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Title

Mind the Gap: On Teaching One's Research, Or Not

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Journal

New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession, 5(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/NC35062447

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Peer reviewed



PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION

NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

Volume 05 | 2024

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Cook. 2024. Mind the Gap: On Teaching One's Research, Or Not. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 5: 49–59.

https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

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Mind the Gap: On Teaching One's Research, Or Not

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Abstract

This essay explores some of the difficulties in aligning one's teaching and research priorities when teaching at a small liberal arts college; it then reflects on textual editing for the classroom as one way of synthesizing these commitments.

I begin with the premise that, most of the time, most of the people reading this essay teach something other than the material that they write about in their scholarly publications. We tend to think of this gap between research and teaching as a new problem, caused by the structural problems and pressures of twenty-first century higher education, and so it is, to a degree. But if we take the long view, it is hard to pinpoint any moment at which teaching and research have easily aligned. Tempting as it may be to evoke the days in which a seminar on the *Canterbury Tales* could be taught year after year to full enrollments, a look at two hundred years of course catalogues at the small liberal arts college where I teach speaks to a history of the discipline that has consistently called for general expertise rather than narrow specialization in the classroom.

A single trimester course in English literature appeared in the curriculum as a requirement for first-year students in 1866–67, more than half a century after the college’s founding (Colby College 1866). By 1868–69 this had evolved into concurrent required courses for sophomores in English literature and “Anglo-Saxon” (Colby College 1868). This might be good news for those of us who would emphasize that medieval texts have been part of the study of English literature and language since the field’s inception; the bad news is that the assigned text was Samuel Shute’s *A Manual of Anglo-Saxon for Beginners* (1867), the preface of which states bluntly that the literary offerings of “this sturdy ancestor of our mother tongue” are “very meagre” (iii). Nonetheless, English literature—presumably including some of those “very meagre” literary relics—did emerge as a discrete instructional field over the next half century, and both the number and scope of classes expanded significantly, even as the size of the faculty remained modest. A look at the catalogue for the 1923–24 academic year reveals an Associate Professor Weber teaching ten (!) different courses on topics ranging from Shakespeare to the American novel (Colby College 1923). There were three faculty members in the English department at that time: in a breakdown that will ring familiar to many, there was the aforementioned Professor Weber; a Professor Dunn, the lone woman in the department, who taught only surveys and composition courses; and Professor Roberts, the college president who—presumably as the result of an administrative course release—taught only a two-part survey focused, per the catalogue, on “Beowulf, Chaucer, Langland, Malory, More, etc.” and “Spenser, Marlowe, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, etc.” (Colby College 1923).

I have no idea what Professors Weber, Dunn, and Roberts would have wanted to teach if they had been dropped into our far more specialized contemporary version of the discipline in which courses can directly reflect a faculty member’s research. It is very possible that their research would have aligned enough with student interests and available resources and would have been, therefore, well-suited to the undergraduate classroom. After all, student interests are not a static thing. My students come into the classroom with much more sophisticated ideas about gender and identity than they did when I began teaching over a decade ago, and this sophistication has changed the conversations we’re able to have about the way these ideas manifest in premodern literature. Similarly, my students’ curiosity about the Middle Ages outside of Christian Western Europe continues to grow, and even if this is not necessarily accompanied by historical knowledge, it provides a foundation for what we can do together. But even scholars whose research translates readily into the classroom will

find themselves reaching beyond it in their teaching, as they seek to triangulate their own expertise with institutional and departmental mandates and student needs.

The tension between specialized research and broader teaching responsibilities has received attention elsewhere, of course, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives including the quantitative social sciences (see, for example, Hattie and Marsh [1996], Teichler [2017], Maisano [2023]). My goal in this essay is not to posit an ideal relationship between teaching and research. Rather, it is first to make explicit what my own institution's history shows: that the idea of synchronicity between teaching and research is not organic, but a relatively recently constructed phenomenon. Second, I aim to take stock of the ways that the idea of synchronicity between pedagogy and scholarship negatively shapes our relationship to our work as medievalists. I then offer some reflections on the way my own work as a textual editor has allowed me to navigate some of the tensions between my research as a book historian and medievalist and my current role as an associate professor at an undergraduate-only institution. Finally, this essay considers some changes in policies and procedures that might help make editing more widely visible as the scholarly labor that it is.

