

OVID'S MEDEA AND THE MAGIC OF LANGUAGE

Valerie Wise

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid suppresses certain elements of the myth of Medea and supplements others. The focus of his alterations, it seems, is on language itself, and particularly on the relation of language to metamorphosis. He returns again and again to Medea's use of incantation. Whether in the story of Jason and the golden fleece or of Aeson's rejuvenation, Ovid emphasizes the efficacy of language. He suggests the relationship of words to transformation through Medea's exercise of magic, indeed literalizes the connection between ritual language and transformed phenomena in the metamorphoses that follow her magic rites. But magic functions also as a metaphor for imaginative power, since it possesses the capacity shared by poet and magician to transform. In the several depictions of Medea's magic art — and one can perceive the episodes of the myth structured around their connections with magic — Ovid develops an image for imagination itself. Jason's labors, for example, are affected by Medea's expertise in magic; they are also a vehicle for a self-conscious display of poetic power. Ovid asserts his imaginative superiority more clearly in the case of Medea, whose relation even to her own power is ambiguous. But let us first consider the portrayal of Medea as a teller of her own tale and the poet's nod in the direction of his predecessors.

As Medea imagines various ways her story might unfold at the opening of Book 7, she unconsciously invokes literary treatments of her legend. Insofar as her soliloquy reveals the romantic musings of a lovesick girl, she creates an Alexandrian context for her infatuation. Her anxious probings, the rationalized motives and responses, suggest this treatment of her myth with its emphasis on the erotic adventures of the hero.¹ Medea recalls her identity in elegiac poetry by imagining herself a *deserta* (7. 40-41), while allusions to her barbarous origins and fear of exile suggest her myth in its tragic dimension. To justify betrayal of her native land as the desertion of Colchian barbarism for the civilization of Greece is to invoke a dichotomy of Euripidean origin. The rather generalized opprobrium of *barbara tellus* (7. 53) contrasts with the more fully imagined *oppida quorum / hic quoque fama viget, cultusque artesque locorum* (7. 57-58) ('cities whose fame has spread even to these shores . . . all the art and culture of such cities,' Innes, p. 156).² In its allusive aspect, Medea's soliloquy conveys Ovid's sense of working within, or in relation to, an Alexandrian poetic context. As an exploration of her psychology, Medea's narrative also recalls its counterpart in the *Heroides*. Whereas the Medea of the epistles interprets past events, the Medea of the *Metamorphoses* projects possibilities for the future. Yet each presents a version, or versions, of her own story and reveals an analytical tendency characteristic of Ovid's Medeas in particular.³ Hence, the poet conveys his idea of how he modifies inherited myth.

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Ovid exhibits interest in products of the imagination by alluding to his literary predecessors. He develops the theme of imagination through a focus on narrative art and the fantasies of his mage. As Medea relates her passion for Jason, she projects different endings to her own love story. Her narrative creates a context for the eventualities she describes, even though the possible futures she envisions are mutually exclusive. Indeed, Medea's habits of thought suggest an important disjunction between imaginary and real events. Some of her fantasies remain fantasies; some eventually become reality. But from the beginning, Ovid shows us Medea's mental processes as she attempts to disentangle the demands of reason and desire. That *aliudque cupido, / mens aliud suadet* (7. 19-20) ('desire sways [her] one way, reason another,' Innes, p. 155) moves her to consider the passion she cannot conquer. Even in her own mind, anxious concern for a handsome stranger seems premature and excessive: after all, she has seen him only once. In an attempt to distance herself from the idea of a future with Jason, she argues that his life or death depends on the will of the gods. To this objective assessment, however, she responds with unequivocal emotion — *vivat tamen!* (7.24) ('yet I hope that he may live!' Innes, p. 155). She rationalizes her feelings as lawful, since one can pray for Jason's preservation without loving him, and reasonable, since Jason's manliness, his youth and beauty, would move pity in any heart. Medea then imagines what will happen to Jason without her help: he will encounter, unprotected, the flames of the fire-breathing bulls, the warriors sprung from the earth, and the dragon that never sleeps. She considers, too, the implications if she does help him: she will have betrayed her father's kingdom and deserted her native gods for a stranger.

