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# Introduction

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I wrote a book. In it, I offered an analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a work first written and performed in or around the year 1600, and took issue with many of the critical orthodoxies through which the play has usually been regarded. One of these orthodoxies concerns itself with the characteristics of tragedy as Shakespeare wrote it, and I put the case that *Hamlet*, understood as a work of early seventeenth-century art, prompts us to think again about what Shakespearean tragedy might be said to comprise.

Although I had imagined that departure from Elsinore would serve as a temporary farewell to Shakespeare studies, it soon became apparent that things were going to take a different course. Writing is hard. I began to see that I had failed to communicate, even to those who had read and liked my book, that which I thought I had set out plainly; I also began to see that I had more to say. As another study of *Hamlet* was out of the question, I found myself thinking about Shakespearean tragedy in the round—sometimes, about whether there is any such thing, rather than a cluster of individual tragedies that happen to have been written, singly or collaboratively, by William Shakespeare.

It was thus in a spirit of something between curiosity and exploratory inquiry that I set out to write two essays. One on Roman attitudes to Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra*; the other on time, temporality, and prophecy in *Macbeth*. Doing so convinced me that, despite persistent rumors to the contrary, many features of Shakespeare's tragic plays have passed unremarked. It also helped me to understand that there is more than enough in them to define "Shakespearean tragedy" as a tool for critical thinking, if not quite as a literary kind. Both essays are folded into the chapters that follow.

So much for how this book came about. The version of it before you has two goals. First, it aims to let readers see for themselves how Shakespeare's tragedies work, or at least to let them see how I see them working—from *Titus Andronicus* at some point around 1590 through to *Coriolanus* nearly twenty years later. These plays are, I suggest, preoccupied from first to last with the inscrutability of human life, the indeterminacy of the universe to which human life belongs, the unacknowledged fictions through which human beings attempt to make their existences feel meaningful, and the unhappy consequences to which these fictions generally give rise. Second, this book is an attempt to explain *why* Shakespeare wrote his tragedies the way he did, and to get at something of what—beyond gratifying patrons and getting people to buy theater tickets or printed books—he hoped to achieve by putting them out there in the world. My claim is that he did so to affirm the status of dramatic art as a medium—perhaps the *best* medium—through which to explore the truth of human experience in a world that is not fully susceptible to rational analysis.

When thinking about comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Love's Labour's Lost* or *As You Like It*, it is straightforward enough to establish that Shakespeare was aware of the degree to which human affairs depend on delusionality of one kind or another; that delusion frequently becomes belief; that belief frequently becomes identity. Here, although delusion threatens chaos and destruction, it is ultimately tamed or rendered benign by the comic-harmonic resolutions of the plot. In Shakespeare's tragedies, delusion takes on a very different aspect, and not only because it aims to generate pathos rather than eye-rolling or laughter. As we shall see, it becomes causal—an animating force of plots in which contrivance is precisely the problem, and where the endings are anything but clearly ordered or resolved.

The difficulty faced by Shakespeare was to find a way of writing about a world framed and characterized by delusions of one sort or another without surrendering his works to expediency, opportunism, deceit, self-deceit, and despair. The challenge was the more acute for a playwright who came to the view that conventionally received models of drama were themselves a part of the problem—not only encouraging misconceptions about the human condition, but providing society at large with a treasure house of metaphors through which to legitimate or otherwise to dignify the delusions it lives by. If writing plays risks making things worse, why bother at all? Why not embrace the misanthropy and dogmatic pessimism of a Thersites or a Timon, and retire to Stratford to hoard more grain?

In what follows, I propose that Shakespeare never settled on a single answer to this series of questions, and that he neither elaborates nor implies a theory of tragedy along the lines of those we can find in, for example, Aristotle and Hegel. But his tragedies are by no means a collection of improvisatory one-offs. They are instead a series of experiments in which he pulls his art this way and that in the conjoined attempts to represent the particularities of the world as they appear to him, and to discover how far tragic representation can be stretched in order accommodate the darker aspects of this vision. What is more, Shakespeare wants us to infer that dramatic art might help us to understand our place within the miserably compromised situations that it depicts. Tentatively, perhaps, to contemplate the possibility of moving beyond it.

