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Medieval Studies and Medievalism: Choosing Good Texts for ESL and General Education Students in Taiwan

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Abstract

This essay uses Brian Helgeland's movie *A Knight's Tale* (2001) as an example of modern medievalism and of a good choice for ESL and general studies students. Drawing on experiences from a course on films and television shows about the Middle Ages, taught at a technology university in Taiwan, I explore how this kind of class benefits Taiwanese ESL students, arguing in particular that a medievalism course can help both teachers and students to reflect on: (1) the need students have for some knowledge of medieval culture, which, entangled as it is in contemporary pop culture, they will encounter frequently in the films, TV shows, and video games that they enjoy; and (2) the need to think carefully about which texts to choose for ESL study.

Teaching medieval studies in Taiwan is a challenging experience. As a Chaucerian, I am excited by the complexity, wit, and profundity of *The Canterbury Tales*; but Chaucer's world seems remote to students here. Medieval texts are not an obvious choice for ESL (English as a Second Language) students because of the difficulty posed by the language and the cultural context of the texts, often so distant from modern Western (let alone modern Taiwanese) culture.

In this essay, I use Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* (2001) as an example of modern medievalism and of a good choice for ESL and general studies students.¹ I argue that this film and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* (to which the film makes a brief but important reference) help both teachers and students reflect on (1) the practical need to have some knowledge of medieval culture which students will encounter today, albeit entangled in pop culture; and (2) the need to think carefully about which texts to choose for study.

Teaching Chaucer in Taiwan

Taiwan has a thriving community of classicists, medievalists, and Renaissance scholars. At some universities in Taiwan, English Departments follow a traditional liberal arts model, offering courses of study in history, literature, and culture. Many students who enter these programs have experience with literary and liberal arts classes before entering the department, most commonly from high school. Both undergraduate and graduate students can pursue degrees in the humanities and specific fields such as literature.² However, at technical universities here, English Departments are often called Departments of "Applied English". Unlike Departments of English in other Taiwanese universities, Departments of Applied English emphasize basic language skills, pragmatics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, K-12 (kindergarten to high school grade 12) pedagogy, and English for special purposes (ESP), especially in practical fields like business and translation. There are some students in these technology universities who take literature classes, but of a less intensive and less comprehensive kind compared to other Taiwanese universities. For example, there is no history of literature class. Some of these students go on to write undergraduate research papers and M.A. theses on literary and cultural studies topics, but even at the M.A. level, many entering students do not have extensive experience with literary studies or highly-developed English language skills. After graduation, most students find sales jobs or teach K-12 English; a few do continuing studies overseas (in business or hospitality programs, but rarely in advanced literary study); almost none pursue Ph.Ds.

At my university of technology, the Applied English department is a small one compared to the Engineering departments: 200 undergraduates and 60 M.A. students. Undergraduate classes have 25-50 students; graduate classes 12-15. These students enter our department with limited English language skills and exposure to English literature. If they do take classes in literature, they do not do

¹ These are students who lack the foundational knowledge and advanced reading skills of literature majors in Western universities and/or who may only be taking literature courses because they are required by the university.

² For more on teaching Chaucer and early British literature in Taiwan specifically, see Cheng. The collection (edited by Haseltine and Ma) of which that essay is a part has a number of other essays about teaching literature in Taiwan specifically and in Asia generally, including several essays about teaching Shakespeare. Most of the texts discussed are for traditional literature classes with students at a higher level than the students I teach (as I discuss below), and the book provides a useful overview of pedagogical issues and approaches related to teaching classic literature in Asia.

so because they want a deep engagement with literature and literary history; they are seeking to improve their English skills and develop some practical knowledge of Western culture which will help them either in their personal life (when they watch Western movies) or in their future careers as ESL teachers and business people. (English major students in Taiwan's technology universities are always looking for something—a vocabulary word, an idea about culture, a strategy for learning languages—that they can “apply”, hence the “applied” in the department title, “Department of Applied English”). That lack of a basic foundation, combined with the students' expectations of the program, means that reading-intensive classes—with the weekly, three-hour lectures on medieval literature and history, taught in many traditional English departments—are just not feasible.³