As Medea contemplates these alternatives, she imaginatively projects different ways in which her story might unfold. But her imaginings are based wholly on fantasy: they are completely separable from and unmotivated by real events, with the single exception of Jason's presence. As yet neither lover nor spouse, Jason is not even aware of Medea's feelings for him; the entire course of the relationship between them exists solely in her mind. Medea similarly conjures up different images of leaving Colchis with Jason. She imagines dangers which are not unreal, but merely irrelevant in her present circumstances. She envisions *cinctaque saevis / Scylla rapax canibus* (7. 64-65) ('greedy Scylla, girdled with savage dogs,' Innes, p. 157) and Charybdis, *ratibusque inimica . . . / nunc sorbere fretum, nunc reddere* (7. 64) ('the dread of sailors, sucking down the sea, and then vomiting it out once more,' Innes, p. 157). As dangers present themselves to her mind, she conceives their dreadful aspects with a specificity that suggests the mental pleasure one takes in imagining things that do not exist or that do not pose an immediate threat to one's existence. When she has sufficiently conjured up the peril of Sicilian seas, however, she rejects precisely this element of the voyage and substitutes a comforting image of seafaring in the protective embrace of her lover. Like every new element of her fantasy, it is dwelt on,

savored, and then modified to suit the changing perception of her role in relation to Jason. She thinks that in Jason's arms, for example, she will fear nothing. She then qualifies this image of confidence and suggests that she will fear only for her husband. The distance between reality and fantasy here intrudes on Medea's consciousness, since even she cannot ignore the qualitative difference between anxiety for the safety of a husband and romantic notions about a handsome stranger.⁴ In fact, there is no love story yet to be told, except the one within her imagination. Her narrative thus creates, rather than describes, a relationship between her and Jason: it has the status of fiction — something made up or spun out of the mind. As Medea modifies the versions of her history, as she projects different endings to her story, she reveals the habit of mind that expresses itself in imaginative possibilities.

The labors for the golden fleece and their inherent dangers are present to Medea's imagination before they possess any substantial reality for Jason. Insofar as their outcome is determined by Medea's spells and herbal magic, the labors are directly affected by Medea's powers of mind. In fact, each labor has a unique relation to imaginative reality and conveys a different aspect of its thematic significance.

Jason's first task reveals more of the poet's than of the hero's creative imagination. Ovid describes the bulls, bronze-footed and fire-breathing. Sounds issue from their chests and parched throats, sounds that resemble the roaring of furnaces and the hissing of hot stones doused with water. As the bulls turn their iron-tipped horns toward Jason, they fill the air with smoky bellowsings. The Minyans are rigid with fear. The reader, however, does not share their terror since he knows that Jason is protected by Medea's magic herbs. Moreover, Jason himself knows he is protected by the herbs, and we know that he knows. The description of the bulls' heated fury, then, conveys neither Jason's sense of these animals, nor the reader's assessment of their power to harm. The similes that suggest their awful presence and the auditory images that evoke their pawing and bellowing are presented to the reader as a display of Ovid's descriptive powers, his poetic virtuosity.

Ovid continues to suggest virtuosity through the ironic treatment of his hero. Even apparently minor gestures by Jason occasion his ambiguous comments, comments that are intended to reveal the superiority of his artistic control. Jason's action of stroking the bulls provides a case in point. He approaches the animals, but

(nec illos
sensit anhelantes: tantum medicamina possunt)
pendulaque audaci mulcet palearia dextra
subpositosque iugo pondus grave cogit aratri
ducere . . .

(7. 115-119)

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never felt their fiery breath: so potent were his magic drugs. Boldly he stroked their hanging dewlaps and, harnessing the animals to the yoke, made them draw the heavy plough behind them. (Innes, p. 158)

Jason's stroking of the bulls can be construed as a natural preliminary to placing them under the yoke. Yet the element of bravura in his gesture is unwarranted, since the harmfulness of the bulls has been circumvented. Furthermore, the reader has just been reminded of Jason's charmed condition by the statement that he did not feel the bulls' fiery breath. The accreted rhetorical effects — the dactyls of 7. 115, the epic diction, the alliteration of 7. 113 — culminate in a 'self-conscious parenthesis.'⁵ If the mock-heroic quality of the passage has not yet impressed itself on the reader, the narrator's intrusion recalls the facts of the matter. Beneath the tone of naive credulity (*tantum medicamina possunt*),⁶ the narrator defines the source of Jason's immunity and suggests with no lack of appreciative wonder, that Jason depends not on his own power, but on the power of Medea's magic herbs.