We Have Always Been Generalists

In an important sense, we have always been generalists in practice, regardless of what else appears on our CVs. This is and has been true not only at small liberal arts colleges like my own but at regional universities, smaller religious institutions, and community colleges. What is specific to this current moment, however, may be the combination of breadth in the way that courses are framed and narrowness in hiring practices, in the current American job market. Especially in the case of premodern literature, there are compelling reasons to organize classes around broad themes and ideas where once specific authors, genres, or periods might have provided curricular structure (there are drawbacks, too, but that is a different essay). Hiring, however, still is framed in most cases by a conservative version of the discipline defined by a notion of discrete literary and historical periods that follow one another in mostly linear fashion.

This framing, coupled with the collapse of the academic job market (also a different essay), incentivizes academic job seekers to present themselves not as generalists but as increasingly specialized specialists with a research agenda already well underway by the time the dissertation is filed. Serving on hiring committees, I've observed that it has become *de rigueur* for job candidates to describe a second research project in cover letters well before the completion of a first monograph or in some cases even the dissertation. This troubles me for several reasons: it contributes to rising and, in many cases, impossible expectations for junior scholars' productivity (if everyone else on the job market has a second book project ready to go, then you need one too) while at the same time discouraging exploration and discovery in favor of precocious professionalization. If the second project is indeed a polite fiction or rhetorical gesture rather than a serious plan, then, given the conventions and constraints of the cover letter form, what is being displaced here is more useful information about the candidate's current work, their teaching experience, and their approach to pedagogy.

Most importantly in the case of this essay, though, the value that hiring committees place (or are perceived to place) on an extended research trajectory for early career researchers seems predicated

on the idea of a close relationship between research and teaching that does not reflect the reality in most departments. While most academics do have the opportunity to teach material related to our research from time to time, the bulk of our pedagogical labor is devoted to things like introductory surveys and writing instruction. I do not want to devalue such classes or pedagogies, which are essential, but I would like to make something clear: *the expectation that research and teaching are closely related helps to justify high research expectations alongside high teaching loads. This serves the institution's bottom line, not faculty well-being.* I certainly do not want to suggest in any way that this is the direst facet of the crisis in the academic humanities or the most pernicious of ways in which capitalism's valorization of productivity locks even the most elite, autonomous workers into unsustainable structures of overwork. But I do want to point out that the number of hours in the day is finite, and that the pedagogical and pastoral demands on faculty are not letting up any time soon, especially given the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic and the growing mental health crisis among young people.

For those of us at schools, like my own, which emphasize the undergraduate experience and devote a considerable portion of their resources to the student experience, the research that is central to our identity as professors can come to feel peripheral to our job as professors. Institutions like mine are right to value the things that make them distinctive: small class sizes, sustained relationships between students and faculty, support for student research, an emphasis on exploratory, discussion-based learning. Many of us, at all kinds of institutions, also devote a significant amount of labor to service. At conferences, it seems like every tenured medievalist I talk with is or has recently served as a department chair, a program director, a dean. I do not have any immediate answer as to how and why the medievalist-to-admin pipeline is so robust, but naming the often unacknowledged third category of service work is a necessary prelude to any honest and productive discussion of the difficulty that many of us face in negotiating the relationship between teaching and research.

The Medium Is the Message

The problem is not, I think, that teaching and research in many cases point in opposite directions. Rather, presuming synthesis or symbiosis where it is neither practical nor desirable for ourselves or our colleagues leaves us with an artificially narrow sense of what both teaching and research should look like, and produces real overload and burnout for faculty who find themselves managing a full teaching load and wholly separate research agenda. This has been the case in my own experience as a researcher whose research is focused mainly on the ways that Middle English texts are transmitted and read in the sixteenth century. Reception is not a topic that I often find ways to bring directly into my own classroom, and yet it is one that both derives from my own experiences as a student and one that informs the way I approach teaching today.

