

article 1**MYTHOLOGICAL TRANSLATIONS: DRAMA, POETRY AND THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH****By Dave Kelman and Jane Rafe (Australia)****Abstract**

Cultural theorists Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes describe myth as a symbolic metalanguage that conveys meanings which are deeply embedded in their socio-cultural context. Primary school children in a regional school working on Homeric mythology by integrating process drama, poetic writing and community performance interpreted myths in relation to their own lives. Some of them also attached broader socio-cultural and deeper personal meanings to the myths that they expressed through their poetic writing. This article argues that, through the act of translating myth into dramatic narrative and poetic writing, the children started to understand and express the deeper symbolism of the mythological narrative. Through this process, young people started to develop a critical awareness of mythology as a vehicle for generating contemporary meanings.

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MYTHOLOGICAL TRANSLATIONS: DRAMA, POETRY AND THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH

Our starting point for this article was the seemingly boundless enthusiasm of young people aged 11 and 12 for Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as demonstrated in two recent performance projects Dave directed in a small primary school serving a strongly economically disadvantaged community in regional Victoria, Australia. Although one hopes, as a drama practitioner, to always engage young people at a high level, it seemed to us that something particular was going on with the young people's deep involvement in this work that was linked to the nature of the mythological material on which the project was based. This article looks at evaluative data from these projects in relation to cultural theory about the nature and social function of myth to try to illuminate the appeal of mythology for young people and its educative potential in primary schools.

The projects in 2009 and 2010 used an extended artist residency model: a team of teaching artists worked collaboratively with teachers over 26 weeks to devise a public performance based on Homer's epic poems, and to generate young people's writing through an integrated creative literacy strand of the project. There were approximately 50 young people involved in each of the projects, and the evaluative data on which we shall draw on in this article is taken from interviews with the young people and from their creative writing.

The appeal of mythology for young people may be related to Joseph Campbell's claim that 'mythical symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of reason' (Campbell 1968: 4). By examining in detail young people's responses to working intensively with myth in drama and creative writing, we aim to throw some light on these processes and their educative potential.

Both of Homer's epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, fit into Winston's broad definition of myth: 'a fantastic, highly symbolic story, an intricate part of a culture's belief system, expanding values significant to that culture, with central characters who are heroic or God-like' (Winston 1998: 28). It is the culturally specific nature of myth alluded to by Winston that is central to Lévi-Strauss's (1981) seminal work on mythology in indigenous societies. Lévi-Strauss says of myths: 'They teach us a great deal about the societies from which they originate, they help us lay bare their inner workings and clarify the *raison d'être* of beliefs, customs and institutions.' (1981: 639) This analysis relates to Geertz's view that any understanding of art in a given society must be based on 'an ethnography of the vehicles of meaning' (Geertz 1983: 118). If this is the case, however, why should we encourage children to study ancient Greek myths in contemporary Australia? Of course, examining the culture of Homeric Greece does have an historical interest, but it is not, I would argue, the primary reason for using this mythology with young people, nor what they found so exciting about the work. If we consider another broad summation of mythology from Lévi-Strauss, we may come closer to the issue at hand:

Mythology, that huge and complex edifice which glows with a thousand iridescent colours as it builds up before the analyst's gaze, slowly expands to its full extent, then crumbles and fades away in the distance, as if it had never existed. (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 694)

Here he poetically expresses the richness, complexity and ephemeral nature of myth (1981: 646), which is also characteristic of theatrical performance. In his analysis, myth is a symbolic system that transcends language: 'the signifying function of myth is exercised not within language but above it' (1981: 649). In this respect, his analysis concurs with that of Barthes (1970), who sees myth as a 'metalanguage' that uses the signs of language (words or images) to construct symbolic meanings that are superimposed on the language in which it is constructed:

Whether it deals with alphabetical or pictorial writing, myth wants to see in them only a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of the first semiological chain. (Barthes 1970: 114)

In Barthes' analysis, myth 'gets hold of' language 'in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call metalanguage because it is a second language, in which *one speaks about the first*' (Barthes

1970: 115, his italics). So Barthes sees myth as what he calls a 'second order semiological system' that can impose meanings on to language that transcend the normal meaning of words, imbuing them with deeper cultural significance. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss describes myth as 'a system of meanings evolved by metalinguistic processes' (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 649).

