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The Carnavalesque in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

This study sets to examine the applicability of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The canonical novel of the American literature published in the middle of the nineteenth century portrays the genesis of the American Puritan culture, while the polyphonic nature of the novel, it is argued, exposes the rifts of and the grotesqueness of this culture.

Keywords: *Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, Bakhtin, Carnavalesque, Polyphony, Heteroglossia and Grotesque*

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Bakhtin's Carnival

As Carolyn M. Shields has argued, Bakhtin, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, does not patently testify that one needs to contravene the “monological, authoritarian, hierarchal patterns of thinking” (97). The questioning of these ‘patterns of thinking,’ however is done obliquely, through concepts such as the carnival and its homological and close affinity with the novelistic discourse. By scrutinizing the matter of carnival, laughter and dialogism in the Middle Ages and authors such as François Rabelais and Fyodor Dostoevsky, Bakhtin leads us to provide, in Michael Holquist’s suggestion, “obvious parallels between [...] scathing references to the Catholic churches in the sixteenth century and Stalinism in twentieth century” [*Rabelais and his World* xv]. Elsewhere, Clark and Holquist, refer to this as “political allegory” (315). As a matter of fact, Bakhtin puts forth this idea to praise Rabelais’ fiction for the double-voiced mode it has adopted. In recognizing carnival as a setting of liberation, popular protest, and fully democratic social relations, subsequently, Bakhtin’s vision represents an allegorical alternative to the Stalinist system. Furthermore, even Marxist critics have acknowledged the seminal importance of this concept. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, situates Bakhtin resolutely within the traditions of Marxist thought and argues that Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais “can be read as a hidden polemic directed against Stalinist uses of Marxism in the Soviet regime of the 1930s and 1940s” (321). For him, “the fight to make Rabelais a man of people,” in other words, “is a fight to make Marx a man of the people” (Ibid. 322); Bakhtin’s conception of carnival provides an important vision of an “alternative social context” to the Stalinist system (ibid).

Bakhtin defines carnival as “the second world and the second life outside officialdom” or “people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 6, 8). Carnival in short “is festive life” (Ibid.). By ‘officialdom’, is meant a serious culture, a world marked by the “prevailing truth” of an “established order” with its “hierarchal rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions,” one filled mostly with dogmatism of religious and ecclesiastical forms of social domination and restraints (ibid. 10). That is “why the tone of the official...was

monolithically serious and why the element of laughter is alien to it” (ibid. 9). However, carnival, in Bakhtin’s words, is “the temporary suspension of hierarchal rank,” a celebration of the liberation from the “established order” that gives rise to an overwhelming sense of the “gay relativity” of those orders and truths, “the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (de l’envers), of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrownings” (ibid. 11). During the carnival everything conventional and official is mocked and reversed and seen as happily grotesque. Hence, “no dogma, no authoritarian, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist” during the carnival because this is a “second world” that provides relief from the oppression of institutionalized hierarchy by rejecting and defying the very institutions that proliferated cultural standards (Ibid. 3, 196).

There are three firmly connected elements in the ‘carnival sense of the world’ that require further elucidation. Grotesque imagery, folk laughter and the marketplace are the elements that create the ambience of grotesque realism during the carnival. Reflecting on grotesque imagery, Bakhtin does not consider the grotesque in the context of the accepted views and beliefs derived from Romantic novelists such as Anne Radcliffe. According to him, “the world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all, suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 39). Bakhtin mentions Wolfgang Kayser’s conception of the grotesque which includes four basic premises as following:

“(1) the grotesque is an estranged world; (2) the grotesque appears to be an expression of an incomprehensible, inexplicable, and impersonal force; (3) the grotesque is a play with the absurd; (4) the creation of the grotesque is an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of world” (Adams and Yates and Warren 17)

Bakhtin holds that Kayser is generalizing about the definition of the grotesque in all periods; he contends that the only right meaning of the grotesque is to be found in the Renaissance, “linked to the culture of folk humor” (ibid. 46). He further maintains that:

Kayser's definition [of grotesque] first of all strike us by the gloomy, terrifying tone of the grotesque world that alone the author sees. In reality gloom is completely alien to the entire development of this world up to the romantic period.... the Medieval and Renaissance grotesque, [is] filled with the spirit of carnival, liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying; it takes away all fears and is therefore completely gay and bright. All that was frightening in ordinary life is tuned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 46).

