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Mary Magdalene on Stage: “The Sinner in the City” and the Persistent Remnant of Catholic Culture in an Anglican Society

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MARY MAGDALENE has been one of the most popular female saints, if not *the* most popular, since the Middle Ages. She strikes the reader as being an outsider in two ways: on the level of her story proper, she is a debauched woman whose fleshly sin excludes her from the community; on a broader, cultural level, she appears as the remnant of a Catholic culture. Yet the outsider Mary Magdalene embodies is very much “within”, again both narratively and culturally: after her conversion, she becomes herself a converting agent, reintegrating the community. In this form, her image persists through drama after the Reformation. This persistence may partly be explained by the essential paradox at the heart of her character, a paradox clearly visible in the oxymoron *beata peccatrix* or “holy sinner”, often used to refer to her; Mary Magdalene is indeed the result of the conflation of two opposite leading female figures, Eve and the Virgin Mary, and this paradoxical quality is at the basis of an enduring fascination. The study of three plays belonging to successive cultural phases will allow us to focus on Mary Magdalene’s status of “outsider within” and on the changes her figure underwent. These plays are the Digby *Mary Magdalene* (c. 1485), Lewis Wager’s *The Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene* (1567) and Thomas Dekker’s *The Honest Whore* (1604 and 1630).

Mary Magdalene does not exist as a distinct personage in the Bible. She is the result of the merging of three different women—namely, Mary of Magdala, Mary of Bethany, and the anonymous sinner who washed Christ’s feet at Simon’s house—who were fused into one by Gregory the Great in the sixth century. The conflation was aided by the fact that most women named in the canonical Gospels are called Mary. Then, the *Golden Legend* (c. 1265) constructed an elaborate biography for Mary Magdalene. The transformation of the Gospel figure was then complete, and Mary Magdalene thus became a manageable, controllable character, an effective weapon and instrument of propaganda against her own sex. Her image was refashioned again and again to suit the needs and aspirations of changing times.

Mary Magdalene, having committed the archetypal sin of the flesh, stands on the margins of the community. This sin sets her up as the opposite of the prevailing feminine ideal, i.e., virginity in the Middle Ages and chastity in the Renaissance. She confirms the idea of Woman as the daughter of Eve. When Magdalene was referred to in the Middle Ages as “the sinner in the city”, everyone understood that she was a prostitute: sexual sins occupied the prime place in the medieval catalogue of evils. So only a small step was necessary to transform the *peccatrix* into a *meretrix*. Since Mary Magdalene made satisfaction for her sins with her eyes, hair, and mouth, the logical conclusion preachers reached was that she had necessarily used them for wicked purposes before. Besides, our character was depicted as beautiful and of a noble family, two elements enticing women to become vain and to commit carnal sin. The idea that Mary Magdalene sinned openly rather than locked away in her house made her sin worse. She had compounded her sin by implicating others in it; lechery was held as the most contagious of sins, and prostitution was a potential pollutant of society. Priests used the symbol of Mary Magdalene to attack the vanity, folly and sexual licentiousness ascribed to all women.

Yet Mary Magdalene’s association with Eve could be read in a more positive light: as Katherine Ludwig Jansen states in *The Making of the Magdalen*, death came through Woman, but so did the news of the Resurrection. The principle of similarity called for a female sinner to rectify the sin of Eve. Because the Virgin Mary was sinless, the responsibility fell to Mary Magdalene (Jansen, pp. 31-32). She was converted into a penitent prostitute and successfully reentered the Christian community, becoming the unrivalled symbol of penitential life. Jansen insists that the fact that Mary Magdalen was a paradigmatic symbol of hope for all sin-

ners explains her extraordinary attraction (p. 15). More than that, she even converted sinners, showing them the path to virtue. The figure of Mary Magdalene could be adapted to different types of messages, and she was also a potent symbol for Reformers, who saw her as an *exemplum* of penitence and salvation, as Wager's play shows.