In responding to a line from the first part of *Henry IV*, James Baldwin captures something vitally important about the Shakespeare in whom I am interested: "Art is here to prove, and to help one bear, the fact that all safety is an illusion."[1] Baldwin frequently writes of illusion (the convenient fictions, whether fashioned by others or oneself, by which one is taken in) and delusion (the distortion of things or events so that they cohere with our prior beliefs and opinions) when thinking his way inside the difficulty many Americans have in acknowledging the significance of slavery and segregation in the history of their nation. But he is just as concerned to delineate the role of the artist or poet (for him, the two terms are interchangeable) more generally. Which, as he puts it in his superlative essay on how and why he came to admire Shakespeare, is to overturn the belief that the evil of the world "can be laid at the door of Another," and to help us understand that we "feed" this evil "by failing so often in our private lives to deal with our private truth—our own experience."[2] For Baldwin, two of the most valuable functions of art are to reveal the unexamined fictions through which we divert our gaze from the reality of our lives, and to suggest as much as it can of what that reality might be said to consist. By doing so, by "correct[ing] the delusions to which we fall prey" when handling the common currency of "birth, suffering, love, and death," it might have the capacity to "make the world a more human dwelling place."

> It goes without saying, I believe, that if we understood ourselves better, we would damage ourselves less. But the barrier between oneself and one's knowledge of oneself is high indeed. There are so many things one would rather not know! We become social creatures because we cannot live any other way. But in order to become social, there are a great many other things that we must not become, and we are frightened, all of us, of these forces within us that perpetually menace our precarious security. Yet the forces are there: we cannot will them away. All we can

> do is learn to live with them. And we cannot learn this unless we are willing to tell the truth about ourselves, and the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be. The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation.[3]

In exposing the delusionality to which every human being is prone, Shakespeare's tragedies kindle something adjacent to Baldwin's acts of effortful reconciliation—howsoever fragile, contingent, or disappointing these reconciliations might sometimes seem to be. *Shakespeare's Tragic Art*, I suppose, seeks to evangelize on their behalf.

* * *

A word or two on my approach to the Shakespearean text.

At all times, my intention has been to reconstruct as cogently and coherently as possible what I take Shakespeare to have been doing in writing his tragedies as he did—and to offer such reconstructions with an intelligently and sympathetically open mind. I do not have a critical credo as such, but I am bound to Frank Kermode's doctrine that the primary and indispensable quality of good literary criticism is "a scepticism, an interest in things as they are, in inhuman reality as well as in human justice."[4] Another governing assumption has been the belief that Shakespeare's plays are carefully constructed works of art: that although the plays demand of their performers and readers and spectators that they figure things out for themselves, this freedom of interpretation finds expression within the boundaries set by the design of the work. As Joel Altman phrases it in his indispensable *The Tudor Play of Mind*, the drama that Shakespeare learned to write "functioned as a medium of intellectual and emotional exploration" for individuals who had been taught to think in the rhetorical tradition, and who "were accustomed to examine many sides of a given theme." Meaning "could be discerned only through the total action of the drama."[5] Even though Shakespeare is famous for tragic characters that seem to transcend the plays to which they belong—Brutus, Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Iago, Cleopatra—I have tried to keep in mind that the "total action of the drama" is the thing.

It follows that I am a historicist of sorts. Necessarily so: to understand what Shakespeare wrote and to explain why he wrote it, one needs the patience and scholarly curiosity required to identify and then sift the various contexts with which his writing intersects. I believe that anyone proposing to read his plays closely (there are, to be clear, many other ways of approaching them) needs to do so alongside fine-grained analyses of the discursive traditions with which they are in contact, and in which they sometimes have a considerable share. The challenge is to do so without losing sight of the primary object of inquiry. That is, not to use—in general practice, to excerpt from—Shakespeare's tragedies to support a thesis about the history of literature, literary theory, politics, political theory, society, social theory, religion, theology, rhetoric, ideas, the theater, or anything else, but to use different sorts of history to illuminate Shakespeare's tragedies as they are available to us. In the introduction to her edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, Helen Vendler makes the point well:

> Aesthetically speaking, it is what a lyric *does with* its borrowed social languages—i.e., how it casts them into permutational and combinatorial forms—that is important. Shakespeare is unusually rich in his borrowings of diction and formulas from patronage, from religion, from law, from courtship, from diplomacy, from astronomy, and so on; but he tends to be a blasphemer in all of these realms. He was a master subverter of the languages he borrowed, and the point of *literary* interest is not the fact of his borrowings but how he turned them inside out.[6]

Without long hours of reading, note-taking, and thinking in the library, no recognition of the "social languages" that Shakespeare subverts would be possible; without an awareness that these labors are only of use to the extent that they help us explain and interpret the poems and plays, it is hard not to mistake the scale and the nature of Shakespeare's achievement.

All of which is to say that the criteria through which I decide whether one set of contextual data or another passes the "so what?" test are critical. Do they or don't they help us to understand Shakespeare's tragedies as works of art? Everything beyond the particular Shakespearean tragedy under discussion is contextual, and each of the contexts to which I turn—some indisputable, others at first blush tenuous—has been admitted only in the service of my efforts at exegesis and interpretation. I thus employ the term "context" broadly and sometimes anachronistically: to cover not only the social, political, historical, religious, intellectual, educational, cultural, or biographical-prosopographical topics that we usually think of in this connection, but also questions such as the origins and nature of tragedy, and the status of poetic and material form; if the likes of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, or Barthes help me to make a point with more nuance or exactitude than would otherwise be the case, then they are in.

That said, my most frequent contextual concern has been to imagine my way inside Shakespeare's complicated and ultimately conflicted engagements with humanism—with the body of doctrine centered on the *studia humanitatis* that dominated the cultural life of sixteenth-century England. *Studia humanitatis* literally means "studies of humanity," but has a more specific sense here as the imitative study of ancient literature and of the arts associated with it. (The phrase is itself borrowed from Cicero.) Humanists believed that attending to ancient texts and ideas would inculcate a model of virtue and virtuosity that, they claimed, had been lost to pious obscurantism in the centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West; humanistic learning would as such translate—in the sense both of carrying over and adapting—the glories of the ancient past so that they could answer and ameliorate the exigencies of the present. Humanism was native to the Italian lands of the 1300s, and was a later import to England and Northern Europe; furthermore, when it took root in the north in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, it was as an elite phenomenon—a token with which to assert one's place within the international cognoscenti. It remains the case that for Shakespeare as for all of those who completed a grammar school education in the later sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries, the *studia humanitatis* was simply how one learned to read, think, speak, write, and behave. (To avoid confusion, let me add before moving on that my uses of "humanism" and the related term "humanist," both as a noun and an adjective, belong exclusively within this early modern semantic field. At no point do I identify, or seek to identify, the *studia humanitatis* with the ideals of human freedom, agency, and self-sufficiency that became articles of faith for anti-religious "humanists" from the nineteenth century onward.)[7]

If this attention to humanism smells a little too much like erudition to account for plays written by a man who grew up in the provinces and made his living in the theater, it shouldn't. Although reconstructing the practices and assumptions of humanism costs the twenty-first-century scholar a sizable outlay of time and energy, versions of it were the bread and butter of all early modern writers. Shakespeare was not particularly learned, and had smaller Latin and less Greek than his near contemporaries Ben Jonson and George Chapman (neither of whom, incidentally, went to university). But he was more than learned enough. As a schoolboy, he had been immersed in humanistic culture, and, as a professional writer from his mid-twenties to his late forties, he returned to what we now call the classics as often, and with as much attention, as he needed to.[8] In brief, Shakespeare drew on all aspects of life as he experienced it in completing his work. Everything was copy, and he was content to leave to others the task of policing the barriers between high and low, learned and vernacular.