Hence, instead of dark 'monstrosities' of the Romantic grotesque, Bakhtin thinks of the grotesque as "the festival of spring, of sunrise of morning" (ibid. 41). Moreover, this grotesque imagery is imbued with grotesque body, images of "exaggeration, hyperbolism ... [and] excessiveness" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 303). Actually, by the 'body' here, Bakhtin does not mean "the body and its physiology in the modern sense," for it is not "individualized," but a universal, cosmic and "at the same time an all-people character" (ibid. 19). In contrast with the 'classical' conception of the body which is associated with the ready-made, complete, individual entity, finished, the grotesque conception of the body was of an incomplete, becoming, amorphous entity (ibid. 28-29). Therefore, for Bakhtin the grotesque body becomes a suitable alternative for the classical one within which the classical signifies the ideology of official culture and its fixed conventions and static view toward life, while the grotesque one signifies "a body in act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (ibid. 317).

The most salient feature pertaining grotesque realism is the degradation. According to Bakhtin, "the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 19). Touching on this, Linda Hutcheon maintains that "there is a specific and wholesome transfer from the elevated, spiritual, ideal plane to the material and bodily reality of life" (84). In addition, Sue Vice notes that "its [degradation's] central trait is an ambivalent act...this ambivalence, particularly when it involves the new birth implicit in death, or the

resurgence implicit in being toppled, is the characteristic principle of both grotesque realism and carnival itself" (155). Regarding this ambivalence, Bakhtin suggests that "degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 24) or, in other words, the death is not merely negative but gives rise to a rebirth and regeneration that is of paramount importance.

The other aspect which plays a crucial role in carnival is laughter. For Bakhtin carnival rituals are shaped on the "basis of laughter;" "laughter degrades and materializes" (ibid. 7, 20). In his essay "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin dramatizes laughter in a manner that it "has the remarkable power of making an object come up close,...turn it upside down, inside out" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 23). Elsewhere, he suggests that "carnivalistic laughter [...] is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 127). What issues from laughter is parody that is subversive of authoritative discourses. Parody, in Bakhtin's words, is bound up with carnival and "to the carnivalized genres it is [...] organically inherent" (ibid.). One important instance of parody relevant to our discussion is the parody of the sacred in a way that there remains no distinction between the sacred and the profane, hence a dialogic, polyphonic ambience. Anthony Gash asserts that Bakhtin's conception is "Platonic rather than Aristotelian," that Bakhtin maintains the "Socratic discovery of the dialogic nature of thought, of truth itself, presumes a carnivalistic familiarization of relations among people who have entered the dialogue, it presumes the abolition of all distance between them" (qtd. in Knowles 180). It is also, Gash continues, "Kierkegaardian rather than Hegelian", for Bakhtin adopts Kierkegaard's assertion that humor is "the incognito of the religious" (ibid.).

The third element in Bakhtin's formulation of carnival is the marketplace. This is a location in which grotesquery and laughter are shared in it. Bakhtin further elucidates that marketplace as an unofficial site is controlled by people and this is a place where people could experience their collectivity:

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is a people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is *outside* of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 255), (Emphasis added)

Reflecting on the historical transformation of carnival, Bakhtin “bemoans the demise of ‘true’ carnival and its partial transformation into bourgeois frivolity” (Gardiner 34).

Bakhtin’s Carnival and *The Scarlet Letter*

Many Nineteenth-century American fictions, as Gregg Crane suggests, “simultaneously embrace and reject various forms of social mobility, such as the greater autonomy and freedom of women or the crossing of class, racial, or ethnic boundaries” (6). One prominent instance is *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Nathaniel Hawthorne in his illustrious introduction to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), makes a distinction between the romance and the novel. He comments that an author by calling his or her work a romance “need[ed] hardly [to] be observed that he wishes to claim a certain attitude, both as to its fashion and material;” the romance “as a work of art [...] must rigidly subject itself to laws and [it] sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart” (Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* ix). Michael Davitt Bell suggests that for “Hawthorne the domain of romance is a world of balance or reconciliation” (qtd. in Michael McKeon 632). Jonathan Arac relates this ‘balance’ to the public and private domains: “Hawthorne’s romances emphasize the private as the reality that public life either mocks or conceals. In the “Custom House” preface ... the document about Hester Prynne left by Surveyor Pue are available for Hawthorne’s imaginative use” (qtd. in Cassuto and Eby and Reiss 139). Because as Hawthorne remarks, they were not “official, but of a private nature” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 26) and “this emphasis on the private,” Arac continues, “joins Hawthorne to a practice of writing that we usually think of him as opposing” (qtd. in Cassuto and Eby and Reiss 139).