What constitutes the formidable appeal of the figure is above all the paradox at the heart of her character. Indeed, the phrase *beata peccatrix* can be read not only as summing up Mary Magdalene's story in a chronological way, but also as an oxymoron suggesting that she is both at the same time. The paradox first stems from the fact that Mary Magdalene subsumes the identities of the two opposite female figures of Eve and the Virgin Mary. Mary's immaculate perfection prevented the sinner from identifying with her, while Eve's fault forbade any hope. It is in this gap that the figure of Mary Magdalene found space to develop, as a comforting mirror and a promise of hope for those who fall. The way of penitence she embodies was the *via media* between Mary's innocence and Eve's perdition. As Jacques Dalarun (basing himself on Le Goff's studies) suggests, this third way also corresponds to the third eschatological place built in the twelfth century: purgatory, the *via media* between heaven and hell. While sinners still feared damnation and the miseries awaiting them in hell, they could now hope that repentance and some time spent in purgatory would enable them to reach heaven, which did not appear as definitively lost anymore.

Our character's ambiguity is particularly visible in her hair and her nudity. In both her pre- and her post-conversion life, the Magdalene's predominant physical attribute is her copious and flowing hair. At the moment of her conversion, her loose hair (a symbol of sexual sin) becomes the emblem of her penitence. The same holds for her nudity: on one level, representations of Mary Magdalene's nakedness such as those found in Italian Renaissance paintings and sculptures (especially those linked to the Neoplatonist trend) could be construed as representing her post-conversion condition of innocence and purity (see Haskins, figs. 48, 50, 51, 52). But given her prior associations with the sin of the flesh, medieval depictions of the naked Mary Magdalene also pointed back to her sexual aspect. According to Susan Haskins (p. 67), Mary Magdalene's erotic aspect is largely due to the association commonly made between her and the Bride of the *Song of Solomon*, an association related to the erotic element which has always been part of the mystical relationship between Christ and the Magdalene. (Of course, there are other allegorical interpretations of the characters of the *Song*: they have

also been taken as representing Christ and the Church, or the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary.) The identification of our character with the bride links powerful female eroticism to direct access to the divine. Again, these remarks stress the paradoxical quality at the heart of the character. Through Mary Magdalene's relationship with Christ, eroticism tends to lose its connotation of sin to become an essential aspect of communication with God.

This paradox is at the heart of the Digby play. As Marjorie Malvern states in *Venus in Sackcloth*, the frank eroticism celebrated by the Bride of the *Song of Solomon* enters the Digby Mary Magdalene in both her roles: if eroticism is an obvious component of Mary Magdalene's profligate life as a prostitute, there also lies the trace of the sexual love so present in the *Song* in the spiritual love shared by the Magdalene and Christ (Malvern, p. 125). But the mythical Magdalene sank into decline as the Reformation developed. To early Protestants, Mary Magdalene was the prime example of the absurdity of Catholic teaching. They chose to emphasize her efficacious penitence above all else, and to drop her role as a female apostle. Yet the powerful attraction of her image could not be discounted.

The ambiguity of our character is magnified when brought on stage, for the theatre shared with prostitution the characteristic of being both outside and within the community. Indeed, both activities (officially) occupied the same suburban space, the Liberties of Southwark and Shoreditch. They were both rejected by the official discourse as being marginal and unrespectable, but nevertheless concerned all social classes and attracted thousands of customers every day. The people who invested in the theatre and those who made a business out of prostitution were often the same. For instance, Thomas Henslowe, the owner of the famous playhouses of the Rose and the Globe, also owned several brothels (Lenz, pp. 837-39). As Joseph Lenz insists in his article, "Base Trade: Theater as Prostitution", the actor was often compared to a prostitute, using his body and faking emotions for profit. This comparison was frequently voiced by the Puritan opponents to the theatre, who conceived the boy actor decked in female clothes as a whore, a simulation that can provide only false pleasure. According to this view, both the actor and the prostitute are performers, beguiling their clients with simulated experience (Lenz, p. 840). Like the prostitute, the professional actor sells himself for pleasure and profit (Lenz, p. 842).