In the past, I taught Chaucer (in Middle and Modern English) in a traditional, albeit simplified literature course on Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton to M.A. students. However, that was still a very difficult class for the students at my technology university, so I shifted to teaching modern medievalism.⁴ The students in this class have minimal background information: sometimes an introductory undergraduate class in literary studies, but no medieval studies and no comprehensive survey of Western literature. Before each week's class (of an 18-week semester), I assign readings, both literary texts (Chaucer in Modern English) and background material (my essays on the various medievalism films we watch).⁵ Generally, though, most of the work is done in class: some of the students can read the assignments on their own, but all of the texts are challenging to the point that we need to closely study them together in class each week. The rest of our time is spent watching, discussing, and analyzing films and TV shows.

In the first few weeks, I lecture on basic information about medieval history and culture, then introduce Chaucer, focusing on the *General Prologue* and *The Knight's Tale*. I do not assign Chinese language texts, but there are Chinese translations of Chaucer, of course, as well as encyclopedic introductions to the Western Middle Ages, of which the students no doubt make use.⁶ After the introductory weeks, I screen Helgeland's film. At first the teaching goal is very simple: to have the students choose a scene, ask questions about it, and practice their English (either written or spoken) while doing so. Usually, they choose scenes related to the romance plot, the jousting, or the modern music. Focusing on the film's hero, Will, an indentured servant who dreams of becoming a knight, and his love interest, Lady Jocelyn, none of the students ever choose the scenes featuring Geoff, the Chaucer character (a fictionalized version of the historical Chaucer, who becomes a traveling companion of the hero Will after they meet on the road to a jousting tournament at Rouen). Therefore, in the following week, I lecture on my reading of the film, focusing in particular on the scenes with

³ On similar problems teaching English literature in Japan, see Chilton. He discusses the pedagogical problems that arise when there is tension between literature professors trained in the West to teach literature on the one hand, and students and university administrators who are wary of literature because they are primarily interested in language acquisition and practical language skills, on the other (4-5).

⁴ Any work created after the Middle Ages (Shakespeare, Cervantes, Tennyson) that makes use of medieval culture would qualify as an example of medievalism, in one way or another. My class in Taiwan tends to focus on 20th and 21st century popular films about the Middle Ages. This modern medievalism has become a significant area of study in its own right; a growing body of scholarship—covering high cinema to Hollywood blockbusters, Bergman to Disney—offers serious examinations of a variety of texts that could be incorporated into the classroom. See for example Elliott, Haydock, Aberth, Finke, and Harty. For medievalism in contemporary culture beyond just cinema, see Utz, Ashton, and Pugh.

⁵ See my essays on *Just Visiting* and on images of the Western Middle Ages in anime and manga.

⁶ On Chinese translations of Chaucer, see Zhang.

Chaucer. Most of the students, when they choose a scene, talk about the plot or the themes of the film (love, destiny, freedom) in a basic, general way. Of course, however simplistic their initial comments, conversing like this is an effective way for these students to practice their English. I offer them my thoughts on the Chaucer character in order to demonstrate to them how to ask critical questions, to pay attention to details, and to analyze a scene more closely than they are used to doing. However, my discussion of the scene in which Will first meets Chaucer naked on the road also reinforces one of the major themes of the course itself: the appropriating nature of medievalism, that is, the way in which modern culture makes use of the past (in this case, Chaucer and medieval culture) to tell new stories and to better understand itself. A further lesson for the students is that by broadening their cultural knowledge (not just of popular culture, but of history and of literature), they can better understand the films and other texts of popular culture they enjoy.

The Naked Chaucer in *A Knight's Tale*

The title of Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* (2001) is, of course, an allusion to Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale." On the surface, the film does not really seem to be about Chaucer's Knight or his tale of the Athenian duke Theseus and the problems created by two of his knights who are in love with the same woman. The jousting tournament in which the two compete against one another results in the death of one of the knights and this requires Theseus to hold a public funeral to help manage the grief of his people, who ask why the gods fated the young knight to die in this way. After the accident, Theseus' father delivers perhaps the most significant lines in this first of the pilgrim tales: "This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo, / And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro" (2847-48). The film, by contrast, is not set in Athens, is not about a duke, and does not end in death. Rather, it begins with the death of a fourteenth-century knight and proceeds to tell the story of a non-noble squire, William, who risks imprisonment and potentially his life by impersonating his late master in order to achieve a childhood dream of becoming a knight. In a flashback of William as a young boy, William's father has the most important lines of this film: "Go change your stars" (01:32:30). William's story is thus one of personal ambition and growth while the story of Theseus and his knights is ultimately about an encounter with death. For Theseus' father there is nothing ("nys") but woe; for William's, life contains the possibility of positive change and of personal as well as social progress.