Obviously, what matters crucially to a Bakhtinian reading of Hawthorne’s novel is his scathing criticism of the Puritan culture as a sociopolitical and religious ideology, with its strict codes and conventions, those engendering a world with no interaction and flourish of ‘audible individual voices or utterances’. Thus, the so-called dialogic interaction has turned into a monologic one. Yet, by and large, there is a

'dialogic' tendency inherent in the genre of novel, in Bakhtin's words, thereby allowing the "word to become the arena of conflict between two voices" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* 106). Therefore, Heteroglossia (on which more later) as "a double-voiced discourse" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 324) is forged, and this monologic view is undermined.

According to Brook Thomas, what distinguishes Hawthorne from most of other novelists "is his sense of the tragic and transgressive nature of historical change. Figured in *The Scarlet Letter* as an act of adultery that threatens the political order of Puritan Boston, such transgressions both keep history moving forward and undercut hopes of radical breaks with the past" (qtd. in Millington 163). Writing "the Custom House" as the introductory part to the novel, Hawthorne makes an attempt to provide the background information to his ancestors, those who were in his view "dim and dusky," whose past still "haunt[s]" him (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 9). "I know not," says Hawthorne, "whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of heaven for their cruelties;" "I, the present writer," he continues, "as their representative, hereby, take shame upon myself" (ibid. 10).

Concerning such Puritans, Joel Pfister remarks that "Puritan colonizers erect their buildings, and impose their customs, values, and ways of identifying in the hope of making it all seem like the only imaginable legitimate authority and reality. Dissenters are imprisoned, pilloried, burdened with halts, and whipped" (qtd. in Millington 37). This pertains to the central motif of individual vs. society in the novel which accords with Bakhtin's theory of carnival in which Puritans represent the society and the dissenters the individuals. Historically, one of these dissenters was Anne Hutchinson, mentioned in the first chapter of the novel "The Prison Door," who came to Massachusetts and soon clashed with the religious authorities. Though she "was a woman of strong faith" (Stille 9), her views were labeled "antinomian" due to her clash with the authorities and she was banished from the settlement.

Modeled on Anne Hutchinson, Hester Prynne, the heroine of the novel, is, in Harold Bloom's words, "a prime instance of Emerson's American religion of self-reliance" (6). Hawthorne makes an indirect

comparison between Hutchinson, a dissenter religiously and socio-politically, and Hester, “as a woman and a radical” (Leland S. Person 19). Hester’s violation of commonly held ideas, the so-called codes and conventions, and her clash with the authorities makes her a figure of dissent, the alien, the other. The puritan society in which Hester lives is a monologic one and a “monologic [...] world,” Bakhtin maintains, “does not recognize someone else's thought, someone else's idea, as an object of representation” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 79). Hester’s transgression of the stringent rules of her society makes her a figure of carnival condemned to “noncarnival life.” In carnival there appears “a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions” (Ibid. 123). In the clash between the carnival individual and noncarnival society “became the symbol of unity, and the unsocialized self was designated the symbol of chaos unleashed” (Bercovitch 56).

It is not for nothing that Hester lives in the forest, a “freed from authority” place in the novel which the Puritan culture figures as a place of evil. As a place of ‘transgression’ the forest contrasts sharply with the town where stringent law and religion prevail. It is the proper place for ‘a new mode of interrelationship between individuals,’ hence the rendezvous Hester, who “determines to cast off the arts of deception, to act openly on the truths of “impulse” and “individuality”” (qtd. in. Colacurcio 52), and the transgressing priest Dimmesdale. Another transgressing figure, or ‘forest figure,’ is arguably, the ‘leech’, Roger Chillingworth. A physician, he is himself, *in public*, a figure of authority. But he is keen on avenging himself on Dimmesdale, who in public stands for law and authority. Associated with the inhabitants of the forests, the Native Americans, he is referred to as “The Black Man” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 62). We realize that he has “learned many new secrets in the wilderness” among the Indians, those whom Puritans label evil and satanic. The imagery highlights this association: “a writhing horror twisted itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them” (Ibid. 49). Leech-like and snake-like, this insidious figure gnaws at the

very foundations of the established order; he turns it inside out by tacitly exposing its very icon, Dimmesdale.