Both the Digby playwright and Wager made Mary Magdalene an atemporal figure yet also one very much of her time. This imbued her character with interest and excitement for the audience. Making Mary Magdalene a contempo-

rary phenomenon helped to reinforce the audience's involvement in the story. This is particularly true of Wager's heroine, who, with her language and clothes, aped young Tudor women's coquettish manners, while presenting to the audience the timeless problems of corruption by flattery and of lapse into sin. The use playwrights made of her also reflects contemporary issues of a wider relevance. For example, the holy sinner was of great use in religious controversy: Wager, notably, in *The Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene* used Mary Magdalene to demonstrate the Calvinist doctrine of salvation through faith. The play deals with the general evangelical theme of justification by faith through imputed grace. As a Protestant, Wager left no place for post-biblical miracles and the other legendary aspects of Mary Magdalene so dear to the medieval cult of the saint. The action begins with Mary Magdalene, the representative of universal man, depraved and already rampant in sin, and it is only when she is wrenched from sin to a state of regeneration by means of irresistible grace that salvation is awarded. It seems at first sight surprising that a Protestant writer like Wager would have used the ambiguous figure of a saint who does not even appear in the Bible to convey his message. It is in this way, too, that Mary Magdalene can be considered an "outsider within", as she was the remnant of a Catholic culture within an Anglican society. This fact was largely due to the protean quality of the saint, who could be suited to very different messages.

One cannot but be struck by the persistence of the figure of the Magdalene through early English dramatic history. This may mainly be explained by the fascination entailed by her paradoxical quality, which also the key to her adaptability. Underlying the latter, in turn, is undoubtedly her archetypally heterogeneous aspect.

Mary Magdalene is one of the first characters of English drama. Although she appears in previous drama, she was for the first time treated as a full-blown heroine in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, at a period when she was the most popular saint after the Virgin Mary. The play ambitiously deals with both her scriptural and her legendary life. It combines apocryphal legend and the scriptural account with allegorical and historical modes of representation. As Malvern states in her very subtle approach to the play, the double plot (the dramas of the Passion and of Mary Magdalene herself) serves to enhance the Magdalene's sainthood. She is also used as a vessel for the ancient dualistic split between body and soul, light and darkness. But the Digby author does not identify darkness with the mate-

rial world and woman, but, rather, with human mortality and the ignorance of Christian doctrine. The Magdalene is the enlightened one enlightening others (Malvern, p. 115).

The dramatist stresses the aspects of Christ's life and ministry pertaining especially to Mary Magdalene. Her fall is represented through an allegorical sequence in which her castle is besieged by the Seven Deadly Sins during her grief for her father's death, which has made her extremely vulnerable. She then goes through a very brief period of sin; the writer avoids salacious details and stresses her naivety. (The emphasis laid on the eroticism of her character is no pretext for bawdy; it is much more an aspect of her divine relationship with Christ.) The implication is that a single act of lechery with Curiosity transforms Mary Magdalene into a common woman. Her bitterness and contrition receive much fuller treatment. After her conversion, she develops from a position of passivity and dependency to one of active spiritual authority (when she has a disciple of her own and converts the King of Marseilles). The writer gives free rein to his imagination to emphasize the saint's apostolic function through a romance of travel, adventure and miraculous occurrence partly taken from the *Golden Legend*. The episode of the King of Marseilles demonstrates the miraculous power of the Magdalene's grace and also satisfies the audience's craving for adventure. The final stage of her spiritual development occurs in the desert, when her very life becomes a miracle (she is elevated by angels three times a day and is fed with manna) and she herself an object of devotion. Her ascension into Heaven at her death recalls the assumption of the Virgin Mary, also a subject of dramatic representation, and constitutes the culmination of a number of points at which an association with the Holy Virgin is implied (for instance, Mary Magdalene has the power to destroy the idols). The Digby heroine takes on all the various roles tradition had defined for her.

The form of the play links it with Morality plays. The struggle between good and evil in Mary Magdalene's soul is typical of this kind of play. So are the staging and characterization. Although the author shows a strong interest in the Magdalene's spiritual biography and her development in terms of religious authority, he represents his heroine as the locus of a cosmic conflict. Mary Magdalene dwells simultaneously in the worlds of human narrative and spiritual abstraction. The towers of Heaven and Hell remain visible throughout, attesting to the presence of a vast spiritual domain. The Digby author is openly didactic. He clearly identifies the Magdalene's fundamental sin as pride and enhances the

Christian virtue of humility represented in the penitent woman. The sin of pride is here directly linked to Mary Magdalene's carnal sin: it is her pride and vanity which lead the young woman to seek compliments from gallants and to develop a liking for adorned and enticing clothes.

