

# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROVINCE OF THE READER IN *HAMLET*

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## Introduction

The baffling diversity of responses to *Hamlet*, tainted by philosophy, psychology, religion, politics, history and ethics, only conduces to the ever-increasing complications of the play. In *Hamlet*, the imagination runs wild and travels far beyond the text, to the extent that the reader perceives things that stand not within but utterly without the text. In reading the play, the reader finds in themselves hidden meanings and pent-up feelings and relates them to the play. In the process of reading *Hamlet*, the reader's imagination fails to grasp the logic of events. Therefore, instead of relating the events to their world, the reader relates their own world to the text. As a result, the world perceived by the reader is not Hamlet's but the reader's. In other words, every reader brings their own world to the play. This study seeks to show how the reader can detach themselves from *Hamlet* and let their imagination run free. It also shows that the reality achieved by the reader in the course of reading the play is only the reality that dwells in the innermost recesses of their own mind.

## Hamlet the Character

By general consent, Hamlet is one of the most complicated characters in the history of Western literature. With the development of psychoanalysis, Hamlet the character has been widely treated as a real person, rather than one created by a human mind. Even the greatest scholars have taken Hamlet out of the text and analysed and psychoanalysed him as a human personality, albeit with little success as to the discovery of the real motivations of the character.

McGinn gives an interesting description of his character:

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He is, in short, a mass of conflicting impulses, or perhaps a man in whom (what we think of as) ordinary human impulse is replaced by soaring intellect and imagination; at any rate, he is impossible to pin down. He cannot be encapsulated; he cannot be reduced to type; he defies all classification; he resists comprehension. To speak of Hamlet's "character" is already to misrepresent him. Hamlet is not so much a human being as a universe—though in an all-too-recognizable human form. We feel we know him, but he eludes our understanding. He contains everything, but consists of nothing. He approximates to the condition of paradox.

(2007, 41)

Varying responses to Hamlet as a character stem from his manifold contradictions in action and thought. There are oftentimes extremely opposite reactions on this score. Some scholars elevate him to the level of a messiah tasked with saving the world, while others reduce him to the level of a murderer. These responses, though contradictory, testify to the grandeur of Shakespeare's skill in inventing one of the most complicated characters ever. Interestingly, Goddard compares Hamlet with the author: "Here is the greatest character in all literature—or so at least many have called him. Here is the Shakespearean character who most resembles Shakespeare, the only one ... whom 'we can conceive of as the author of Shakespeare's plays'" (Goddard 1960, 344). This explains:

why Hamlet is the most fascinating character, and the most inexhaustible, in all imaginative literature. What else should he be, if the world's greatest poet ... put his own soul straight into this creation, and when he wrote Hamlet's speeches wrote down his own heart?

(Ibid., 357)

Until the early twentieth century, critics and scholars alike showed favourable responses to the character, viewing him as an ideal person. Yet, with the burgeoning of modernism and the development of psychoanalysis, critics tended to analyse the character in light of what they presumed could help unravel the mystery behind his procrastination.

A most aggressive reaction to the play came from T. S. Eliot, who argued that: "Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem" (1997). T. S. Eliot decided that *Hamlet* was a:

failure because he detected in it the signs of an unsuccessful struggle against what he called “intractable material.” Shakespeare, he said, wanted to write about something else, the effect of a mother’s guilt upon her son, but forced himself to impose this motive on the old revenge story someone asked him to spruce up—and failed. This is wrong unless one accepts Eliot’s questionable idea of the play’s theme, but he was right to insist on the layered nature of *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare created a complicated and self-contradictory character at the peril of evoking opposite and contradictory responses. He might even conceivably have imagined a reader like Eliot to accuse him of artistic failure and bafflement in his creation. In terms of this assumption, we should say that *Hamlet* is the most ambitious work by Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

From the outset, Shakespeare frustrates the reader’s expectation in his depiction of the character. Hamlet speaks with an alacrity that requires an agile reader to follow it. Early in the play, when Gertrude criticises him with, “Why seems it (his father’s death) so particular with thee?” (1.2: 75), Hamlet responds with alacrity, “Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not ‘seems’.” (1.2: 76). He is immediately depicted as a character who observes, analyses, and knows things for certain. The complication in the character becomes manifest to the reader in the same scene in his conversation with Gertrude: “But I have that within which passeth show;/ These but the trappings and the suits of woe” (1.2: 85–6).