Lévi-Strauss relates mythology to musical composition. He sees myth 'as a score, which for its performance, requires language to serve as orchestra'. This is a form that composes with symbolic meaning; myths 'construct with meanings a composition comparable to those that music creates with sound' (1981: 649), creating 'a pattern coded in images instead of sounds' (1981: 654). 'In music, it is the sound element which takes over, and in the myth it is the meaning element.' (Lévi-Strauss 2001: 47) The pattern is, of course, a narrative pattern and the meaning is held in story: 'the substance of the myth is neither in the style nor in the form of the narrative, nor in the syntax, but in the *story* that it tells' (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 645)

The story can only be fully understood as whole – 'it is only by treating the myth as if it were an orchestral score, that we can extract the meaning out of the myth' (Lévi-Strauss 2001:40) – and Lévi-Strauss sees 'mythic thought' as a complex system of abstract thought:

If this tendency towards abstraction can be attributed to mythic thought itself, instead of being, as some readers may argue, wholly imputable to the theorizing of a mythologist, it will be agreed that we have reached a point where mythic thought transcends itself and, going beyond images retaining some relationship with concrete experience, operates in a world of concepts which have been released from any such obligation, and combine with each other in free association: by this I mean that they combine not with reference to any external reality but according to the affinities or incompatibilities existing between them in the architecture of the mind. (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 473)

So myth is strongly linked by Lévi-Strauss to the development of a form of abstract, conceptual thought through which human experience can be explored. This complex system of abstract thought using narrative symbolism exists where mythology has a deep cultural significance that clearly no longer exists in most societies in the world. However, Lévi-Strauss goes on to say that the development of abstract thought through mythology is the precursor in European culture of philosophy, which led in turn to scientific thought (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 473). This analysis suggests the value and complexity of what Lévi-Strauss calls 'mythic thought' as a means of understanding the world. It is our contention that through working on myths across different art forms, we can – at some level – enter into a realm of mythic thought and develop complex understandings about human behaviour.

There are some indications in the research data supporting the idea that the young people using drama to explore Homer in their primary school were responding to myth as a type of symbolic language. If we start with young people's thoughts about the Greek gods who inhabit Homer's poems and who, as Bruner tells us, are manifestations of different aspects of human psychology – 'myth is an externalisation of the vicissitudes of personality' (Bruner 1960: 280) – then clearly these characters were recognised as significant by the young people. The following representative quotes show young people's attachment to the god characters that they acted and their perception of their importance:

When I got out there in front of the audience as Hermes I feel I am actually the messenger of the gods. It's interesting – when you are acting a god, you have to be a god.

I liked being Athena! She is the Goddess of Wisdom. It was one of the most important parts of the play 'cos if she hadn't done his [Odysseus's] disguise, he couldn't have done his plan with the suitors ... he couldn't do it without her.

This attachment to god characters is part of a more general pattern of engagement with and excitement about the symbolic language of the stories as manifested in the monsters and magic, the transformation of men into animals, the gods interfering in the affairs of men or arguing about the fate of the protagonists, or Odysseus venturing into the Land of the Dead. Whether the depictions of supernatural events were played as comedy (for example, Odysseus's foolish crew being transformed into pigs under the enchantress Circe's spell) or spectacle (the six-headed Scylla devouring the men off the ship), there was a sense of freedom in enacting something where the boundaries had shifted, and the rules of engagement had changed. Quotidian reality melted away as the students entered the realm of myth and

possibility. The strongest symbolic element in the *Odyssey* performance was a Cyclops, a 3 metre tall puppet, which was a highlight for the cast and audience alike. As one student remarked:

The Cyclops was a 'Whoa!' moment – something you wouldn't see in other stories.

