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Fantasy and Reality Reconsidered: Myths and Legends in the Works of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm

Abstract

Although somewhat out of fashion at present, the works of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898–1987) arguably provide an ideal starting point for a consideration of the main theme of this Volume. Not only has "fantasy versus reality" been frequently identified as one of the main *motif*s of much of his work, but many of his plays draw on myths, legends and similar material from various literary traditions as inspiration for his own writing. This chapter will discuss the different ways in which Al-Ḥakīm made use of such material, beginning with his early plays *Ahl al-Kahf* (1933) and *Šahrazād* (1934) and continuing to works such as *Hārūn ar-Rašīd wa-Hārūn ar-Rašīd* (1969), produced towards the end of his lengthy writing career. This account of Al-Ḥakīm's use of myths and other related material will also provide an opportunity for some more general reflections on the use of such sources by modern writers in Arabic.

Keywords: Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Egyptian Literature, Drama, Intertextuality, Mythology

Although, like other members of his generation, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm appears to be rather out of fashion at the moment, his works arguably provide an ideal starting point for a consideration of the main theme of this volume. Not only has "fantasy versus reality" been frequently identified as one of the main *motifs* of his work, but several of his plays draw on myths, legends, folktales and similar material from

different literary traditions as inspiration for his own works. As such, they usefully reflect both senses of "myth" as commonly used in English: both the technical sense, as used by anthropologists and other specialists to mean something like "a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events;"[1] and the non-technical one, where the word is used as a synonym, or near synonym, for "fantasy," as in "the myth of Arab unity," for example, or "the myth that Brexit would bring economic advantages for the UK."

The discussion here will touch on "myth" in both these senses, though with an emphasis on the more technical sense, as we consider Al-Ḥakīm's use of the myths, legends and related material that provided the inspiration for some of the intellectual, "philosophical" plays that constitute his most distinctive contribution to the corpus of modern Arabic literature. This will also provide an opportunity to reflect on some of the issues relating to the use of such material by Arab authors more generally. In doing so, I will refer primarily, though not exclusively, to around half a dozen of Al-Ḥakīm's plays, which span most of the author's writing career from 1933 to 1969, and which it will be convenient to list, as follows:[2]

Ahl al-Kahf (*People of the Cave*), 1933;
Šahrazād, 1934;
Pygmalion, 1942;
Sulaymān al-Ḥakīm (*Solomon the Wise*), 1943;
Al-Malik Ūdīb (*Oedipus Rex*), 1949;
Īzīs ("Isis"), 1955;
Hārūn ar-Rašīd wa-Hārūn ar-Rašīd (*Hārūn ar-Rašīd and Hārūn ar-Rašīd*), 1969.

We begin, then, with a play that is generally agreed to be one of Al-Ḥakīm's most interesting creations, *Ahl al-Kahf*, first published in 1933, which is based on the story referred to, among other places, in Sura 18 of the Qur'ān, itself entitled *Sūrat al-Kahf*. The story, which relates the experiences of a group of people who sleep for more than a lifetime to awaken in an unfamiliar world, is by no means confined to the Islamic tradition, and variations can be found in many cultures, including that of Christianity, where they are usually known as the "sleepers of Ephesus"; and indeed, Al-Ḥakīm seems keen to emphasise the universal nature of his

[1] *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed., Oxford, 2010, s.v. 'myth'.
[2] For full bibliographical details, see the list of references at the end of this chapter.

theme by introducing a reference to the parallel Japanese legend of Urashima into his play.[3]

It is generally agreed by the critics that this was the first time that Qur'ānic material had been used as the basis for an Arabic drama of this sort – a potentially risky undertaking, in view of the religious sensitivities in much of the Islamic world during this period.[4] In fact, the Qur'ānic narrative of the fate of the sleepers and their dog is rather elliptical: it is introduced with a question: "Hast thou reflected that the Inmates of the Cave and of Ar-Raqīm were one of our wondrous signs?,"[5] but although the length of time for which they slept is precisely defined as three hundred and nine years, the number of sleepers is left unspecified, being known to God alone. Be that as it may, in Al-Ḥakīm's version the sleepers are three in number, two being ministers from the court of the third-century Roman emperor Decius and the third a shepherd, Yamlikha. Together with their dog, they take refuge from Decius's religious persecution in a cave; but although they are revered as saints on awakening several centuries later, they find themselves unable to adapt to their new environment. One by one, they return to the cave to resume their sleep, being joined in a melodramatic ending, possibly modelled on the close of Verdi's *Aida*,[6] by Prisca, the king's daughter. It hardly needs saying that this scenario is ideally suited to the "fantasy versus reality" *motif*, and indeed, as they settle, one of the characters explicitly poses the question that seems to underlie much of Al-Ḥakīm's work: "Lord, where is the boundary dividing dream from reality?"[7]

This uncertain relationship between dream and reality is perhaps even more pronounced in the second of Al-Ḥakīm's intellectual dramas, *Šahrazād*, first published in 1934, though probably written several years earlier. As its title implies, the inspiration for the play was, at least nominally, *Alf Layla wa-Layla* – a source from the "popular" Arabic heritage that in many respects lies at the opposite end of the literary spectrum from the sacred Qur'ānic text that underpins *Ahl al-Kahf*. Al-Ḥakīm's use of his source material is also rather different from that of *Ahl al-Kahf*. For while the plot of *Ahl al-Kahf* demonstrably follows the story of the Sleepers as narrated in the Qur'ān,

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[3] For a useful summary, with references to other versions, see Viewed 12 October 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Seven-Sleepers-of-Ephesus>. For the text of a version of the Japanese tale, see: Viewed 12 October 2023, <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Japanese_Fairy_Book/The_Story_of_Urashima_Taro,_the_Fisher_Lad>.