Hamlet is implying that what is inside him passes show, or let us say that it will not be easy for us to discover the workings of his mind. How can Eliot evaluate Hamlet in a formulated phrase? According to Honigman, Hamlet’s, “situation is unusual (a father murdered by an uncle, a mother the murderer’s dotting wife, a Ghost calling for revenge), so what would be the appropriate emotion?” (2002, 64). It is true that when we start reading the play we encounter a character who is overwhelmed with great sorrow. Yet, it should be taken into consideration that the character is dejected more over his mother’s hasty marriage than his father’s death. A fact ignored by Gertrude and many readers about Hamlet is that he is not actually mourning the death of a loved father. Rather, he is mourning the

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from Eliot’s judgment that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure, one of the strangest commentaries comes from W. H. Auden in his Ibsen essay, *Genius and Apostle*, which contrasts Hamlet as a mere actor to Don Quixote as the antithesis of an actor. He says that Hamlet does not have any “faith in God and in himself. So, he must define his existence in terms of others, e.g., ‘I am the man whose mother married his uncle who murdered his father.’ He would like to become what the Greek tragic hero is, a creature of situation. Hence his inability to act, for he can only ‘act,’ i.e., play at possibilities” (Bloom 1989, 62).

hasty remarriage of his mother. He actually laments the degenerated state of a human being who is inferior to a beast. In this respect, his feeling is one of anger more than sorrow. This is one good reason why the Ghost warns him not to, “let thy soul contrive/ Against thy mother aught” (1.5: 85–8). So, Hamlet’s primary concern is Gertrude’s hasty remarriage. The cynical attitude of Hamlet in this scene creates a sense of hatred in the reader towards Claudius, whom he describes as a satyr. Shakespeare barely gives any chance to the reader/audience to decide for themselves if Claudius really deserves his contempt and hatred. Shakespeare consciously anchors the reader’s mind to instil his manifold observations on the myriad problems of life and eternity and build a sense of trust, although the imagination of the reader eventually runs wild in a mesh of individual interpretations and meanings.

From the outset, Hamlet expresses his contempt for the world. His morbid vision of the world as, “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable” and as, “an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed” (1.2: 133–5) leaves no doubt in our minds that life is not liveable in the hero’s Cimmerian dark world, unless a ray of light breaks upon this darkness. The only hope for salvation comes from the Ghost, who apparently comes from “the undiscovered country” that Hamlet is prone to question. Hamlet is a soul in torment who has already lost all interest in the affairs of the world, and wallows in self-pity and suicide, regretting that, “the Everlasting has fixed His canon ’gainst self-slaughter!” (1.2: 132). The Ghost, though his intentions might be questionable, gives Hamlet a good reason to live a meaningful life and exhaust all his potential on that score.

Before the appearance of the Ghost, the reader is confronted with a philosopher brooding on the human condition. Yet, with the appearance of the Ghost, his personality assumes heroic dimensions, as he is tasked with exacting revenge on the murderer of his father and eradicating evil on a larger scale. Although he remains largely inactive during the play, he is the only one who can save a world made rotten by incest and corruption. The reader’s expectations are frequently shattered by the hero’s inactiveness in relation to the revenge. The fact is that Hamlet is reluctant to assume the role of the hero, although he promises the Ghost: “I, with wings as swift/ As meditation or the thoughts of love,/ May sweep to my revenge” (1.5: 29–31). Initially, Hamlet seems ready to take revenge on the murderer, as we learn from the Ghost’s “I find thee apt” speech. His firm resolution to carry out the act is clearly reflected in the following lines:

Remember thee!