Our intellectual lives are shaped by the editions we read, the conceptual packaging in which new ideas are presented to us. In the case of more recent literature, a good edition clarifies and contextualizes. In the case of premodern literature, it provides information that is essential to comprehending the text. By the time I graduated with my BA, my shelves were stocked with Norton Critical Editions, volumes from the TEAMS Middle English series, and translations from Paulist Press's Classics of Western Spirituality series. My professors seldom talked with me about their reasons for choosing a particular edition, or the layers of mediation that might exist between a premodern text

and the paperback editions I bought from the campus bookstore, but I knew that I relied heavily on footnotes and glosses, when I wasn't using translation outright. Later, as a graduate student, I learned how to use critical editions for detailed information about the history of the texts I studied, along with their manuscripts. In time, I came to think more deeply about the ways that medieval texts are mediated and remediated as they make their way to modern readers. I wrote a dissertation, and then a book, about early printed editions of Chaucer. Insofar as these editions are crafting, in real time, the idea that poetry is something that might be studied as well as read for enjoyment, they are foundational to the very idea of English literary history. To read them now, with their dedications to Henry VIII praising the excellence of the English tongue and their elaborate family trees for Chaucer, is to see clearly how early modern politics informed the way Renaissance readers got their poetry.

That work underscored the truisms that editing is never neutral and the text is never a stable thing. Despite the claims of descriptive bibliographers to objectivity and transparency, cataloguing and editing involve countless small acts of judgement, with real consequences for the way we understand and interpret texts, as the work of Leah Marcus (1996) and Randall McLeod (1982) has established. The interpretive frame extends down to apprehension of the book itself: the cataloguer M. R. James is famous, at least among the kind of scholar who reads manuscript descriptions, for his wry (which is to say subjective) accounts of hands in early manuscripts. Of the second scribe of a fifteenth-century Italian manuscript in Trinity College, Cambridge, James (1902) writes, it is “in two hands, one ugly, the other clear and good” (256). And yet, despite its subjectivity, editing is also essential, not only in medieval studies—in which, as Bernard Cerquiglini (1999) argues, the pervasive variance of manuscripts offers a powerful counterexample to the seeming standardization of the text in printed books—but in all areas of literary study (2–7). Editions mark what the field values, and they shape the contours of what is possible in the classroom. As a teacher, I am constantly benefitting from the editorial work of other scholars.

The practice of editing and the idea of the canon are closely entwined. In the last fifty years, especially following publication of John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), the discipline of literary studies has rethought the notion of canonicity from a variety of angles. The *Book of Margery Kempe* went from unknown to canonical in the span of about seventy years, a move that would not have been possible without Hope Emily Allen and Stanford Meech's initial edition for the Early English Text Society (1940) and Barry Windeatt's modern English translation for Penguin Classics (1985), both of which made the *Book* available to generations of student readers. Editions are a powerful tool for rethinking notions of what students new to medieval literature can read and should be reading, and how they should be reading it. Chaucer has never been out of print. Langland has also been available in print steadily since the early nineteenth century, as has most of the poetry of Lydgate and Gower. The works of the Pearl Poet were printed for the first time at the turn of the nineteenth century. The first two editions of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one edited by Sir Frederic Madden for the bibliophilic Bannatyne Club (1839) and the other by Richard Morris for the more democratic Early English Text Society (1864), demonstrate how expectations of audience shape editorial choices even in the case of a work edited from a single manuscript.

My own experience with textual editing did not emerge from formal training (though my background as a textual scholar and book historian certainly functioned as *ad hoc* preparation). Instead, it came directly out of my difficulty finding suitable teaching materials for a course that, as it happens,

has its origins in my inability to merge my teaching and research fruitfully when I was a junior faculty member. I have taught, for many years, two paired classes, one on sex in the Middle Ages and one on death in the Middle Ages. Their existence owes itself to my panicked discovery that no, I could not lead a room full of college sophomores, no matter how bright, in discussion about the ways the sixteenth century reimagined Middle English poetry without ensuring first that they knew a thing or two about Middle English poetry.