Without magic, Jason could not indulge such apparently heroic impulses as confronting fire-breathing bulls or furrowing land that had never felt the press of steel. It is the power of words to transform that ensures the outcome of his labor. For the reader informed of his safety, Jason's encounter becomes a performance, heroic action merely a gesture. Whether in herbs whose magical properties derive from Medea's incantations, or whether in Ovid's own verbal illusions which allow Jason to perform 'heroic' deeds, the source of Jason's power is, finally, not his own.

Having undermined the stature of his hero, Ovid then challenges the artistry of his fictive surrogate, Medea. By alluding to Medea's anxious fears about her magic (7. 137-138), Ovid implies his own confident facility in the exercise of his art. Medea had protected Jason from the armed men who rise from the earth. She fears nevertheless that her magic might not prove strong enough, so she sings a spell and calls on her secret arts. She tries to compensate for the possible impotence of her magic song by chanting yet another, seeking the familiar means of incantation to control events. Ovid here portrays a mage with serious doubts about her powers as a magician; he implies that she lacks a sure sense of the extent or limitations of her power.

Ovid trivializes Medea's doubts about her art by presenting them as the misguided concern of a lovesick girl for her lover. She grows pale at the sight of Jason facing so many hostile enemies and watches immobilized with fear. She chants magic spells to protect the man she loves, since to do nothing, it seems, is intolerable to her. Her fears, however, are not so much the concerns of a magician for her magic as a woman's concern for her man. Ovid reduces Medea's art to an aspect of her relationship to Jason: her spells provide the means of preserving her lover and, therefore, of sustaining the possibility of a future with him. In presenting her magic as an

outlet for misplaced anxiety, Ovid undermines her authority as an artist. He implies that he does not quite take her power seriously. Yet his very attention to expertise in transforming arts conveys their significance and suggests the metaphorical weight with which he endows them. For Ovid, the power to transform reality is the power held in common by magician and poet. To portray Medea as less confident in her magic than he in his is not to trivialize the force or expression of magic itself, but only to comment on the relative power of his fictive counterpart.

The first of Jason's labors, as we have seen, provides an occasion for the play of Ovid's wit in the gratuitous description of its terrors. It also establishes the different audiences for which the story is told and enacted, since the responses to Jason's task differ according to the awareness of those responding, whether it be the fear of the assembled Greeks, the confidence of Jason, or the reader's enlightened appreciation of a display of poetic virtuosity. The second labor asserts the superiority of Ovid's artistic control over that of his characters. Neither Jason's unquestioning, untroubled use of magic art nor Medea's use of magic in the conduct of her love affair exhibits the disciplined and successful artistry of the poet. The third labor, to which we now turn, introduces the language of magic rites and incantations that will recur throughout the rest of the myth.

Jason's final task is to put to sleep the unsleeping dragon. He sprinkles the juice of Lethean herbs on the creature, chanting *verbaque . . . placidos facientia somnos, / quae mare turbatum, quae concita flumina sistunt* (7. 153-154) ('spells that produce tranquil slumbers, spells which soothe the tossing sea and raging rivers,' Innes, p. 159). Thus sleep came into the eyes of the dragon, eyes which had never known sleep. The description of Jason's third labor suggests the ritualistic aspect of magic language. Characters utter their chants three times, and the dragon that Jason must overcome is, of course, triple-tongued. The symbolic quality of repetition in threes creates the impression of a ritual being enacted. Moreover, verbal repetition anticipates repeated action and alerts the reader to the potentially symbolic nature of that action. Just as the language of magic art is recognizable by its characteristic diction and rhythm, so the effects of magic language tend to be repeated and are therefore predictable and even formulaic. There are, for example, certain words that bring sleep, quieten oceans, and stop rivers. Whereas Jason utters these words in order to circumvent the unsleeping dragon, Medea utters them to invoke the very powers for which they are the symbols. Medea reminds the gods that with their help, when she has willed it, *ripiis mirantibus amnes / in fontes rediere suos* (7. 199-200) ('rivers . . . have run backwards to their source, between their astonished banks,' Innes, p. 160), that they have known her to 'soothe the stormy seas, or rouse their placid surface,' (Innes, p. 160) (*concussa quae sisto, / stantia concutio . . . freta*, 7.200-01). She lists among her magical accomplishments precisely the transformations of nature to which Jason's words allude. While the calming of swollen seas defines the kind of