While Catholic narratives and plays emphasize saints' post-conversion lives of repentance and good works more than earlier misdeeds, things are quite different in Protestant accounts. Wager's *Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene* was written just after the reign of Mary, at a time when Protestantism needed re-establishing in England. It is the only extant example of a Protestant saint's play, a fact which constitutes a telling reflection on Mary Magdalene's status as an apostolic figure. Wager gives a typically Protestant interpretation of the Magdalene's experience. The play confines itself to Scriptural details narrowly relevant to the process of repentance, and the miraculous elements found in the Digby play are rigidly excluded. It was designed for the entertainment and the instruction of teenagers of noble households and relied on traditional medieval dramaturgy, especially allegory. In this respect, it is closer to morality plays than to saints' plays. Indeed, Wager follows the morality play's traditional pattern, i.e., the succession of temptation, fall, repentance, and salvation, with the heroine placed in the midst of personified abstractions. The Protestant Mary Magdalene is usually a truncated figure, and Wager's version of her is particularly so: he travesties her goddess-like qualities, making them part of her temptation and fall; Christ explicitly denounces Mary Magdalene's extra-Scriptural mythology. Nowhere is the eroticism present in her pre-conversion phase given any positive aspect. In the Digby version, Mary Magdalene's eroticism before she repents has the same essence as the love she shares with Christ. She exchanges her worldly love for the love of Christ, but sensuality is an essential component of both. In Wager, the saint's sensuality in her pre-conversion phase is reduced to bawdy, and eroticism is absent from her relationship with Christ. Wager's Mary Magdalene is thus as far removed as she can be from her Digby counterpart. She becomes Every(wo)man, an exemplary figure of the universal sinner, which, although exemplary, should not be worshipped as a saint able to perform miracles.

The figure of the prostitute retains a more threatening aspect in Protestant writing than in Catholic hagiography, because as a sexual sinner she disrupts the patriarchal patterns of authority designed to keep this system in place. Catholic tales of conversion emphasized the importance of the institution of penance and

the miracles performed by the reformed sinner, whereas in their Protestant counterparts, confidence in one's own salvation rested more on inward assurance than on institutionally validated signs or tasks. Protestant writers used these stories to show the inward assurance granted to believing sinners, and to demonstrate how figures of authority in a properly ordered Christian society could reform others. The prostitute served as a useful symbol for a different process of salvation, based on justification by faith and emphasizing social integration over asceticism or other extreme acts of penance. The prominent role of faith is constantly stressed in these texts.

The essential first step towards salvation, an intensely private experience, is self-recognition. Protestant stories of salvation imply the ongoing struggle against sinfulness that the elect Christian faces throughout his life. The moment of intercession and the risk that the intercessory effort could fail are more fully dramatized and problematized than in Catholic texts. Wager emphasizes Mary Magdalene's sins and repentance, not her life as a penitent. From the moment of her conversion on, he stresses doctrine at the expense of dramatic interest. The play shows a strong Calvinist bias. It rejects the Catholic insistence on free will in favour of the Protestant concepts of predestination and grace. Man cannot save himself in Wager's world. The play is very much indebted to Calvin's *Institutes*. Especially dependent on Calvin's text is the dramatization of the process of conversion. Mary Magdalene's declaration to the audience in ll. 1769-70 sets her up as an example of Christ's mercy to the whole world: "To all the worlde an example I may be, / In whom the mercy of Christ is declared".

There are similarities between the two plays. Both are committed to combining edification with entertainment, and the scene in Wager where Christ extracts seven demons from the saint is highly theatricalized, with much wriggling and roaring on the part of the possessed witch that Mary Magdalene seems to be at that point. But Wager does not at all portray the saint's virtuous life after her repentance: he concludes with her acknowledgement of the power of God's love.

One finds in the phase of the character's degeneracy an overlapping of the traditional pattern of Vice intrigue and spiritual corruption with satire directed against the youth of the privileged classes. Mary Magdalene appears as already naturally disposed to sin. The four Vices compare her to Thais, Lais and Helen, i.e., famous whores. This phase is portrayed in lively, comic realism. To enhance the play's appeal to noble youth, the heroine is beautiful, spoilt, and coquettish.