Ay, thou poor Ghost, while memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee!

Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
 That youth and observation copied there;  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,  
 Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!

(1.5: 95–104)

At this point, the reader acquires the conviction that Hamlet will sweep to his revenge with speedy wings as he has promised the Ghost. Soon after the disappearance of the Ghost, Hamlet tells Horatio that, “it is an honest Ghost” (1.5: 138). By now, the reader has come to believe the existence of the Ghost and the truth of his words on the testimony of Hamlet. In other words, Shakespeare has succeeded in giving credibility to the Ghost. Hamlet puts on an antic disposition in order to ascertain beyond question the guilt of his uncle and exact his revenge.

Yet, the rupture in the interplay between the text and the reader emerges after the play-within-the-play, which is intended to “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2: 558). He actually does catch the conscience of the King, who goes to pray in remorse for what he has done. The play actually proves the guilt of his uncle, and Hamlet, who is now overwhelmed with ecstasy over his discovery, should rush to take revenge, as he says, “I’ll take the Ghost’s word for a thousand pound” (3.2: 260–1). Now that certainty as to the crime is achieved, Hamlet should no longer hesitate. Yet, no real revenge happens. No action takes place. He takes the knife, goes to his room, finds him praying and thinks to himself:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;  
 And now I’ll do’t. And so he goes to heaven;  
 And so am I revenged. That would be scann’d:  
 A villain kills my father; and for that,  
 I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
 To heaven.  
 O, this is hire and salary, not revenge.

(3.4: 73–9).

Now the question, which arises in the mind of the reader, is: If Hamlet is so firm a believer, why does he justify the charge to revenge? After all, Hamlet will send his own soul to hell if he commits murder. Besides, Claudius does not really repent. True repentance, theologians argue, involves a change of heart and of mind. There is a change of heart in Claudius but there is no change of mind, as he does not vow to take steps

in the remission of his sins. The repentance process consists of feeling sincere regret or sorrow for doing wrong, confessing the sin(s), asking for forgiveness, making restitution for any damage done, and promising not to repeat the sin. Yet, he does not try to right the wrong he has perpetrated.

Hamlet is a Wittenberg philosopher and is naturally acquainted with the tenets of Christian faith. The expression of sorrow and remorse by Claudius will not suffice to purge him of his sins and send his soul to heaven. Let us consider what repentance is not. Repentance is not simply cessation from sin (Gen. 6:6). Repentance is not simply sorrow for sin (2 Cor. 7:10). Biblically viewed, repentance is a change of mind or will produced by godly sorrow and the goodness of God that results in a change or reformation of life (Matt. 21:29). Claudius's expression of remorse is a far cry from true repentance. To say that Hamlet delays in killing him under the pretext that he will send his soul to heaven is but idle contemplation.<sup>1</sup>

Some might suggest that he does not delay at all, but acts when the time is most opportune. This might be an interesting idea to the casual reader, but to an active reader who pays close attention to what they read and sets to motion his imaginative mind by aid of the text, it is nothing but an excuse to justify Hamlet's procrastination. By the end of Act 1, the Ghost has revealed to Hamlet the story of his murder and demanded that he take revenge. Yet, revenge really comes in the Act 5; not at the most opportune time, but when Hamlet is forced. Yet, I doubt if Hamlet really revenges his father's foul and most unnatural murder at all. In Act 1, Scene 2, when we have seen the Ghost for the first time, Hamlet laments the premature death of love in his mother:

Why she would hang on him  
 As if increase of appetite had grown  
 By what it fed on, and yet within a month?  
 Let me not think on't; frailty, thy name is woman!  
 A little month ....