I was, in the face of that discovery, pretty confident that any text I might want to put on a syllabus would fit under one of those rubrics, sex or death. Over time, these have developed into popular thematic courses that draw students in and allow me the chance to experiment with a wide range of primary texts. When I first began teaching the death course, I relied on a few staples: Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* and the *Book of the Duchess*, the Alliterative *Morte D'Arthur*, and *Sir Orfeo*. These are all great narrative stories that reflect medieval attitudes toward death and articulate creative, sometimes quite searching responses toward them; crucially, they are all also available in thoughtful, affordable student editions from Broadview or Norton. But I knew from my work with fifteenth century manuscripts that some of the most interesting and incisive poetry about death consists of poems that, because they are not narrative and because they are not really lyrics either, are not so commonly taught. For a sense of how much there is out there, I would suggest looking at the *Digital Index of Middle English Verse* subject headings for "death"; Vance Smith (2020) includes a virtuoso reading of the widely-copied short poem "Erþe Upon Erþe" in his *Arts of Dying* (65–84).

At the top of my list was the *Dance of Death*, ideally in its Middle English form. A widespread late medieval motif in visual art, material culture, and probably performance as well, the Middle English *Dance of Death* was translated by John Lydgate from the French version of the poem painted in the walls of the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris. On the interrelation of poetic form and embodied performance in the history of the *danse macabre*, see Part Two of *Strange Footing* by Seeta Chaganti (2018). In both its French and English versions, the poem consists of a series of dialogues between a personification of death and people from all walks of life, ranging from the Pope and Emperor to the poor laborer and the child dead in infancy. There is a tension at the heart of the poem: at the same time as it insists upon an atomized and hierarchized society, it underscores the fact that Death comes for all. This presents both death and Death differently from the *Pardoner's Tale*, which foregrounds the naiveté of Chaucer's feckless and self-absorbed rioters. Reading the *Dance of Death*, we might feel a bit of a thrill when Death comes for the vain Gentlewoman or the imperious Magistrate, but what about the poor Plowman or the speechless Infant? What, indeed, are we meant to feel when we inevitably encounter a figure whose social rank seems to match our own? A text like the *Dance of Death* uses death as both an event as and as a personification to present a surprisingly complex set of questions about collectivity among the living.

The version at the Cemetery of Innocents was accompanied by images, and this schema was copied when Lydgate's version was painted on the interior walls of the Pardon Churchyard at Old St. Paul's in London in the early fifteenth century, where it remained until the yard was torn down in the 1530s. The donor who funded this work was John Carpenter, whose records provide us with contextual insight into his library (Appleford 2008). Around the same time, the work began to circulate in manuscript form, with some differences from the version that was publicly displayed at St. Paul's.

While the two versions do not differ as markedly as versions of *Piers Plowman* (see Brewer 1996), there are nevertheless meaningful changes made between them. These changes represent a rethinking of the structure of the poem: some material is added, other material is subtracted, and some of the material that is found in both versions of the poem is rearranged. The complexity of the situation provides an opportunity not only to think about the late medieval social imaginary, but also to think about revision and rhetoric. All of which is to say: this is a text that offers students an opportunity to think about translation, the relationship between text and image, poetry in public spaces, social hierarchies, the Black Death, medieval debate poems, and authorial revision. As a teaching text, what is not to love?

The so-called A text of the poem has been available for some time in student-friendly editions (I am using the term student-friendly here, because I don't think that there has to be a firm line between critical and student editions, particularly in the case of shorter poems present in a modest number of manuscripts—the *Dance of Death* appears in fifteen). These include Eleanor Prescott Hammond's edition in her *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey* (1927, 131–42) and Douglas Gray's *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose* (1985, 69–70). The first time I assigned the poem, I used Florence Warren's edition for the Early English Text Society (1931), which was the only edition at that time to contain both versions of the text. The student experience of the *mise-en-page* of that edition, while consistent with the EETS layout and informative for experienced textual scholars, was not a success. Students had important basic questions about the social ranks described in the poem that needed to be addressed before they could even begin to think about textual complexity; none of the previous editions offered the context they needed.