The Vices instruct her to dress provocatively in the latest style, to dye and curl her hair, etc., in order to allure rich young suitors. This mimics the habits and courtly manners of the time. The laughter evoked by the Vices is a means of implicating the audience in the experience of temptation the protagonist undergoes. Because of her riches, Mary Magdalene cannot plead necessity in defence of turning a prostitute: Wager emphasizes her desire both for luxurious wealth and for carnal pleasure. She is a passive creature led into wickedness by circumstances and her own weak nature. Infidelity works on Mary Magdalene through the same device as that used by Lechery in *Digby*, i.e., flattery and a *carpe diem* speech. In the conversion phase, the godly figures' serious, homiletic speeches encourage critical detachment in the audience. Their placing and grouping mirrors what happens in Mary Magdalene's mind, but also in the mind of every spectator elected by divine grace. The young woman cannot save herself by human means. The pivotal moment when Christ enters to reward her is highly theatrical, and enables Wager to make his doctrinal point. The moral lesson of the play is constantly stressed, from the prologue, where it is said that the play gives "an example of penance the heart to grieve" (l. 6), to the very last words, in which Mary Magdalene hopes that everyone will go the same way as she. The characters are self-presentational and constantly explain to the audience what they stand for.

If *The Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene* is the only example of a Protestant saint's play, the figure of Mary Magdalene did not completely disappear from the English stage, as her early Jacobean avatar, Bellafront in Dekker's *The Honest Whore*, witnesses. Protestant versions of the reformation of prostitutes retain Catholic texts' emphasis on Woman's responsibility for and "natural" association with sexual sin, but they also question and complicate the rather simple reformation process present in Catholic hagiography. Protestant texts often de-emphasize the prostitute's symbolic position as a mere abstract representative figure of female sinfulness, and take into account the socio-economic forces affecting the protagonist's moral and religious choices, and the community's response to them. Such is the case when Bellafront blames men for women's fall into prostitution and when she calls poverty "that cunning bawd" (2 *Honest Whore* III.ii., IV.i).

Bellafront is a very successful representation of the repentant whore in the tradition stemming from medieval Magdalene plays. The heroine follows the Christian schema of resisting temptation to prove her honesty (the worst temptation being Hippolito's attempt at turning her into a whore again in Part II).

She shows a deep awareness of sin. The play's oxymoronic title is puzzling to the spectator, and one finds oneself confronted again with the paradox already present in Mary Magdalene: the oxymoron reflects the evolution of the character but also suggests the coexistence of the two aspects in Bellafront. Her repentance links her with Wager's Mary Magdalene, but Dekker, like the Digby playwright, emphasizes her return to honesty. The first scene in which she appears is that of her conversion. In choosing to present her reformation as instantaneous, the author closely adheres to the structure of traditional Catholic narratives of converted prostitutes. But the motivation behind Bellafront's conversion is much less traditional: she desires Hippolito and reforms out of love for him. Her reasons for becoming a prostitute were also intensely personal, not stereotypical: she attributes her fall from honesty to lack of opportunity rather than to lust. The conversion is shown visually on stage by a change of props between Act II, Scene i, and Act III, Scene iii, where ink and paper replace make-up, mirrors and phials. This recalls Wager's Magdalene's being "sadly apparelled" (l. 1764) after her reformation.

Once turned "honest", Bellafront becomes in turn a converting agent for erring sinners, just like Mary Magdalene. For instance, she tries to persuade her former customers to forsake their lives of gaming and whoring (Part I, III.iii). But her efforts prove vain, for there is no place for a new Mary Magdalene in Jacobean London. Dekker does not adopt an obviously religious stance, or, rather, he tends towards the Puritan side. The contemporary and the realistic aspects are essential to his play, in which he gives a picture of the corrupted world he and his audience inhabit. People in the "real world" lack the Christian virtues of faith and charity embodied in Christ in the plays of the Digby author and of Wager. Dekker's perspective is much darker. Like Mary Magdalene, Bellafront often stresses her role as an *exemplum* through addresses to the audience. For instance, in Part I, she declares: "By my example / I hope few maidens will put their heads / Under men's girdles" (III.iii.131-33). And at the very end of Part II, she says: "women shall learn of me, / To love their husbands in greatest misery" (V.ii.540-41). Yet one must keep in mind that it is Hippolito and not Christ who converts Bellafront. The young woman proceeds from physical desire for Hippolito to contrition induced by his scornful rejection, and finally to a chaste love for him. It is thus much more difficult for the audience to decide what value to give to the prostitute's abrupt change. Hippolito and Matheo, the two men aiding her conversion, prove limited in their effectiveness and questionable in their morality. Yet, once Bellafront enacts her