(1.2: 143–7)

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<sup>1</sup> For Leggatt, "Claudius attempting to pray, and Hamlet watching him kneeling, both accept for the moment an orthodox scheme of damnation and salvation, contradicting the uncertainty of the famous soliloquy. The result is that Claudius, knowing he does not meet the conditions for forgiveness, fails to pray, and Hamlet, thinking he does, fails to kill him. Each man enters the scene determined on an action, and does nothing. For Claudius it is again a problem of language: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below./ Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3: 97–8). When Polonius asks what he is reading Hamlet replies, "Words, words, words" (2.2: 192), separating them from thought, draining them of meaning" (2005, 65).

The reader knows that King Hamlet has been dead for less than two months. In Act 3, Scene 2, we see Hamlet talking to Ophelia: “Look you how cheerfully my mother looks,/ And my father died within these two hours” (3.2: 112–13). Ophelia corrects him: “Nay, ’tis twice two months, my lord.” (3.2: 130).

So, four months have passed since the death of King Hamlet. In other words, there has been an interval of two months between his death and the appearance of the Ghost, and in that time Hamlet has done nothing.

In the closet scene, the Ghost appears to him only to chide his son: “Do not forget: this visitation/ Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose” (3.4: 110–11).

Crucial to the play and our understanding of the personality of Hamlet, I believe, is the closet scene where the Ghost reappears to chide him and warn him against hurting his mother, when Hamlet has just failed to carry out his father’s command. Curiously, the reader finds the Ghost repeating his warning to Hamlet about his mother. This is crucial to the play because this is the scene where the reader begins to doubt if the Ghost is but the product of Hamlet’s imagination, as it is only visible to him.

Hamlet:

Do you see nothing there?

Queen Gertrude:

Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.

(3.4: 132–3)

By way of answering this riddle, Bradley says that, “a Ghost, in Shakespeare’s day, was able for any sufficient reason to confine its manifestation to a single person in a company; and here the sufficient reason, that of sparing the Queen, is obvious” (2007, 75).

The scene is also crucial to our understanding of the personality of Hamlet. In this scene, which comes after he sees Claudius praying in his room, he forces his mother to sit down and frightens her in such a way that she cries for help. In fact, Gertrude is so terrified at the sight of Hamlet that she develops the feeling he has come to kill her: “What wilt thou do? thou wilt not murder me?/ Help, help, ho!” (3.4: 21–2). Polonius, who is hiding behind the arras at this moment, also cries for help: “What ho! Help!” (3.4: 23). Immediately, Hamlet draws his sword and kills Polonius. For the first time, the reader is faced with a character who does not pause to think but rather translates his thought into action. Is there a complete change in Hamlet now that the truth of the Ghost’s story has dawned on

him? If he has the power to kill a man without knowing who he really is,<sup>1</sup> what is it that stymies his will to kill the man who has killed his father? Claudius is not actually repenting, and accordingly his soul will not go to Heaven, as Hamlet suggests. There should be another reason. The reader can visualise that, in the closet scene, when Hamlet steps in he harbours the forethought of killing Gertrude. For this reason, she becomes so terrified that she cries for help. In a sudden act of violence, Hamlet slays Polonius by way of venting his anger at his mother, who is to him a personification of human degeneration. In other words, Hamlet satisfies his blood lust by dispatching Polonius. An ingenious reader will not find it hard to see that killing Claudius is a mere afterthought. Polonius becomes a substitute not for the King but for the Queen. Besides, in the two main scenes in Acts 1 and 3 where the Ghost appears to Hamlet, he orders him to revenge his murder but warns him against hurting his mother. The way Hamlet talks to his mother in the closet scene is to be metaphorically interpreted as plunging a dagger of words into her heart. This idea is well understood in Gertrude's words: "These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears;/ No more, sweet Hamlet!" (3.4: 95–6).