Yet, different as the film and the original tale are, even in that summary one can see tenuous relations: both are about fathers and sons, imprisonment, and the "stars"—that is, about fate and destiny. Like the tale, the film features jousting tournaments and a love triangle. Though there are few commoners in the tale told by Chaucer's knight, the Knight himself is forced to interact with various types and classes of people on the pilgrimage. When the Miller, bored by the long and complex story of the noble Theseus, mocks the Knight and his tale, we see the values of the nobility questioned and social order beginning to break down. The Knight's tale is a traditional medieval romance, reinforcing the Knight's traditional ideas of nobility and feudal order, but Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* captures the voices and perspectives of people across the social spectrum, from knights and clergymen to millers and wives, and is a record of the changing social order in the late fourteenth century.

Arguably, then, the film is related to the tale in much the same way that the tale is related to the history of the classical Athenian Theseus, who is remade by Chaucer into a medieval knight. Chaucer's story is set in Athens, but the behavior and concerns of the characters are medieval; similarly, the film

is set in the medieval period, but the behavior and concerns of its characters are distinctly modern. The medieval peasant William becomes a modern disaffected youth, just as the Athenian Theseus becomes a fourteenth-century knight. In both cases, the original source material is altered to engage its audience more easily and to see in it something of themselves and their culture.

In terms of teaching medieval studies, medievalists must consider how these modern texts fit, if at all, into medieval studies (as opposed to merely being a minor branch of pop cultural studies). I suggest that Helgeland's film helps us to think about our relationship to medieval literature and to Chaucer in particular, when we consider how the film portrays Chaucer himself. Strikingly, our first image of Chaucer is as a completely naked man covered in dirt, trudging down the road to Rouen. Of course, this character is not meant to be exactly equivalent to the historical Chaucer; the character is "Geoff" (as William later decides to call him), who has his own particular role to play in the film. Yet he introduces himself as Geoffrey Chaucer and he is, in one way or another, an image of Chaucer.

One way to read the scene is as a metaphor for Chaucer's place in the modern world and as the filmmaker's comment on how far poets have fallen in modern times. The abuse Chaucer bears and the nakedness forced on him in the film are symbolic of the fate of the past—its writers and its culture—in a modern world that, distracted by the latest trends and fashions, is sometimes indifferent and sometimes hostile to history and literature. Many Taiwanese college students watching the film are as unlikely as the characters in the film (all of whom exhibit a marked indifference to Geoff's boasts about his literary achievements) to have read or to be curious about Western poetry. By clothing Chaucer, making him one of the heroes of the story, and turning his creative talent into relatable comedy (for example, when he introduces Will at the jousting tournament, World Wrestling Federation style), the film in a way works to protect and rehabilitate him by encouraging the modern audience to like him, just as William, the common medieval man who is actually very modern, learns to do.

There are a few points about the initial scene, though, that extend and complicate our understanding of the film's attitude toward Chaucer. Notably, all the characters are on the road to Rouen/Ruin, literally and figuratively — they are all pilgrims on the thoroughfare of woe, as Theseus' father would say. Will saves Chaucer from ruin by clothing him, giving him the gift that God gave Adam and Eve after the Fall (Gen. 3:21); and Chaucer saves Will by providing the documents he needs to compete in the jousting tournament and win the glory he seeks. The stripping of Chaucer identifies him as Will's equal—a man down on his luck, a frail body subject to forces in the social, political, and material world beyond his control—just as later the lady's removal of her dress before Will (whom she knows to be a commoner) assures him of their equality in love. The naked Chaucer is the human Chaucer, who shares the world in common with every other human being regardless of class or occupation—a human with the capacity to help and be helped by others. That is, arguably, a very Chaucerian theme.