We do not need to recognize every quotation, allusion, pastiche, or *hommage* in a film by the Coen Brothers or Quentin Tarantino, in a play by Tony Kushner or Martin McDonagh or Annie Baker, or in an episode of *The Sopranos* (or *Doctor Who*) in order to appreciate the experience of viewing them—any more than we need to be familiar with the intricacies of the *Odyssey* to appreciate Joyce's *Ulysses* or *King Lear* to appreciate Kurosawa's *Ran*. But if we do notice that an artist is in some way—which is to say, deliberately or inadvertently—nodding to another artist or work or technique or tradition or formula, we experience the work differently. As the actors John Heminges and Henry Condell phrase it in their prefatory remarks to the 1623 Folio, Shakespeare's works addressed everyone "from the most able, to him that can but spell." The patterns of artifice through which a dramatist creates the illusion of reality lend themselves, more perhaps than any other verbal art form, to being interpreted on a variety of levels. Shakespeare knew this, and never worried that every audience member or reader should be able to "get" every resonance of his writing. Consider his use of Latin in *Titus Andronicus*, his use of macaronic Latin (Latin deliberately jumbled up with English to comic effect) in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, his jokes about the Pythagorean transmigration of souls in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, or his later and occasionally downright risky experiments with what Stephen Orgel calls the "poetics of incomprehensibility."[9] If the play is good enough, Shakespeare seems to have concluded, then a little obscurity can serve to draw its audience members in by flattering them both for what they recognize, and for what they don't. The bigger danger, which Shakespeare saw with the clarity of one who had scrambled to obtain much of his cultural capital for himself, was the snobbery of talking down to the groundlings. He avoids it with an audacity that is quicksilver and steadfast. In considering his tragedies afresh, this audacity is one of the things that I seek better to understand.

This might be the point at which to stress that Shakespeare's writings do not embody the soul or spirit or anything else of his age. For the most part, this is because "ages," or historical periods, have such limited value as analytical tools: despite the gallons of ink that continue to be spilled over and around them, they are no more than the approximate categories through which we seek to make stretches of the past more readily digestible. This is not to say that notions like the medieval, the Renaissance, the Elizabethan, the Jacobean, the modern, the early modern, the baroque, or even "the age of Shakespeare" do not have value as a form of shorthand—and in the case of the Renaissance, as more than a shorthand (it was an artistic movement before it came to denote a period of time). Instead, it is to remind ourselves that, as such notions are fictions, we should be wary of reifying or essentializing them; the history of any given "age" encompasses a plurality of voices and perspectives that cannot be unified without distortion.[10] In the latter part of the sixteenth century and early part of the seventeenth, one of those voices belonged to Shakespeare. As it had to, this voice emerged from the cultural, social, and intellectual orthodoxies that informed its historical moment—but so did those of countless others, the vast majority of whom were not distinguished writers. What makes Shakespeare distinctive is not his refusal to be constrained by these orthodoxies (again, the same is true of many others), but the extraordinary appropriations, transformations, and analyses to which he subjects them in his art. He was not a representative man, never the shuttle to anyone else's loom.

◆

One of the most salutary features of Shakespeare criticism over the past four decades has been the renewed interest in his plays as theatrical artifacts—as works intended not to be read in a library or classroom, but to be performed, heard, and viewed in a playhouse or theater. As will be apparent at numerous points below, I am in debt to this work, and am moreover grateful to it for helping to disentangle Shakespeare's tragedies from the totalizing idealism in which they have too often been bundled up. The emphasis on performance has been complemented by the research of Lukas Erne and others on Shakespeare's cultivation of a print readership—in the literary marketplace of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, and in posterity.[11] When, in the late 1630s, the great portraitist Anthony van Dyck painted the Cavalier poet Sir John Suckling and wanted to show that Suckling was a Shakespearean, he didn't depict him holding a stage prop like a skull, but a copy of the First or Second Folio, open at the beginning of *Hamlet*. The obvious position for once seems to be the right one: Shakespeare wrote for the stage, for the page, and for the innumerable spaces between. Both/and, not either/or. In Claire Bourne's apt summary, for the early moderns, the theater and the book were "mutually constitutive sites of dramatic action."[12]

A good index of this complementary relationship is that almost all of what little we know about the circumstances in which Shakespeare's plays were first performed comes not from living theatrical tradition, but from documents. These mostly take the form of printed play-texts, but also