With a collaborator, Elizaveta Strakhov of Marquette University, I undertook to edit the poem myself, learning along the way from other editions, the guidance of more experienced scholars, and a certain amount of trial-and-error. We contacted the editors of the TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, based at the University of Rochester, and proposed an edition with an undergraduate audience in mind. We developed a list of manuscripts, including several that were not included by Warren in her edition. After consideration of the witnesses, we decided to use a different base text than that used by Hammond. Rather than trying to construct a parallel text edition that clearly communicates the relationship between the two texts to undergraduate readers who may have minimal experience with poetry to begin with, we decided to produce two linked versions of the poem. In the free online format used by TEAMS, one can easily compare the two versions side by side on a screen, and one can also navigate between different points in the text with greater ease than with a printed book. Our edition did not solve all the challenges in bringing this work into the undergraduate classroom, but it did make this text more accessible than it has been previously. It made it *teachable*. (Note: In this essay, I have focused primarily on editing because I myself am not a translator, though I want to acknowledge the persuasive case that scholars like Geraldine Heng have made for the role of translation in the premodern literature classroom.)

In its new iteration, the *Dance of Death* is a lodestar on my syllabus, a text which students refer back to throughout the term. As medievalists, we teach students with a range of background knowledge, from the eager Catholic school graduate with a robust working knowledge of biblical stories and Christian theology, to the international student fully new to the idea of the Trinity but with fluency in English, French, and Chinese. A good teaching edition levels the playing field substantially

and opens the way to new modes of interpretation and adaptation. Each time I've taught it, I've asked students to create their own version of the *Dance* adapted to our campus, and from this exercise I have learned much about how students perceive their own social hierarchies and the foibles that they attribute to athletes, professors, and freshman naïfs. I begin by dividing up the text into four or five parts, depending on the size of the class, and give them most of the class period to craft their own campus-specific analogue to the medieval material. The college president is usually slotted into the place of the Pope or Emperor, but beyond that, their choices can vary quite widely. Honoring the *Dance of Death's* origins as public art and, perhaps, performance, I reserve fifteen minutes of class for students to perform their "dance" for one another and anyone else I can round up from the faculty lounge or student study areas. When we debrief after, a few topics come to the forefront: first, in deciding how to represent the community, the class is also making decisions about who counts within this community. Are, for example, college dining and custodial staff present in my students' version? Second, the address and response format—in which Death speaks to people, often catching them unaware, and they briefly react—requires a ruthless distillation of characters to their most basic elements. And third, especially when performed before an audience, these dramatized encounters inevitably offer some humor. Confronting death often means laughing at, and with, the living.

While I turned to editing Lydgate's *Dance of Death* in the hopes of better facilitating these kind of class conversations, I was surprised by how holistically and deeply it drew on my training as a scholar of early books: paleographical and codicological skills, awareness of generic and bibliographical conventions, and a working knowledge of the historical and cultural context for late Middle English verse. My editing work remains the site at which my teaching and my research are most organically and productively yoked together. I want to make the case that textual editing is a reader- and student-oriented site at which we articulate the values of our discipline while drawing on a range of knowledge and experience that is greater than the scope of a single class. In this way, editing fits what Laura Heffernan and Rachel Sanger Buurma (2020) describe in *The Teaching Archive*: curricular design as a site for the theorizing of what, exactly, the discipline of English literary studies is supposed to do. For pragmatic purposes, a text can only be assigned when it is available to students. What we choose to edit and how and why says a lot about our discipline to our fellow scholars, but more importantly, to our students.