There were audible gasps and shrieks from the audience on its first appearance, and again when it began rampaging around the stage in its blind fury. In audience response surveys, many young audience members commented on the Cyclops as a highlight of the show. This is unsurprising – it was the centre of a spectacular and funny/scary action sequence that was highly entertaining – but perhaps there was more to it. The Cyclops devours men whole – in the performance, it chewed on a dismembered arm! – and was described as 'scary' as well as 'awesome' and 'cool'. It is a symbolic representation of the taboo of violence visited by the strong on to the weak (including infanticide and cannibalism) that still has a resonance in contemporary society and, although there are no data indicating that young people were conscious of this symbolism, it made a strong impression on them.

The other scene frequently referred to in student interviews and audience response data is Odysseus's visit to the Land of the Dead. One participant, Daniel, spoke of why he liked the scene and Odysseus's interactions with the gods:

I liked this scene, the spirits all calling out to him, the masks and stuff. I know it adds to the play that he went to the Land of the Dead. When he sees Agamemnon and Achilles there – it's pretty good seeing these people you know in death. It kind of added depth – that and all the stuff with the gods.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by depth?

I mean that it's one of the things that makes the story a lot better with it in. Stuff that isn't just about the journey – adding in the other stuff that adds more to the story.

Daniel is struggling to express what he means here, but he is clear that this scene adds something *different* to the play because it is realised through masks and works at a deeper symbolic level than the dramatic encounters between the human characters. Another boy, Harry, spoke about the role of the gods:

The gods are force and power, they make people do things, their actions that they do can cause death – one mistake could cast you on your way! They are cruel, you don't want to be on the wrong side of them. [When you play a god] you feel like you have a lot of power – if you really were Zeus, the whole of mankind rests in your hands!

Another boy, Nick, also referred to the intervention of the gods and its impact on the story:

Poseidon was angry with Odysseus, he raised a storm, so I had to act shipwrecked, I nearly died. The crew did wrong – they should have asked him [about opening the bag of winds] so he got angry but that's the story, that's the play, that's what makes it interesting.

Developing this theme, Daniel related the rich symbolism of the myth to the question of human free will:

I sometimes wonder if everything is planned, or if we are really in the control of the gods.

Odysseus himself – an archetypal trickster – is also perceived as a symbolic figure, as revealed in these extracts from young people's written statements in the voices of Odysseus's crew:

I will follow Odysseus on this mission because he is the man of twists and turns, and being the man of twists and turns he can escape danger.

I follow Odysseus because he is my leader and my god. He is trustworthy, but has sneaky schemes. He is like my undiscovered father.

What emerges from this data is that the symbolic language of mythology holds an attraction for the young people. They were enjoying their immersion in this world, but significantly they experience it – as revealed in this representative data – as interesting, powerful, scary and deep as well as just fun. Which is all very well, but the next question we might reasonably ask is what did it all mean to the young people? If mythological meaning is culturally specific, then Homer's texts had a social function that was particular to Homer's world. Winston, drawing on the work of MacIntyre, summarises this function as the strengthening of a sense of social duty: 'There was no way of being good which lay outside the performance of one's role and shame was felt by the person who failed to perform it successfully.' (Winston 1998: 43). But, as Winston points out, both historically, and in contemporary contexts, exploring myth through drama frees it from the constraints of its historical/cultural context, allowing it to forge new meanings: 'drama exposes myth to public reinterpretation and change' (1998: 46).

A process of young people using drama to reinterpret Homer in order to construct their own meanings is certainly apparent in my analysis of the data. Odysseus's long journey home, for example, becomes a narrative about the importance of family. This significant theme is well expressed here by Sarah:

Odysseus – he's a warrior and all that, yeah, but there's something deep down. While there is still breath in his body he'll come back to us. He's not just an average guy, deep down he'll never stop – he'll get back. Behind the whole story, behind that big massive warrior there is someone inside him, he really wanted to get back – he cared about killing those people. There's more to him, he cares about his family – he'll go through hell for his family. His family is more important to him than any battle.

This is a strongly recurring theme in the data, making the play in its regional Australian primary school context a story about the importance of family above all else – perhaps an unsurprising interpretation given the age of the children and the fact that a significant proportion of them came from families that had experienced parental separation. An insight into how deeply internalised this narrative became for the children is indicated in another girl's description of how she approached the role of Odysseus' son Telemachus when he is finally being reunited with his father:

You've got to act like you're actually him, you get in the moment ... When I was Telemachus I was confused and angry and mad, like 'you can't be my father!' but [he says] 'You have to believe me' ... You're sad and happy and emotional at the same time – you don't know if it's really him [your father Odysseus] or someone trying to trick you. But he says 'our eyes are the same', that we look like each other, we must be related!