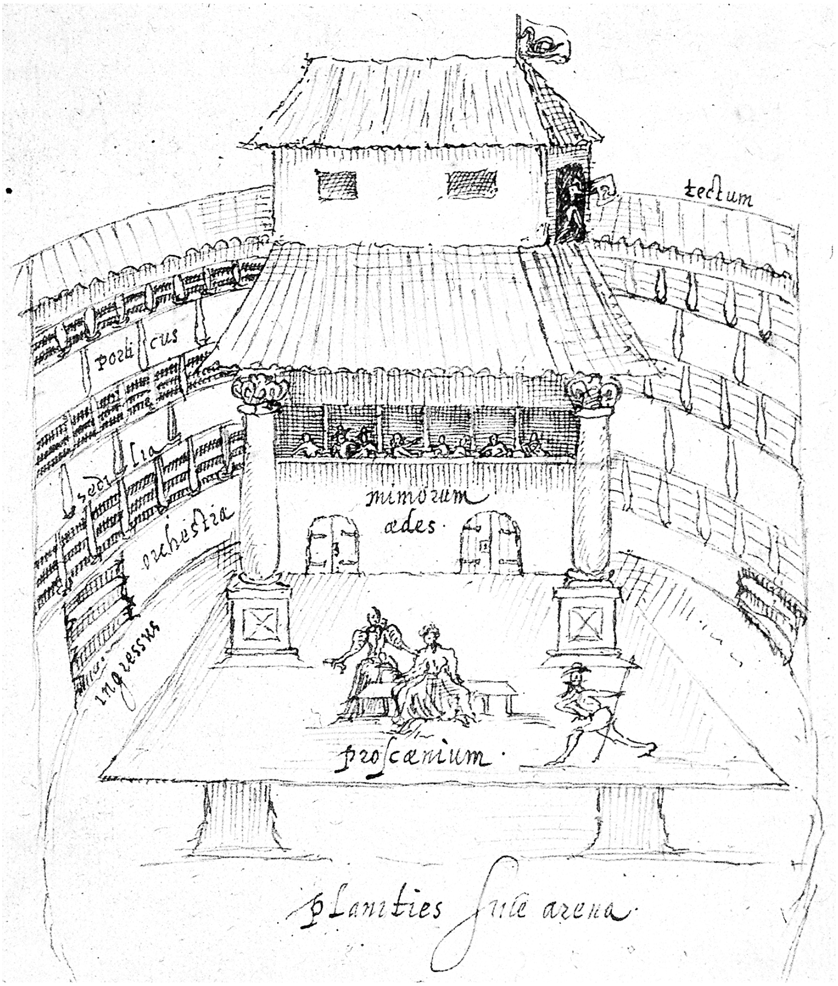
tectum
porticus
sedilia
orchestra
ingressus
mimorum ædes
proscænium
planities sive arena

FIGURE 1. Johannes de Witt, sketch of a performance in progress at The Swan theater in 1596, as copied in Aernout van Buchell's *Adversaria*. Universiteitsbibliotheek Utrecht, Ms. 842, fol. 132r.

include manuscripts like Henslowe's diary, and—exceptionally—visual evidence like Johannes de Witt's 1596 drawing of a performance in progress at The Swan theater (see figure 1), or Henry Peacham's ambiguously-dated sketch of *Titus Andronicus* (see figure 4). ("Almost all" because archaeological excavations at the sites of The Rose and The Curtain have also had important things to tell.) Unfortunately, these documentary sources are not always reliable. To take one famous example, the title page of the apparently unauthorized edition of *Hamlet* published in 1603 advertises that it had been performed "diverse times . . . in the two Universities of Cambridge and Oxford." Maybe. But the absence of corroborative evidence means that there is no way of gauging whether the claim is accurate, or an advertising ploy designed to lure recent graduates—or those who merely wished they were—into making a purchase. The truth is that the destruction of The Globe in 1613 and the effacement of the theaters altogether in 1642 leave us with a dearth of records from which to piece together the history of the English theater's golden age. In a few lucky cases, there are enough data for us to infer some detail or other of the way in which Shakespearean tragedies were staged—gorily, affectingly, with frenetic actorly energy, on a stage draped in black, perhaps with a dance once the main action of the play was over. More frequently, our ignorance of the conditions and norms that shaped theatrical production from 1580 to 1642 means that such detail can only be conjectured. The late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English theater is no Stonehenge, but it is in various important senses pre-historic—an institution that we know existed, but whose modalities for the most part lie beyond the surviving record.[13]