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language Jason uses, rather than an action he performs, for Medea it describes previous metamorphoses achieved through her magic. Thus when Medea describes a sea transformed or rivers stopped in their course, she suggests the variety and scope of her art. Her powers to transform nature can also assume contrary expressions, as her allusions to marshalling clouds and driving them apart, to rousing and calming oceans, to summoning winds and dispelling them, suggest. Her prayers to the gods constitute a litany of magical accomplishment, at the same time as they implore power to enact more magic.

The concrete manifestations of Medea's magic, then, correspond with elements of Jason's language. Her achievements differ substantively from his use merely of words with magical properties. Yet Jason's brief litany (7. 153-154) and Medea's more comprehensive one refer to the same transformations (7. 199-201). Repeated recourse to and description of verbal formulae is not insignificant: as the idea of metamorphosis becomes increasingly familiar, as the reader comes to associate the power to transform with a particular diction, the notion of transformation acquires greater meaning. Medea enumerates her powers in a context of ritual language, invoking the gods by repeated, insistent allusions to the effects of her magic (7. 192-219). And so Ovid develops an image for the transforming power of imagination.

The relation of language to the magician's powers of metamorphosis connects Medea's incantations with poetic activity; hence, the metaphorical meaning of her verbal skills here seems closer to the surface of the poem. In praying to Night, Earth, and Hecate, Medea clarifies the relation between magic language and imaginative power. She invokes the three-formed goddess [*quae*] *adiutrixque venis cantusque artisque magorum* (7. 195) ('[who comes] to aid the spells and arts of magicians,' my trans.) and Earth *quaeque magos . . . pollutibus instruis herbis* (7. 196) ('the source of the magician's powerful herbs,' Innes, p. 160). From the beginning her spells are identified as magic art and her role as that of the artist. Since incantation precedes even the acquisition of magic herbs — they, too, like other elements of magic, must be invoked — the formulaic use of language seems the most basic aspect of the magician's art. Appropriately, Medea's prayer to the gods anticipates the first major instance of her transforming power.

Once more, however, Ovid undermines the image of Medea's confident skill, as he plays on her ambiguous relation to the gods and the implicit paradox of her invocation. When Medea catalogues her powers and their successful results, she alludes to the aid of those gods she addresses. She reminds them that she has altered the course of nature with their help (*quorum ope*, 7. 199), though she locates the motive for transformation solely in her own will (*cum volui*, 7. 199). Her accomplishments in magic indirectly form a litany in praise of the deities she names. In fact, the very act of naming seems to be an attempt to invoke their power, as if the declaration that Earth provides potent herbs will move Earth to provide those herbs.

Similarly, Medea's speech reveals a shift in person that increasingly locates power in the will of the gods. The shift becomes more pronounced as the speech develops, although the phrases *quorum ope* and *cum volui*, juxtaposed at the beginning of her list of powers, themselves contain the implicit contradiction between declarative statement and appeal. More or less ignoring the implications of *quorum ope*, Medea proceeds to enumerate the ways in which she can transform, and has transformed, nature. She repeatedly insists on the transformations as products of her own power — that *she* moves forests, that *she* bids the earth rumble and the mountains shake. She boasts that Aurora pales at her poisons and claims the pallor of the sun as an achievement of her spells (7. 208-209). But she then credits the gods with cooling the fiery breath of the bulls: *vos mihi taurorum flammās hebetastis* (7.210). In the juxtaposition of *vos mihi* lies the most condensed version of her combined bravura (*for me* you dulled . . .) and dependence (*you* dulled . . .). The phrase both acknowledges the power of the gods and asserts her sense of self-importance. Yet Medea's use of the second person (*hebetastis*) clearly assigns responsibility to the gods. Although she continues to use this verb form in describing the magic of Jason's labors, she does not again suggest that she motivated the action: the magical agency of *vos mihi* has become merely *vos*. The responsibility for yoking the bulls, for turning the fury of the earth-born band among themselves, and for putting to sleep the watchful dragon is the gods', and Medea acknowledges this in forthright declarative statements.