reformation, she never wavers from chastity and faithfulness. Her depiction in the conversion scene subverts the traditional association between prostitution and indiscriminate lust, since she asserts her preference for monogamy. Besides, the play portrays the fall into prostitution not only as a moral failing but, as mentioned above, as the result of other kinds of circumstances, such as the failings of (male) heads of household and economic factors. Dekker also stresses the individual's role in her reformation: Bellafront is not overcome by divine grace; she can choose between a lapse into sin and a virtuous line of behaviour at any time. Her reformation is linked to the strength of her will above all else.

As Jean E. Howard argues in her article, "Prostitutes, Shopkeepers, and the Staging of the Urban Subjects in *The Honest Whore*", Bellafront by her reform cleanses the civic body and provides a model for urban dwellers. Her reformation occurs against the backdrop of the unreformed and the unrepentant (madmen and whores). Indeed, both parts of the play end in institutions symbolizing the control of the state over the unruly, i.e., Bedlam and Bridewell. The elaborate staging of the singing and cursing whores in Part II constitutes an exemplary spectacle meant for the edification of both those who watch on the stage and those who watch in the theatre. The Bridewell scene stages three stereotypical prostitutes (a quality emphasized by their names, i.e., Dorothea Target, Penelope Whorehound and Catharina Bountinall), whom the authorities (represented by the beadle of Bridewell) try to subdue. For this purpose, the three women are made to wear a blue gown supposed to symbolize their shame and repentance, and they are forced to perform manual work for the benefit of the community. Yet the prostitutes do not easily submit, and they curse the people coming to see them. The staging of the unrepentant whores is both a warning and a reassurance (Howard, p. 175).

After her conversion, Bellafront nevertheless remains stigmatised. In the second part of the play, she is continually forced to demonstrate her integrity in order to counter public insistence that she is ultimately merely a whore. Even the young woman sees herself as such. Ironically, Bellafront's transformation into a penitent and chaste lover subjects her to far more degrading abuse from society than she had ever known as a whore—a satiric inversion of the conventional morality play structure. Again, Dekker's pessimism regarding the possibility for salvation makes its presence felt. But one can also see his stance as endorsing the rigid moral condemnation of the prostitute, who must pay for her sins all her life long.

Thomas Middleton also relied on the convention of the reformed whore in his comedy *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1606). His characterization of the courtesan (by this word we mean a woman having a long-term illegitimate amorous relationship with one single man) is truly original, however, in that he combined the penitent of the native morality tradition with a thoroughly comic world. This is to go well beyond *The Honest Whore*, for Middleton uses the convention of the converted prostitute for ironic and satirical purposes much more obvious than Dekker's—proof, however, of how completely this convention was assimilated. Middleton shows his courtesan as having much sounder moral standards than the supposedly respectable people surrounding her, who prove corrupt and greedy. The courtesan's reformation speech at the end of the play is pointed at as the convention it is; what seems to matter to Middleton is that his courtesan is more clever, and in her own way more honest, than the “respectable” members of the society she lives in.

The character of Mary Magdalene is at the root of an enduring tradition: that of the type of the repentant prostitute, a blessed sinner becoming in turn an agent of redemption. The rich paradox at the core of her character is surely one reason for the longevity of the type. Its potential to function as a scapegoat, enabling the dominant discourse (i.e., the male patriarchal world to which authority belongs) to screen its own vices and to cleanse them through a symbolic reform, is probably another. Still, the type remains relatively rare in Renaissance drama: playwrights between Wager and Dekker ignored the character of the repentant prostitute, and the theme disappeared after 1608. It was probably more entertaining and more cathartic for the audience to see the prostitute as a Vice needing chastisement, and to see this chastisement carried out on stage, as happened in the streets of London every day.

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