My work with the *Dance of Death* and, subsequently, other Middle English poetry, has also equipped me to talk with students about the editing process and why the particular edition of a text that is assigned in a class carries intellectual weight with implications for their learning (this doesn't mean they always listen to what I'm saying, of course). Since completing the *Dance of Death* edition, I've developed a new upper-level course on digital manuscript studies, in which students conduct a semester-long engagement of a single digitized manuscript and its contents. In the most recent iteration of the class, we focused on British Library MS Additional 37042, a Carthusian religious miscellany compiled in the north of England at the end of the fifteenth century. As part of their work, students transcribe a short text, compare it with another manuscript witness and with an edited version, taking their cues from the classic essay, "Un 'Editing' Shak-speare," by Randall McLeod (1982). They then produce their own annotated and emended version of the text using the Digital Mappa platform (<https://www.digitalmappa.org/>).

These exercises, and the various challenges and ambiguities that they inevitably reveal, provide an opportunity to talk with students about the subjective dimensions of editorial work, and bring some of the heightened literacy that we develop as researchers into the undergraduate classroom. At the same time, as anyone who's edited something for publication knows, editing requires intensive close reading, and what is our discipline's distinguishing feature if not the application of this kind of analysis to imaginative writing? Unlike the social sciences, the humanities and especially literary studies are often reticent to talk about methods, whether in our scholarship or in our classrooms. The texts that students receive in the classroom often emerge as if from a black box, with little or no information provided as to how a medieval manuscript— or sometimes dozens of them— are translated into a paperback or e-book. Making the work of editing visible is one way to push against this tendency and insisting on the importance of this form of scholarly labor. It is also a way of helping students to understand that the transmission of texts, especially medieval ones, is a material process, and that books are above all objects whose accuracy and survival are not assured.

Editing has been a way for me to bring my research into the classroom that feels both authentic to my intellectual commitments and useful beyond my own institution. It has forced me to reflect on things that I've taken for granted during most of my time as a medievalist. Talking with students about the way that meaning is made through the process of textual editing and the stakes of seemingly small choices has helped me to articulate the value of close, granular analysis in a way that is concrete and comprehensible to undergraduates. I also think it has made me a more attentive reader of medieval texts in any context.

Good editions are a necessary component to making medieval literature more accessible to students and scholars alike. Indeed, editions for classroom are a necessary precondition for teaching many kinds of research. But for editing to thrive as a scholarly/pedagogical nexus, a several other conditions must hold:

- We need to support early career scholars working on these projects. This means that graduate students need to have access to the appropriate training and support in fields like paleography and codicology, either at their home institutions or through organizations like Rare Book School.
- The work of editing needs to be valued in the hiring, reappointment, and tenure process. There are lots of good reasons for faculty in a position to shift the narrative to insist on the value of scholarly labor outside the ambit of the monograph, and the utility of a good edition is certainly one of them. Rebecca Colesworthy, an acquisitions editor at a university press, provides an important perspective on the structural pressures on monograph publishing in her Public Books essay "Publishers and Scholars, Unite!" . We are at a moment where the future of the monograph is being reconsidered and surely there is an opportunity here to reevaluate the contributions made by editors as well.
- If (as I would argue) the best editions are those that promote access at every level, then promotion and tenure committees also need to recognize and value open access scholarship as a pedagogical and intellectual good. The assumption that research needs to look a certain way and that this research in turn should inform one's teaching in a direct way puts artificial constraints on both teaching and research that prevents teaching and research from flourishing and developing organically.

- As a profession, we need to set aside our fetishization of hyper-specialization and instead acknowledge and value the generalist capacities we all develop in the course of a teaching career. I am a late medievalist and book historian, with a particular specialty in late medieval and early modern books. But in practice, I teach no more than one course a semester devoted to literature before Spenser. Half of my teaching is devoted to what many call service courses: first year writing, a required introductory course for majors, and a methods seminar for honors students. All of these are valuable and important, but in none of these does medieval literature have an inherent place.

Not all research can or should make its way directly into the undergraduate classroom, and not all medievalists will gravitate toward the work of editing. Like a river separating two halves of a city, the gap between teaching and research does not need to be bridged at every point in order for the two to be productively linked. Most of my students don't need to know about the history of Chaucerian editing as they navigate their way through the General Prologue for the first time. But my knowledge of Chaucerian editing certainly shapes the way that I guide them on this track and others like it and provides me with a context for that most elusive of pedagogical practices, teaching one's research.

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