The grammatical shift in Medea's speech leads finally to an appeal couched in the language of assertion: *nunc opus est sucis, per quos renovata senectus / in florem redeat primosque reconligat annos* (7. 215-216) ('now I have need of essences by which an old man may be restored to the flower of his youth, and regain the prime of life,' Innes, p. 161) and, she declares, 'you will give me them' (*dabitis*). Medea's repeated declarative statements provide reassurance that the powers she needs are in fact available to her. At the same time, the very declaration that the gods will help her constitutes an attempt to invoke their aid. Just as she enumerates her magical powers in order to call them into being, so now she lists the feats of the gods for the same purpose. The flattery implied by her rhetoric appears to have the desired effect, since the final details of her speech triumphantly reaffirm her power. The stars gleam in reply, and her car drawn by winged dragons is at hand.

As Medea has been speaking, the car indeed has descended from the upper regions of air. Since the gods appear to respond to her rhetoric and even anticipate her need for the dragon car, the sense of her power is briefly reinforced. The narrative confirms her statement that *currus adest* (7. 219), and Medea appears finally to impose her will on the gods. Yet the cumulative effect of her insistent declarations, her retreat from a role as source and agent of various transformations, and her implied flattery of the gods, is to convey her reliance on them. Medea seeks divine aid in appar-

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ently self-confident language, but her statements betray an urgency and a sense of determination that undercut her image as a potent magician. The ambiguities of her address, the suggestions of both power and dependence in an unclear and shifting relationship, color the portrayal of Medea. Ovid here conveys the weakness of his fictive artificer as much as he does the strength.

The formulaic quality of Medea's language is reflected in the conditions necessary for its utterance. That is, the circumstances of ritual action, like magical words and gestures, recur with recognizable consistency. The isolation that characterizes the performance of magic thus constitutes part of its formulaic quality; at the same time, the reader's expectation that rituals will be performed in private creates a context for interpretation. Medea invokes the aid of Earth and Hecate, one recalls, in precisely the silent space of ritual:

egreditur tectis vestes induta recinctas,
nuda pedem, nudos umeris infusa capillos,
fertque vagos mediae per muta silentia noctis
incomitata gradus. homines volucresque ferasque
solverat alta quies: nullo cum murmure saepes . . .
(7. 182-186)

Medea stole out of her home, dressed in flowing robes, with her feet bare, her head uncovered, and her hair streaming over her shoulders. Through the still silence of midnight she directed her uncertain steps, alone. Birds and beasts and men lay relaxed in deep slumbers. There was no murmuring from the hedgerow . . . (Innes, p. 160)

Before placating the gods with murmured prayers, Medea had waited three nights for the horns of the moon to meet, form a circle (*efficerent orbem*, 7. 180), and regard the earth with its complete shape. The image of a darkened earth illumined by a circle of moonlight recalls the forest clearing where she first sought Hecate's ancient altar (7. 74-75), since it creates the same sense of enclosed space. This kind of isolated spot, with its illumined center and circumference of deep shadow, typifies the place of magical activity.⁷ The illumination in the midst of darkness, the prerequisite of solitude, and the metamorphoses that ensue, combine to suggest that it is mental space that Medea enters when she goes alone to perform her rites. Entering an isolated clearing, then, becomes a metaphor for entering the depths of the mind, and Medea's rituals metaphorically enact her powers of mind or imagination.

The necessity for privacy now becomes clear as the meaning of Medea's secret arts unfolds: no one can observe her rites because they project the very workings of her imagination. Aeson's metamorphosis — the culmination of her art and the achievement of both verbal formula and ritual action — is itself performed in secret. Because she alone has access to her mental

processes, only she can be present during the performance of her rituals, rituals which concretize her powers of thought and of image-making.