In a sense then, if one accepts that the film shares a certain ethics and basic world view with Chaucer, the initial image of the naked Chaucer is an image of what the film itself does to him: it strips him to his core. Cutting away the medieval trappings of his work, the film isolates the essential Chaucer, his intellectual and philosophical spirit, and then re-clothes him in a modern guise more familiar and acceptable to its modern audience. Still, even assuming the film tells a story in the essential spirit of Chaucer and is in fact telling a modern Chaucerian tale, it is worth noting one other significant

detail in that initial scene with the naked Chaucer: the Chaucer who appears naked to Will on the road to Rouen is not the Chaucer who wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, which Geoff has yet to write. Geoff assumes he is a famous author, but the book he expects Will to know (but which neither Will nor any of his companions have heard of) is the *Book of the Duchess*, an earlier work and the first of his major writings. It is, as Geoff says, an allegorical poem. The joke, of course, is that Will and the others don't know what "allegorical" means, assuming it to be a jumble of a's, l's, c's, o's, and r's cobbled from "horrible" and "atrocious" (Wat, Will's fellow indentured servant, is not exactly sure what an allegorical poet does, but suspects that some people would disapprove: "Well, we won't hold that against you. That's for each man to decide for himself" [00:16:46]). This could also be a joke at the expense of the modern audience if they are viewed as the equivalent of Will and his literature-indifferent friends. If we assume, however, that many in the modern audience are better-read than Will's companions (at least to the point of knowing who Chaucer is and that he wrote *The Canterbury Tales*), then the joke is at Chaucer's—or at least the early Chaucer's—expense: allegorical poetry sent him down the road to Rouen/Ruin. The film implies nobody is going to remember or like him for writing the *Book of the Duchess*. Only by writing *The Canterbury Tales*—a survey of humanity in its many forms, capable of appealing to a modern democratic society—will he secure a place in history. His experiences traveling with the common (and quite modern) Will in the rest of the film prepare him to write his masterpiece which will transcend time and culture.

***The Book of the Duchess* and Choosing Good Books (for Oneself or a Class)**

If the film is correct about the cultural (in)significance of the *Book of the Duchess* relative to *The Canterbury Tales*, does it make sense to have the students in Taiwan read the *Book of the Duchess*?

Arguably, the *Book of the Duchess* is instructive in part because it is an example of a work that has a theme which transcends time and culture: it is about love and about suffering. The story of Ceyx and Alcyone is about the king's tragic death and his queen's suffering (and eventual death) caused by the loss of her lover. The dream which Chaucer's narrator has (after reading this story) is about a knight grieving the death of his lady. There are a number of aspects of the poem (the love or the dream) which are eminently relatable to any reader. Yet the poem is also instructive in that it demonstrates that it is very much a message from the past, a product of a past, even as it shares its universal and highly relatable story about love. It is, therefore, strange and not always immediately understandable to the reader of the present day, just as a foreign culture is not always immediately understandable to the traveler, however developed one's language skills are. The love story, for example, is expressed in part through a discussion of the concept of fortune: when the narrator-dreamer encounters the sad knight in the dream, the knight initially says that he is depressed and angry because he has lost a game of chess to his adversary, Lady Fortune. Especially for Taiwanese students, understanding this part (which is quite an interesting and beautiful passage) requires—and therefore could help them develop—a deeper understanding of Western culture, including its concepts of fortune, will, and providence.

However, for my Taiwanese ESL students, who only take a very small number of literature and cultural studies courses, I think the time and energy required to read (any) Chaucer is best spent on *The Canterbury Tales*, as Helgeland's film suggests. In my medievalism class, the main focus is on modern films; I use the *General Prologue* as background material in my broad introduction to Chaucer

and the historical Middle Ages. We start with scenes the students find interesting, but they never select the scene which mentions the *Book of the Duchess*. Therefore, during my in-class remarks after the screening, I use that scene to introduce the students to the *Book of the Duchess* and the reasons that it is thematically interesting on its own, independent of the film, from the perspective of medieval history and literature. But I also remind them that it is not a text I assign the students or even necessarily encourage them to read on their own, at least not before they have read other, more canonical texts. In that way, for the students who will someday be high school teachers and even for the students who will just be responsible for their own continuing education after they graduate, I also use the scene to talk about pedagogy in Taiwan, about the ethics of teaching, and about the responsibility of choosing a ‘good’ text for a class (or just for oneself).