A scene in which young Telemachus is bullied by the children of the suitors, who taunt him about his absent father, also resonated strongly for the children and was referred to by a number of them in interviews.

Clearly the cultural context of Homer's mythology was very different from our own, and his work still carries moral messages about duty and honour that require a critique from a contemporary perspective. But, as discussed above, a drama process opens up the underlying values of myth to exploration and critique. A debate about the character of Odysseus in the post-show interviews illustrates the point; one boy, Harry, who played Odysseus, spoke of his character:

He's persistent, he doesn't give in easily. He'll die fighting – he never gives in – he thinks of a plan and he carries it out. You know, ten years of fighting then this on the way home – he is sad, and angry with himself, he's really sad at the loss of his friends. To survive a war and then die coming home.

Referring to one of Odysseus's boasts that rebounds on him, a classmate retorted:

MELISSA: He's also stupid. He'd have got home a lot quicker if he hadn't told the Cyclops his name!

This conversation continued in a lively manner, illustrating how committed the students were to the story, its characters and the decisions they make:

- BEN:** *He's pretty sad about the crew, but they're just crew.*
- MELISSA:** *Crew have families too! Like the people at home on Ithaca ... he comes home, but his crew don't; their families all wait, like Penelope [whom she had played], but they don't come home ...*
- TAHNEE:** *Well, you live, you die, that's life!*
- MELISSA:** *And as well, he should have taken the crew with him when he went to the temple to stop them eating the sacred cattle, another mistake!*
- HARRY:** *Yes he makes multiple mistakes, but he also has multiple triumphs!*

Melissa has empathetically extended her feelings as Penelope waiting for Odysseus's return to all those who wait on Ithaca for returning soldiers, and is fierce in her judgement of Odysseus – she was positively triumphant when she declared *'another mistake!'* Harry has played Odysseus and understands his flaws, but can also feel his strengths and accept the internal contradiction as essentially human. Tahnee seems to take the stoic's position that one can only endure life's ups and downs, or perhaps that everything lies in the lap of the gods. Although Odysseus is the hero of the play, he is also human – and in this process, a flawed character who can be questioned and critiqued. It was important to me in leading this project, however, that in entering into this process of critique the young people maintained a belief in the original myth because I didn't want to lose the potency of its deep symbolism.

There are other themes emerging in the data that illustrate this process, showing the young people reaching beyond their experience in their attempts to make sense of the mythical world in which they were immersed. If we turn our attention to the *Iliad* project (the story of the Greek siege of Troy), two students were interviewed very soon after the performance. Aided by the intensity of feeling still proximate, they began to mine a very rich seam of thought when asked about why they thought the play was an important event to have been part of:

- JULIE:** *Well, it shows people are risking their lives. Like in the play, they are fighting for Troy, 'cos it's important to them.*
- IMY:** *Well you are learning, you are putting yourself in another person's situation, so you learn from that other person because you put yourself in their shoes. And, another idea of the play is, someone might be a stranger, but you feel for them even though you don't know them. They are all just wanting peace for the young, they want the future to go on for Troy.*
- JULIE:** *Yeah, if Troy is destroyed, there'd be a piece missing, torn out of the history book ... there'd be no one to remember who was there.*
- IMY:** *When you are acting the true thing, everyone has the chance ... war for example, putting the play together and it becomes true. Like when you put all the stuff together from wherever, it has to make sense. All the bits together – a bit from a book, a bit from somewhere else, well you have like war, love, sad, comedy ... or like pain, war, honour; well if you put it all together [in a work of art] you can make something true. Love is true, war is true, when you put the bits together you get something new; you are making a story to take them [audience] to a place they've never been before ...*