After the transformation of Aeson, the focus of Ovid's myth shifts from the history of Medea and Jason to the very powers latent in herbs and spells. The impulse to transform seems to absorb more of Medea's energy and more of the energy of the poem. Indeed, the performance of magic seems almost self-perpetuating: the occasions of its use become more frequent and its expression more extreme. Magic generates more magic, but the fictive mage of this myth loses control in the whirlwind of flux and transforms the world of the poem by violence and deceit.

To indulge her malice, Medea feigns discord with Jason and seeks refuge at the house of Pelias. The old king's daughters receive her amicably and, before long, succumb to the false image of friendship she presents. Fascinated, they listen to the stories of her achievements. Medea dwells on the rejuvenation of Aeson, and by selecting the details of her narrative, elicits the response she desires: Pelias' daughters believe her story and plead for their father's renewed youth. The deceitful mage appears to hesitate, feigns consideration of their plea, and finally agrees. She then volunteers proof of her ability to make things young by transforming an aged, worn-out ram into a frisky, bleating lamb. Since the daughters seek Medea's expertise solely in response to the story of Aeson, the transformation of the ram is gratuitous: they were convinced by her narrative art alone.

Although the change from ram to lamb accurately conveys the power of Medea's magic, in no way does it guarantee the nature of the ritual she performs on the body of Pelias. The king's daughters do not err, then, in their assessment of Medea's abilities, but in their unexamined belief that she exercises her powers. They have given control over their imaginations to the Colchian mage — even their notion of a youthful parent derives from the promptings of her narrative. So Medea plays on their desires with ease, mocking their hesitations to drive out age with the life-blood of their father. With vicious literalism, she urges that Pelias' life is in their hands (7.335); a single appeal to *pietas* motivates their impious act. They ignore the promptings of morality and common sense and deal their lethal blows.

The murder of Pelias is the obverse of the rejuvenation of Aeson. The rituals that metamorphose the two men possess an obvious similarity, yet in the one case, spells and herbs rejuvenate, in the other, spellbinding language and powerless herbs destroy. Although the stab wounds inflicted by his daughters are the immediate cause of the old king's death, the blows are motivated by Medea's artful persuasion. Her stories about previous metamorphoses and the beguiling demonstration of her power inspire the trust of Pelias' daughters. Because they so ardently desire their father's restored youth, they assume that Medea's present rituals will reenact earlier metamorphoses. They fail to recognize that the magic she now uses is *sine viribus* (7. 327) ('without potency', my trans.). The metamorphosis of Pelias, like that of Aeson, originates in the power of the mage, but only the earlier rite

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transforms in the sense of renews. Yet in each case, Medea expresses her powers of mind in magic ritual — in verbal formulae with incantatory power and the conventional gestures of transforming arts. Whether or not she intends her rituals to succeed — whether the herbs or the language she uses are *pollentes* or *sine viribus* — magic concretizes and makes manifest the workings of her imagination.

New York University

NOTES

1. See Eleanor Winsor Leach, 'The Sources and Rhetoric of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Ovid's *Heroides*,' Diss. Yale 1963, 217.

2. All quotations are from *Ovid's Metamorphoses Books 6-10*, ed. William S. Anderson (Norman 1972). Translations are those of Mary M. Innes, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* (New York 1955) unless otherwise indicated.

3. Leach, (n. 1 above) 253-254.

4. See Anderson, (n. 2 above) 251, n. 69-71.

5. Anderson's phrase. See n. 2. above, 256, n. 110-114, on the melodramatic quality of the scene and 257, n. 115.

6. Editors differ over the position of the parenthesis; it precedes either *nec* or *tantum*. Its placement does not alter the narrator's credulous tone, however. Cf. Anderson (n. 2 above) 257, n. 115-116, and E. J. Kenney, 'The Style of the *Metamorphoses*,' in *Ovid*, ed. J. W. Binns (Boston 1973) 151, n. 111.

7. Ovid does not incorporate all these characteristics in every performance of magic ritual. The initial description of Hecate's altar, for example, combines isolation with shadow; although there is a clearing, it is not described specifically as 'illuminated'. Because these elements recur with increasingly predictable regularity, the reader tends imaginatively to supply those that Ovid omits. Cf. 7. 239-240; 255-256.

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