In general, at the broadest level of culture, be that popular culture or undergraduate student culture (anything above and outside specialized Chaucerian studies culture), ‘what we talk about when we talk about Chaucer’ are the opening lines of the General Prologue, its portraits of the Wife and the Monk, and the tales of the Miller and the Wife, because those appear most frequently in anthologies and are most likely to be read by high school and college students in the West (who are the people with whom my Taiwanese students are most likely to interact and speak English with after graduation). For ESL students—whose engagement with literature is limited—the issue of canon and of culturally significant texts is especially important. The scene in *A Knight’s Tale* which references the *Book of the Duchess* is one that can get students to think about the importance of cultural knowledge and their need to think about how texts can be useful to them and why, as well as which texts they will select in their continuing study of language and culture.⁷

Student Reactions to Chaucer, to *A Knight’s Tale*, and to Medievalism Generally

After the first few weeks on medieval culture, Chaucer, and *A Knight’s Tale*, the course moves on to other films (*Just Visiting* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*). At the midterm, the students choose one of the three films we discussed and write a short (5-7 page) paper. Then, I do a unit on Western medievalism in Japanese popular culture (anime and manga). In the last part of the semester, the students choose examples of modern medievalism and do presentations. Some students continue the conversation about Japanese anime (because that is actually their favorite form of pop culture and one of the reasons they take this course); but some choose additional Hollywood examples of medievalism such as *Black Knight*, *Merlin*, *Shrek*, and *The Sword in the Stone*.

⁷ Another way to think about the difference between *The Canterbury Tales*, on the one hand, and *The Book of the Duchess*, on the other, might be in terms of Damrosch’s definition of world literature as “works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4):

In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base, but . . . focus[ing] on actual readers makes good sense: a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present with a literary system beyond that of its original culture. (4)

If the pedagogical goal here in Taiwan is not to teach the students a canon of high literary Western texts but to introduce them to a “mode of reading” works that circulate widely (Damrosch 5), then the story of the transformed Chaucer in *A Knight’s Tale* has greater value to students here (looking for words, ideas, and stories that they can use in a practical way to communicate with English speakers) than the archaic and less traveled *Book of the Duchess* (however rich and interesting it might be from the medieval scholar’s point of view). Significant world literature in Taiwan might then mean American and Japanese popular stories (and the classic literature appropriated and transformed by that popular culture).

Just like the midterm, the presentations involve research into some aspect of medieval culture that the students did not know much about before: feudalism, the seven deadly sins, the courtly romance tradition, or women in the Middle Ages. The quality of the papers and presentations reflect the diversity of the students in this type of ESL program. Topics range from very basic discussions of what a knight or the feudal system was and how we see these ideas depicted in *Black Knight*, to more complex analysis of the influence of Dante's *Inferno* on Itagaki Shin's 2016 anime version of Miura Kentaro's manga *Berserk*. By the end of the course, though, all of the students have done secondary research about an aspect of medieval culture and used that new cultural knowledge in their primary analysis of specific scenes from examples of modern medievalism on film and TV.

The influence of *A Knight's Tale* on the students' thinking is often reflected in the texts which they choose to present at the end of the semester. Many of them are interested in the concept of the knight, the heroic warrior and lover; but also in William's particular story, his knightly journey presented as a quest to "change his stars." The students find an opportunity to talk about this theme in *Shrek* and *Black Knight*, and they sometimes choose those films so that they can compare them to *A Knight's Tale* (and have a topic that they know they can immediately understand and talk about for their presentation).