It seems reasonable to suggest that the project has taken these girls to a place they have 'never been before'. We have included the whole of the final statement, with all its false starts and hesitations, because it seems to hold an embryonic definition of the function of art and art-making. Reading this, 'hearing' her voice, one can imagine the neural pathways forming and synapses firing as she struggles to find *and express* complex meaning. This shift (and it was a change that was confirmed by her teacher) in her ability to hold on to and develop complicated thought has come about because of her immersion in a symbol-rich, culturally complex process. Turning to Julie's comment about a page torn out of the history

book, she seems to have arrived at a profound understanding of the human need to make and experience art and cultural experiences, to tell stories, to try to understand who we are and how we find meaning in our existence, and how our past relates to our present. It seems apparent that this emerging conceptual understanding has only come about because of her deep, sustained involvement in an arts process that is based on the language of myth, symbolising the concepts she lists, such as war, honour and love. The arts pedagogy based on Homer's mythology demanded that the students think hard and care passionately.

Another girl reflects on the scene in which the Trojan leader Hector is killed:

I think of pictures in my head, of what the other actors are saying, and when I listen the images come out, and I think what it would be like if in your head you saw like Hector's death, imagining that I felt a lot of emotion, that reached to my heart, I felt really sad.

What is interesting here is her emphasis on images, not words, and this relates to Lévi-Strauss's description of myth when compared with music as 'a pattern coded in images instead of sounds'.

Both projects were grounded in process drama that explored the experience of the mythological characters through an extended workshop program utilising a range of drama/theatre techniques. This process made extensive use of teacher-in-role and modelling/demonstrating by the artists-in-residence that went beyond the skill-set of most non-specialist teachers in their classrooms. Both projects culminated in complex, polished performances in a well-equipped local theatre that integrated technical elements and a range of theatrical styles, enabling the young people to perform the myth as a disciplined ensemble. These stylistic elements – physical theatre, slapstick/clowning, dance, mask work, puppetry, choral speaking, choreographed fight sequences, poetic narration to audience and elements of ritual – served to create complex and layered theatrical performances. The audience response data indicate that the school community was surprised and moved by the complexity of the performances and their stylistic elements, as these representative quotations illustrate:

Every child on stage had great expressions. Fantastic sounds, full of life, not a dull moment!

I loved the part where the children formed the two ships – it was breathtaking.

In general, however, the young people themselves did not interpret their experience in terms of the rich theatrical language of the performance, but rather in terms of the experience of the mythical characters. They were immersed in the world of the characters and the mythic narrative – a view supported by some of the young people's statements quoted above. In my analysis, the relatively sophisticated theatrical style they utilised to interpret the myth in performance generated a heightened awareness of the myth. The ephemeral nature of the performance experience crystallised the process for the young people, making their theatrical representation of the myth seem vivid and real.

A further perspective on the young people's experience can be gained by considering students' work from the integrated creative writing strands of the projects; some powerful work, rich in imagery, was generated. For example, here is a young person's poem about Cassandra's warning for the doomed people of Troy:

Hear me people of Troy!

I see your obliteration by the Greeks, The walls of Troy are crashing down, Fires raging inexorably,

The crack of a whip as the people are enslaved, A river of blood lies thickening in the gutters, The smell of blood lingers all through the city; The Greeks victorious – so shall it be.

In the poetic phrasing of 'So shall it be', the poem creates a sense of *inevitable* destruction, amplifying the anguish we feel for the doomed Trojans. Returning to the *Odyssey* project, here are short extracts from two poems about the Sirens (beautiful sea creatures who lure sailors to their deaths with their song), written from the point of view of Odysseus who is here bound to the mast of his ship so that he may hear their song and live. The first piece is spare in style; its fourth line seems almost unfinished:

Sweet unbound sounds

*Coming from the island of death But nothing matters now
The **sound** is only ... This island is Despair And only Despair ...*

However, this is a deliberate ploy to suggest Odysseus caught, suspended outside time by the sound of the Sirens. In the second piece, there is a musical feeling running through the whole poem:

*The sound of the Sirens is sweet Like a glimmer of peace
Their harmony drifting over and over, The rhythm beating.
They are calling me now,
A blistering sound, like a shard of light ...*

The first line is almost jaunty, like a playground rhyme, then, in the second line the long sound of 'peace' feels like the boat slowly drifting to a standstill. The harmonies, too, drift 'over and over' one another towards the ship, but underneath there is a more sinister 'rhythm beating'. Then the 'calling' starts and there is now no doubt of the evil intent – it is 'blistering' on the ear, and the 'shard of light' image conjures the sharpness of glass as well as a blinding light so the senses of hearing, touch and sight are evoked in two short lines. Both of these short poems create a sense of a lost moment of perfection that is at once beautiful and threatening.