So it was that someone, most likely the learned fabulist John Payne Collier, decided to forge a document witnessing the earliest known performances of *Hamlet*, alongside one of *Richard II*: on a boat, in 1607, off the coast of Sierra Leone.[14] I hope to have resisted less serious versions of the same temptation—that is, to have kept my conjectures both conjectural and to a minimum. Like the actors and directors who, in the decades after 1660, adapted Shakespeare for the Restoration stage and began—that is, invented—the tradition of Shakespeare-in-performance as we know it, I use the printed and manuscript record to reconstruct what I can of the circumstances in which Shakespeare's works were first staged.[15] But the task I have set myself is at once freer and more constrained than theirs: to understand as fully as I can what Shakespeare wrote, and why he wrote it when he wrote it. A more complete archive of his tragedies' early performance histories would be of the utmost assistance to this end. Alas, it does not exist.

Disheartening though this state of affairs can sometimes feel, it permits us one marginal gain: the obligation to remember a distinction that was central to early modern concepts of drama. On one side, stagecraft and acting as mechanical rather than liberal arts; on the other, the more elevated business of "dramatic poetry," with "poetry" here doing duty for all forms of imaginative writing (what we might call "literature") rather than just those forms of it written in verse. The line between the two was policed by university-educated rivals of Shakespeare like Robert Greene (for whom, only the elite should write dramatic poetry; upstart mechanicals like Shakespeare should stick to performing), by writers like Philip Sidney's exact but much longer-lived contemporary Fulke Greville (who fastidiously declared that his own tragedies were "no plays for the stage"), and by many opponents of the theater (dramatic poetry, when read inwardly or aloud to a select few, was acceptable; dramatic poetry when performed for paying audiences through the artifice of stagecraft was the work of the devil).[16]

As we shall see, there are good reasons for concluding that Shakespeare was impatient with this distinction, and not only because his career—like that of Ben Jonson—did much to change the status of the dramatic poet in the early seventeenth century.[17] All I would like to stress for the moment is that Shakespeare's first two publications were heavily classicizing exercises in the stylized mini-epic that would become known as the epyllion: *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Both were extremely popular and helped him to establish himself as a "name" in the Elizabethan cultural marketplace. Likewise, several of Shakespeare's sonnets were in scribal circulation by the late 1590s, and an entire sequence of them was printed in 1609. Put simply, a key part of Shakespeare's repudiation of the split between dramatic poetry and stagecraft was that he, a theatrical professional, wanted his dramatic language to be enjoyed on the page just as much as in the performances of the Lord Chamberlain's (later, the King's) Men. By the time the first quarto edition of *Troilus and Cressida* emerged in 1609, its publisher could blurb it by telling Shakespeare's readers that they "have here a new play, never staled with the stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar." The pitch is a contestable and remarkably un-Shakespearean one, but it is striking even so.[18]

In his great humanistic commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, the Italian scholar and controversialist Francesco Robortello observed that tragedy

> may be considered in two ways, either insofar as it is theatrical and performed by the actors, or insofar as it is made by the poet as he writes. If you think of it in terms of the poet as he writes, then we may say that the principal end of tragedy is to imitate the dispositions of souls and the moral characters (*mores*) of human beings through written words, through which description it is possible to discern whether men are fortunate or unfortunate. If you assume it to refer to the actor as he performs, then we may say that the greatest and most powerful end [of tragedy] is that very action as the result of which people are judged to be fortunate or unfortunate.[19]

I suspect that Robortello would have struggled with Shakespeare, but to anyone contemplating Shakespeare's tragic output, his formulation functions as a reassurance and a challenge. The fact that we cannot say much about the plays in their earliest performances is undeniably frustrating. The fact that there is still a lot to say about the plays as dramatic poems—as intelligently assembled works of writerly art that attempt to "imitate" the features of the human condition that lead us to feel the ways we feel and do the things we do—gives rise to headaches of a very different sort. Oftentimes, to vertigo.

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