his body was interred upright within the wall of the church of the Franciscan friars (Les Cordeliers) in Salon. His wife had a marble tablet affixed, bearing his portrait, arms and an epitaph in Latin:

Here lie the bones of the most illustrious Michael Nostradamus, whose almost divine pen, in the judgment of all mortals, alone was worthy to record, under the influence of the stars, the future events of the entire world. He lived 62 years, 6 months, 17 days. He died at Salon in the year 1566. Posterity, disturb not his rest. Anne Ponsard Gemelle hopes for her husband's true felicity.

THE SECRET. In the dedication epistle of his prophecies Nostradamus tenderly addressed his infant firstborn: "Thy late coming, César Nostradamus my son, hath caused me to bestow much time in continual and nocturnal vigils, that I might leave a memorial after my death, to the common benefit of mankind, concerning the things that the Divine Being hath revealed to me by the revolutions of the stars."

He pictured the scene of his revelations as he waited alone at night in his secret study, bending over a brass tripod. "A slender flame, leaping out of the solitude, makes me pronounce what it is not vain to believe." He also at times used what was probably a forked divining rod.

He told his son: "There are secrets that are received by the subtle spirit of fire, by which the understanding is moved to contemplate the highest celestial bodies."

He ascribed his prophetic sight to a combination of judicial astrology, divine inspiration and continual calculation, then added somewhat ambiguously that although this occult philosophy (astrology) was not forbidden, he could never be persuaded to meddle with it. In fear, and to protect César from later temptation, after reading certain ancient and secret volumes, he consigned them to the flames, in which they burned with an unusual brilliance, like lightning.

Identifying these secret volumes has absorbed Nostradamians for many decades; a persistent theory is that they came to Nostradamus from one

of his Jewish savant ancestors, possibly sacred writings rescued from the temple in Jerusalem at its destruction,* carried into exile and preserved through the wanderings of Jews for 1500 years. Less imaginative is the hypothesis that Nostradamus in his own lifetime had acquired books on astrology, alchemy and magic whose possession might prove a danger to his son in later years.

Nostradamus and his prophecies escaped censure while he lived and for two centuries more; although the *Index librorum prohibitorum* was established during his lifetime, the prophecies were not included until 1781.

THE BOOK. A copy of the original 1555 edition or part of it, titled *Les Prophéties de M^e Michel Nostradamus*, existed in a private collection as late as 1840, when it was examined by the French scholar Eugène Barest; its imprint, *Lyon, chez Macé Bonhomme, MDLV*, was followed by an unusual statement of royal permission and a two-year copyright granted by the seneschal of Lyons. The copy contained three complete centuries and 53 quatrains of a fourth. Also examined by Barest was a copy of the enlarged 1558 edition probably printed in 1566 which, until the French Revolution, had belonged to the Benedictine monastery of Saint Maur; it was in two parts, the first containing the letter to César and seven centuries, the second the letter to Henry II and centuries VIII, IX and X.

Editions of varying degrees of authenticity were numerous in France for the next 100 years: Nostradamus' disciple Chavigny labored for 28 years after his master's death on editions and explanations, combined with biographic notes; these appeared in 1594, 1596, 1603. A 1605 edition was prepared for Henry IV, a 1629 edition bears the imprint of the printer-in-ordinary to his son and successor Louis XIII. A famous edition, dated Amsterdam 1668, has a title page engraved with scenes of the beheading of Charles I (1649) and the Great Fire of London (1666), indicating that both were among Nostradamus' predictions.

In 1672 appeared the classic English version, translated and annotated by Théophile de Garncières, *The Prophecies or Prognostications of Michael Nostradamus*. French editions continued at infrequent intervals in the 18th and 19th centuries; an American revival of interest coincided with the years of the second world war.

Despite scholarly efforts, the number of quatrains actually published by Nostradamus remains in doubt; even more dubious is the authorship of many that have been included in later editions.

*In 70 A.D.; Holy of Holies, when opened, was found to be empty.



"The young red king will take the hierarchy," above, a contemporary British cartoon commenting on a Nostradamus prophecy and the rise of Napoleon. Escutcheon shows guillotined head of Louis XVI. Below, "A doddering old man will arise head of France. The country will be divided and conceded to gendarmes." A wartime Australian cartoon by Aria showing the pertinence of a Nostradamus prophecy to Marshal Pétain's regime.





Fountain and statue of Nostradamus in Salon, the Provençal town where he settled after 1543 and lived with his second wife, Anne, and their six children.

THE PROPHECIES. Like all oracles, Nostradamus elected to baffle his would-be interpreters with puns, anagrams and a deliberate scrambling of chronologic order. The result has been a 400-year game in which each player has read in the quatrains the events of his own time; the same verses have been deciphered by 19th-century experts as referring to Napoleon, by 20th-century readers to Hitler; earlier renderings have pointed to Cromwell. A single quatrain has meant to one reader the St. Bartholomew's Eve massacre of 1572, to another the death of Mussolini in 1945; another verse is read to mean Cromwell's death and the return of the monarchy, or alternatively Hitler's supposed death and his return.* Among other variances are these: one interpreter sees fighting around Rome at some unspecified time where another beholds an accurate forecast of the Maginot Line; one understands a literal account of a freak human birth where another reads a vision of supersonic weapons. Nostradamus did refer to "armies fighting in the air"; the prophecy of airplanes was also made by Leonardo da Vinci, among others.

Nostradamians have tackled the prophecies with the tools of cryptology, numerology, astrology and pyramidalism (prophetic lore based on measurements in the Pyramids). Anagrammatic techniques have disclosed that "Nizaram" means Mazarin and thereby assigns the prophecy to Louis XIV's time; also that in one quatrain the apparently meaningless syllables "Pau, nay, loron" conceal the name of Napoleon (nay-pau-loron).

Verses have been read as prophecies of the American Revolution, the glorious future of "Hesperia" (Land of the West) or the United States, New York City's water pollution, an earthquake that will one day shake Manhattan. Interpreters in the years 1940-1945 found numerous verses predicting the war, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pearl Harbor and the conflict with Japan; reassuring was the discovery in one quatrain of the line: "The Germans will succumb wholly."

Prognostications of events that are still to come have been less comforting: in store are natural catastrophes and political calamities that will involve all the world's leading cultures, the rise of a world leader whether savior or tyrant, finally a date for Judgment Day in the year 7000.

SUMMING UP. By Nostradamus: Men who come after may see and know that these events have certainly come to pass, although they are veiled in cloud: *Sed quando submoventa erit ignorantia*,† then all will be made clear.



*After seven years.

†But when the time comes for the removal of ignorance.