After the death of Polonius, the reader will notice a radical change in Hamlet's attitude to the idea of killing. He even openly vows that he will kill Claudius. Hamlet neglects revenge not because, as Foakes has pointed out, "the heroic code he associates with his father urges him to action, while the Christian code that is given lip-service in Claudius's Denmark condemns revenge and inhibits him from murder so foul" (in Kinny 2002, 96), but because he is reluctant to take revenge. Shakespeare has created a rebellious character who flies in the face of all forms of authority. He can be considered, "a precociously self-alienated Modernist" (Cefalu 2004, 2), or hailed as "the Western hero of consciousness" (Bloom 2005, 63).

Hugh Grady aptly specifies Hamlet's position in the history of modern intellectuality:

Hamlet, who came into being as a carrier of the new form of malleable, protean subjectivity identified by Hegel and Burckhardt as the hallmark of modernity, and who served centrally as the emblem and signifier of art and subjectivity throughout the classical bourgeois era, now emerges into a new century re-newed, uncannily ourselves, yet once more challenging our own understandings of our world, its past, and its uncertain future.

(2009, 18)

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<sup>1</sup> When he kills Polonius, Gertrude asks him: "O me, what hast thou done?" (3.4: 25), and he answers: "Nay, I know not: Is it the king?" (3.4: 26).

What makes Hamlet a hero in the eyes of the reader is not his mission to kill the King and thus revenge his father's murder, but his rebellious nature. In fact, he is "a conspicuous example of a character standing outside traditions, habits, rituals and supposedly natural human impulses" (Mousley 2007, 33). According to Barbara Everett: "The Prince never does revenge his father; he does something more natural and perhaps more terrible, he becomes his father" (1989, 126). He is made to kill the King only by force of circumstances, and not in a calculated plan, only when he realises that he has betrayed him. Similarly, he sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their doom only to save himself. Therefore, he is capable of killing but he only kills when he wants to, rather than when he is dictated to do so. Rebelliousness in Hamlet makes him likeable and the reader finds this characteristic much to his taste. The quality of rebellion is enough to make him a hero of a different kind—one who observes, analyses, and decides. Hamlet immortalises himself by being rebellious. This idea gains even more momentum as time passes. His rebellious nature creates in him a sour sense of separateness. His dying wish to, "report me and my cause aright/ To the unsatisfied" (5.2: 344–5), "registers his own sense of his separateness from others, since all other characters misinterpret him. No one knows the cause of his melancholy, if it is melancholy, and all the reasons they give for it—unsatisfied love for Ophelia (Polonius), his mother's hasty marriage (Gertrude), unfulfilled ambition (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and perhaps suspected by Claudius)—are partial at best" (Zamir 2006, 174).

Hamlet's personality undergoes a drastic change in his brief sojourn with the pirates, who abduct him from the ship transporting him from Elsinore to England after he slays Polonius. He discovers Claudius's letter ordering his summary execution, and turns it against its bearers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In a terse letter, he reveals to Horatio that an unexpected stroke of luck has saved his life. The ship he sailed on was attacked by pirates, who took him prisoner but let the others continue. Since Hamlet had discovered the treachery in Claudius's letter and replaced it with one requesting the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead, the two have sailed to certain death. In return for the promise of ransom, Hamlet is released by the pirates on the Danish coast. He mentions that, "I am to do a good turn for them" (4.6: 18). Yet, it is not clear what Hamlet has really promised the pirates. We are left with many gaps to fill. Hamlet is a completely new man after his short voyage. Such a quick change should strike the readers as odd because a complicated personality like Hamlet cannot possibly change so quickly and suddenly.

The idea is further complicated by the fact that Hamlet is not in the least struck by pangs of conscience for sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their doom—"They are not near my conscience" (5.2: 58)—when we consider the fact that they were both ignorant of the content of the letter. This is not in fact the first time in the play that Hamlet is left without compunction for directly or indirectly causing the deaths of people. This incident should be enough to create aversion in the reader for Hamlet. To Goethe, the great romantic German poet, it was clear that Shakespeare intended to exhibit the effect of the sense of a great duty imposed upon a soul unable to perform it: an oak tree is planted in a china vase, proper only to receive the most delicate flowers; the roots strike out, and the vase flies to pieces.