In moving from the intensity of the drama experience – as evidenced in some of the data above – to a reinterpretation of that experience through poetry writing, it seems to me that some of these young people have reached for a deeper meaning in their work. Barthes relates myth to a Freudian analysis of dreams in which there is a 'second order of meaning' that is the 'real meaning' (1970: 120), and certainly there is something dreamlike in these short poems as there is in much of the symbolic action of *The Odyssey*. But what is that meaning – and anyway, as Lévi- Strauss asks in his short work *Myth and Meaning*, what do we mean by meaning?

What does 'to mean' mean? It seems to me that the only answer we can give is that 'to mean' means the ability of any kind of data to be translated in a different language. I do not mean a different language like French or German, but different words on a different level. (Lévi-Strauss 2001: 9)

Lévi-Strauss's view is that to arrive at meaning, myth must be expressed in an analytical and not a symbolic language. Some of the young people have managed to do this, but they have also translated their ideas from the language of dramatised myth to the language of poetry, or from the metalanguage of myth to the more personal and individual artistic language of poetry. In doing so, it is significant that some of the young people in these projects have expressed feelings of loss and beauty that are beyond anything they have actually experienced or can easily articulate in analytical language. The ideas the young people express through their poetry go beyond moral reasoning, although they relate to it, and express something about the human condition at a deep level; this insight has arisen out of the young people's immersion in the language of myth through the medium of drama/theatre.

As we have seen above, both Lévi-Strauss and Barthes see myth as a symbolic language or metalanguage loaded with culturally specific meaning. We want to suggest that the attraction of mythology for young people is to do with working in a symbolic language that represents the social roles, moral values and taboos that make up our fundamental psychological identity. When they can *translate* the language of myth into their own terms, they can generate meaning that is local and culturally specific to their context through the process of translation. Lévi-Strauss links the translation of social rules into mythological language to:

a need for order in the human mind and since, after all, the human mind is only part of the universe, the need probably exists because there is some order in the universe and the universe is not chaos (2001: 9)

The broader claim we want to make is that using drama/theatre to reinterpret myth fulfils a deep desire in young people to create a sense of order in their world.

In his 1957 essay 'Myth Today', Barthes analyses the construction of myth for political or commercial

ends that has, in my view, developed and become more sophisticated in the digital age. Barthes makes the point that the meanings of myths are dependent on their historical context; 'there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely'. Barthes uses the image of a black African soldier saluting the French flag as an example of an imperialist myth. He sees myth-making as a motivated act of deliberate distortion that is effective because of the nature of myth as a highly authoritative symbol system: 'any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system' (1970: 131). Lévi-Strauss makes a similar point about the function of history in contemporary society: 'I am not far from believing that in our own societies, history has replaced mythology and fulfils the same function.' (2001: 36)

So as well as being a fundamental cultural system for making moral meaning, myth is open to manipulation and distortion to make the mythical appear as incontrovertible fact. If young people are only exposed as consumers to commercially or politically manipulated myths, then they are ill-equipped to critique them or to reconstruct and manipulate myths to compose their own meanings. As Lévi-Strauss states: 'We are now threatened with the prospect of our being only consumers, able to consume anything from any point in the world and from every culture, but losing all originality.' (2001: 16) In my view, originality is generated by making significant works of world culture available to young people, enabling them to reinterpret myths through drama and theatre in ways that are relevant to their own world. Through this process, they can start to develop a critical awareness of mythology as a vehicle for generating contemporary meaning. If a process of translation of ideas from one symbolic language to another is integrated into the work, myth becomes a vehicle for generating deep understandings of human experience because it is through the process of translation that meaning is generated. This meaning – like all meaning – is specific to its context, but it emerges from a process in which young people are developing moral reasoning and creating their own sense of order in the world.

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