I suspect, too, that Will's story resonates with many Taiwanese students here. It is not only a story that, compared to other difficult texts, they can easily understand and talk about in English; it is also a story about escaping a social structure designed to map out an individual's life, set limits that are not supposed to be questioned, and define the potential of an individual from a very early age. In that sense, it is a very modern, very Western, story; but for many of these Taiwanese students, the idea of changing one's stars is compelling. In addition to the pressure that many of the students feel from their traditional parents (who emphasize the value of certain kinds of study and certain kinds of careers), there is pressure exerted on them by the education system itself. Some are in a particular university because in junior high (grades 7-9, ages 13-15) they were tested to determine which kind of high school they would be sent to; and in high school (grades 10-12, ages 16-18) they were then tested again to see which kind of university they should apply to, based on which kind of department and course of study the test revealed would suit them. So Will's story of becoming something other than what society expected him (and originally planned carefully for him) to be is inspiring to some of the students.

The theme of fate, destiny, and society's expectations and plans for an individual—the questions of whether one can or should "change one's stars"—pop up in student presentations and also in their midterm writing. Given a choice of three films, a few ambitious students will tackle *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (a film that almost all of them admit is the most difficult for them), but the others split between *A Knight's Tale* and *Just Visiting*, usually in favor of *A Knight's Tale*. This preference may be because, as I suggested, the students relate to the young Will, perhaps more easily than to the older French knight and his servant in *Just Visiting*. Their interest, though, is still almost exclusively in Will and Jocelyn, rather than Geoff, the Chaucer character. Occasionally a student might research the historical Chaucer and the original Canterbury "Knight's Tale" further; one time someone did a final presentation on Pasolini's film *The Canterbury Tales*. But overall, very few write about Geoff or return to the medieval literature which inspires many modern medieval texts. The exception is perhaps Dante's work—some of the students do know the *Inferno* and, unlike Chaucer, Dante appears as a

main character in both a video game and a short animated film, so the *Inferno* sometimes surfaces in the class in connection with popular modern stories that the students know about hell or Dante himself.

I think that the students do understand what I am saying about both the historical Chaucer and the Chaucer character, but that they see my analysis as what a professor would and is supposed to say about this film. To them, the professor's role is to provide background and facts that they would never learn on their own and offer interpretations that are "academic" and decidedly not their own. Neither my discussion of this particular film nor the class as a whole are likely to inspire a new generation of Chaucerian scholars in Taiwan. But the analysis of the Chaucer character does provide the students a model for how to ask questions, to think more carefully, and to watch scenes more closely when they are engaging texts of their own choosing and thinking about things that are important to them—in this case, Will's story and the major themes (love, fate, social order) of this popular film. I can see that effect when *A Knight's Tale* surfaces in their papers and in their presentations. Even if the class does not inspire a love of Chaucer, it does get the students interested in aspects of medieval culture that they then realize are useful to know when they are watching films that they enjoy.

Teaching Medievalism

For students whose goal is a comprehensive understanding of Western culture and history, medievalism cannot replace medieval studies. Studying modern works takes time and focus away from medieval studies; and ideally, it is a thorough understanding of medieval culture which will help students subsequently analyze our contemporary stories which draw on the Middle Ages for material or inspiration in a more complex manner.⁸

However, especially for ESL and general studies students, modern medievalism is potentially a practical alternative to traditional medieval studies, or might be an alternative entry point to medieval studies. In an ESL medievalism class, the films are much easier than written texts for the students to analyze, which gives them a chance to practice their close-reading and analytical skills. Students enjoy such stories, in part because they are often familiar with them from their own experience of popular culture (such as video games and films).⁹ More importantly, because these are modern texts, the texts *themselves* are already thinking about how to make use of medieval culture and ideas, and about what part of medieval culture remains relevant and of interest to modern culture. By the end of the semester, having researched and discussed definitions and concepts related to medieval culture (feudalism, knighthood, and Christianity), the students can learn both about the historical Middle Ages, as well as about the way in which elements of medieval culture persist in popular culture today. A film like *A Knight's Tale* demonstrates in action how a culture preserves and discards certain ideas, texts, and authors from its past, encouraging students to examine more closely both what they choose to study and why.

⁸ For non-ESL-specific approaches to teaching medievalism, see Pagès, Chance, and Paden.

⁹ As more scholars take an interest in popular culture, there also has been growing interest in exploring the pedagogical value of popular culture. For an overview, see Werner.

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