A pure, noble, highly moral disposition, but without the energy of soul which constitutes the hero, sinks under a load which it can neither support nor resolve to abandon. All his obligations are sacred to him, but this alone is above his powers. An impossibility is required at his hands—not an impossibility in itself, but that which is so to him

(in Shakespeare and Cornwall 1864, 9).

Which delicacy is Goethe talking about? A man capable of violence and murder cannot be attributed delicacy of character. But where does this misconception come from? In Hamlet, Goethe sees an ideally romantic hero who is tasked with saving the world. A romantic mind is at work to create an ideal hero and exonerate him from all blame. However, a messianic mission is not enough to make him a saint. What really happens in the mind of the reader to make them like Hamlet even more after his return to Danish soil?

Central to the play is the graveyard scene where Shakespeare brings a taste of death and doom to the protagonist. In this scene, we find a Hamlet of a different kind, a man who has relinquished his rebelliousness and found a large degree of composure. To the conscious reader, the change is too rapid to be plausible. In all events, the reader finds a new character who has achieved spiritual tranquillity. Even his outlook on life, which has been hitherto dark and pessimistic, becomes one of a mystic. This idea is clearly indicated in the following lines:

There is special providence in  
the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it  
will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all.  
Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't

to leave betimes? Let be.

(5.2: 191–6)<sup>1</sup>

This sudden change in Hamlet creates a conceptual rupture in the reader's ability to find any solid justification in relation to the character they used to know. If Hamlet's soul has been sick, it has recovered now. It is useful to quote G. Wilson Knight in this regard:

Hamlet's soul is sick. Hamlet's soul is sick to death—and yet there was one thing left that might have saved him. In the deserts of his mind, void with the utter vacuity of the knowledge of death—death of his father, death of his mother's faith—was yet one flower, his love of Ophelia. He takes a devilish joy in cruelty towards the end of the play. So we should be equally prepared to adopt the point of view of the other side of human Claudius against inhuman Hamlet.

(2001, 21, 29)

Though I believe there is a degree of truth in his words, I do not find it completely convincing. Ideally, the reader should notice that Hamlet takes devilish joy in being cruel towards some characters, but this does not last to the end. In the graveyard scene, as I pointed out, he has been transformed into a better person, into a mystic of some kind. He is even deeply grieved as he realises that the grave they are digging is to house the dead body of poor Ophelia. It is interesting to note that this is the first time Hamlet feels sorry for someone's death. His sorrow is not engendered by his sense of responsibility for her suicide but by the compassion for a human soul, which appears to have recently awakened in him. This is the point where Hamlet achieves a sort of inward balance. The deep sense of tranquillity in Hamlet is also conveyed to the reader, who now sees in him as not a turbulent soul but one who has capitulated to fate. Hamlet's problem of "to be or not to be" recedes into a submission to life and God. The tragedy of *Hamlet* is a transmission from introversion to extraversion, from monologue to dialogue, and from rebellion to submission.

Eliot wrote: "And probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the *Mona Lisa* of literature" (1950, 144).

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<sup>1</sup> Here Hamlet becomes ready to reconcile with his situation. He resigns himself to the, "powerlessness of being authored; there is only so much rough hewing he can do, only so much he can know. Indeed, he is ready and knows that 'no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught.' By accepting the paradox of acting—to be and not to be?—Hamlet can be ready for the paradox of being (and dying)" (Platt 2009, 164).

Readers have found *Hamlet* interesting because they have found it a reflection of their thoughts, a mirror of their desires. As Hazlitt once wrote: "Hamlet is a name: his speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What then, are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is we who are Hamlet" (2008, 77).

Aesthetically speaking, *Hamlet* is a great work of literature because it has engaged and continues to engage the imagination of the reader as they realise how to connect their world to the world of the text, and create a palpable world in it. This is the province of the reader.

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