Authority and its defiance in the novel creates, in Eleanor Ty's words, an "interplay of voices" (qtd. in Hohne and Wussow 98). In his groundbreaking essay "Discourse in the Novel" Bakhtin calls this "heteroglossia" which indicates "*another speech in another language* [...] and it expresses simultaneously two different intentions" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 324). Hester and Roger tend to be labeled 'alien,' since, to use Bakhtin's words, their "consciousness awaken[s] to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses" (ibid. 345); Also, the forest can be regarded as an 'independent ideological' place. As David Lodge points out, "it's Bakhtin's point that the variety of discourses in the novel prevents the novelist from imposing a single world view upon his readers even if he wanted to" (21).

Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel was published in the period called American Renaissance or rather American Romanticism. As such, Wolfgang Kayser's views, mentioned above, about the grotesque are relevant to Hawthorne's fiction. The gloomy, dark and dim ambience dominates the novel. The gloomy ambience and mood right from the beginning of the novel starts contributes to figuring disillusionment with the vision of any human utopia, particularly the 'American dream' in its nascent stage, such a utopia is what Bakhtin calls in his theory of carnival a "people's second life" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 8). From the very beginning one can detect traces of grotesquery like the townspeople whose clothes are "sadcolored" and "gray," portraying the Puritans' refusal of anything merry or colorful (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 39). Moreover, the contiguity of prison and cemetery has a significant impact upon the inhabitants of the city. Such an ambience is unrelenting throughout the novel. In effect, Puritan entrenched beliefs, norms and orders make their society seem grotesque.

However, we suggest, this 'romantic' or 'gothic' grotesquery also paves the way for creating the situation of, in Bakhtin's words, 'grotesque realism,' especially, when there is a romantic individual rebel. Degradation is a central component of this grotesque realism. The second chapter of the novel, "The Market Place," which is also the first scaffold

scene, can be considered as brilliantly exemplifying 'degradation.' The narrator illustrates the entering of Hester Prynne thus:

She took the baby on her arm, and, with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbors. On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold threads, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the appeal which she wore, and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 43-44).

Hester as a sinful woman is supposed to wear the 'letter A' on her dress and a gesture of shamefulness on her face as signs of her degradation. But, neither the gaudy letter nor her demeanor intimates any sense of the required shame; what is demanded by the puritan code is reversed and "a haughty smile" and "a glance that would not be abashed" substitute it. As Joseph Adamson notes, "instead of surrendering to the instinctive impulse in shame to drop her head and avert her grace, she defiantly smiles and raises her head and looks directly at the crowd" (qtd. in Adamson and Clark 58). This is also apparent in the spectator's comments; "to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates," says a female spectator (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 44). That is, degradation is overturned. Another instance of the degradation of the magistrates is the scene when Hester has "fringed and embroidered" a pair of gloves "to his [Governor Bellingham] order...which were to be worn on some great occasion of state" (ibid. 79). Thus, "the garments ... had been wrought by her sinful hands" and even "her needlework was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarves, and the minister on his hand" (ibid. 66). The degradation is reversed; as a strategy and sign of power, it is turned upon itself.

To expand on the subversion of authority, in what follows we say more on the two important features which constitutes a sense of the carnivalesque in the novel, that is, laughter and parody. In Bakhtin's view, as mentioned in the introduction, laughter and parody are the basic elements of carnival and are subversive of authoritative discourses.

According to Bakhtin, they may create a happily grotesque and dialogic impression removing the boundaries among all strata in society. One of the core ideas of parody in the novel, one of particular interest to Bakhtin, is that of the sacred. Again, the first scaffold scene, the so-called second chapter, very well instances the “profanation” (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 123) in the novel. Hester with pearl in her arms is likened to a ‘sinless motherhood’ or ‘Divine Maternity’ reminiscent of Mary with Jesus in her arms. The narrator portrays the scene as follows:

Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritan, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of *Divine Maternity*, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent; something which should remind him, indeed, but only by contrast, of that *sacred image of sinless motherhood*, whose infant was to redeem the world. (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 46), (Emphasis Added)

Again the strategy of degradation, the discourse of sinfulness, is turned on its head, the very puritan religious discourse is parodied, the sacred is profaned or rather the distinction between the sacred and the profane is questioned.

Furthermore, Pearl, though a fruit of sin, “an imp of evil” who “could not be made amenable to rules” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 72, 74) in the puritan discourse, is described by the narrator, whose voice counterposes those of the Puritan Fathers, and indeed all the characters in the novel, thus: “the infant was worthy to have been brought forth in Eden; worthy to have been left there, to be the plaything of the angels, after the world’s first parents were driven out” (ibid. 71). In the words of Harold Bloom, “Pearl emerges from a deeper stratum of Emerson, from the orphism and Gnosticism that mark the sage’s first anarchic influx of power and knowledge” (6) Captivatingly, in his first sight of Pearl, Governor Bellingham acknowledges that “I profess, I have never seen the like, since my days of vanity, in Old King James’ times, when I was wont to esteem it a high favor to be admitted to a *court mask!* There used to be a swarm of these small apparitions, in holiday time; and we called them children of *the Lord of Misrule*” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 86, Emphasis Added). This acknowledgement refers to one of the key facts

of carnival: Hester and Dimmesdale symbolically play the role of 'the Lord of Misrule' and Pearl that of their child; for they are parodying the normal social order turning it playfully on its head.

Before referring to the end of the novel which figures another 'market place,' we must make mention of the chapter "The New English Holiday" which illustrates Hawthorne's feeling of nostalgia for the old English rites and festivals in the festal season of the year. He says: "the Puritans compressed whatever mirth and public joy they deemed allowable to human infirmity" (ibid. 179) or:

Here, it is true, were none of the appliances which popular merriment would so readily have found in the England of Elizabeth's time, or that of James – no rude shows of a theatrical kind; no minstrel, with his harp and legendary ballads, nor gleeman with an ape dancing to his music; no juggler, with his tricks of mimic witchcraft [...] All such professors of the several branches of jocularly would have been sternly repressed, not only by the rigid discipline of law, but by the general sentiment which gives law its vitality. *Not the less, however, the great, honest face of the people smiled, grimly, perhaps, but widely too* (ibid. 179-180). (Emphasis Added)

Hawthorne's nostalgic account of the old festivities also intimates that the spirit of carnival cannot be totally suppressed – people laugh, 'Not the less'.

The second scene of the marketplace and the third scaffold scene appear to a certain extent different from the former descriptions. This is the Election Day and Dimmesdale is supposed to bestow a sermon for the crowd. But everything is reversed when he ascends the scaffold and instead reveals the secret of the scarlet letter:

With a convulsive motion, he tore away the ministerial band from before his breast. It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation [...] while the minister stood, with a flush of triumph in his face, as one who, in the crisis of acutest pain, had won a victory....there was a sweet and gentle smile over his face, as of a spirit sinking into deep repose (ibid. 198, 199).

As Bakhtin explains, the "primary carnivalistic act is the *mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king*" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 124). Here, Dimmesdale's tearing away his

ministerial band and revealing his sin is truly an act of “decrowning.” The scene in Michael T. Gilmore’s assertions “deconstructs the speaker/ruler divide” (2005, 34), the carnivalistic situation is complete; the monologic discourse of authority is, at least momentarily, subverted. The novel itself ends on a carnivalesque note.

Concluding Remarks

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* deftly addresses the Puritan culture of the seventeenth-century America as, to use Bakhtin’s terms, a “monological culture.” Hawthorne’s novel is, among other things, the fact that laughter and the spirit of carnival cannot be totally repressed even in the most ideological and monological cultures. Although the writer apparently creates a Romantic grotesque, that is, one of dark, gloomy monstrosities, to intimate the distorted nature of the society he portrays, the implication is that the Bakhtinian conception of the grotesque, one associated with “light” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 41), with the carnivalesque, capable of subverting the rule of ‘darkness,’ ‘decrowning’ it, is in the background too.

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