[4] See below, for example, for the experiences of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's near-contemporary Ṭāhā Ḥusayn in this regard.

[5] Qur'ān 18:9, trans. John M. Rodwell, New York, 1971 (1st ed. 1909). The meaning of Ar-Raqīm is disputed: among other suggestions, the reference may be to the name of the cave, or to their dog.

[6] Suggested by John A. Haywood, *Modern Arabic Literature*, London 1971, p. 200.

[7] On this theme, see further Paul Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower*, London 1987, especially pp. 37–74.

Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's second play makes almost no direct use of the stories included in the *Thousand and One Nights*; rather, he borrows characters from the popular tradition to construct a play that revolves around different characters' interpretations of the character of Šahrazād herself. In this context, Šahrazād functions as a sort of "mysterious woman", whose nature is interpreted by the other three main characters according to their own dispositions; however, her true nature remains a mystery to the end of the play. For Qamar, Šahriyar's vizier, Šahrazad is an ideal of beauty; for the slave, she represents sensual gratification; while for the king, Šahriyār, she represents pure intellect – though in Šahriyār's case, his interpretation of Šahrazād's character is linked with a quest for knowledge that drives him, first, to resume his nightly killings, then set out into the desert in a quest for truth. His journey ends in an opium den filled with semi-lunatics, a symbol of a world halfway between illusion and reality, which is the furthest man's intelligence can attain.[8]

Two further points may be made about Al-Ḥakīm's use of his source material in *Šahrazād*. First, unlike in *Ahl al-Kahf*, the author was not breaking new ground here in the use of his sources: indeed, as long ago as 1849, the Syrian playwright Mārūn al-Naqqāš had staged a play called *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Muġaffal aw Hārūn ar-Rašīd*, commonly regarded as the first original "modern" Arabic play, based on the story of the man who became caliph for a day.[9] It hardly needs to be added that characters and stories from the *Alf Layla wa-Layla* have continued to provide inspiration and intertextual references for a variety of authors throughout the Arab world and beyond, including, for example, the Nobel Literature prizewinner Naǧīb Maḥfūẓ. We may also note that Al-Ḥakīm himself was to return to the 'Abbasid environment in his short play *Hārūn ar-Rašīd wa-Hārūn ar-Rašīd* (1969), a piece of "improvised theatre", with audience involvement, which combines the fantasy /reality motif with the use of a literary source familiar to the audience in a discussion of issues of contemporary relevance.[10]

The second point is that, whereas a "nationalist" interpretation of *Ahl al-Kahf* as Egypt awakes from centuries of slumber is eminently plausible, no such reference seems relevant in the case of *Šahrazād*, which seems entirely devoid of contemporary significance. Al-Ḥakīm's own attempt to link the interpretation of the two plays by juxtaposing the "struggle between man and place" in *Šahrazād* and the "struggle between man and time" of *Ahl al-Kahf* is a rather forced one, since while

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[8] For an extended discussion, see Starkey, *Ivory Tower*, pp. 40–44.

[9] For a discussion, see Jacob M. Landau, *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*, London 1958, pp. 63–65.

[10] For a fuller discussion, see Starkey, *Ivory Tower*, pp. 72–74, 216–217.

"struggle against time" is clearly an integral element of *Ahl al-Kahf*, "place" in *Šahrazād* seems something of an afterthought.[11]

A different aspect of the conflict between illusion and reality is evident in the next of Al-Ḥakīm's plays, *Pygmalion*, which revolves around the relationship of the artist to his work – a theme he had already tackled in a short dialogue entitled *Al-Ḥulm wa-al-ḥaqīqa*, written while studying in Paris in 1928, and which reappears in his later novel *Ar-Ribāṭ al-Muqaddas* and in other, less intellectual, dramas such as *Al-Muḫriğ*.[12] The cultural and literary context that provided the inspiration for this play is quite different from that of the two plays already discussed. The story of Pygmalion, the sculptor who fell in love with one of his own statues, has its origins in the world of Greek mythology, and was spelled out in detail by the Roman poet Ovid. It later became a popular subject in Victorian Britain and is today (in Britain, at least) most closely associated with the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, whose play of the same name was first performed in Vienna in 1913.

Unlike Shaw's play, which involves a critique of aspects of contemporary English society, Al-Ḥakīm's play follows closely the original legendary framework (though complicated by the inclusion of references to a different classical myth, that of Narcissus). The sculptor Pygmalion, tired of his own creation, implores the goddess Venus to breathe life into one of his statues, and after some hesitation, she agrees, leaving the sleeping Galatea to be awakened by Pygmalion's kisses. But the relationship between them is doomed from the start, for the "ideal woman" of Pygmalion's imagination bears little resemblance to the small-minded housewife that Galatea turns out to be, and it is not long before Pygmalion is imploring the gods to give him back his original statue. When Venus restores the ivory Galatea, however, Pygmalion is overcome once more with a yearning for life and refuses to look at it – his final act being to smash the statue with a broom, declaring that he has wasted his life in a struggle with art, with his talents and with fate. Pygmalion's dilemma is essentially a very straightforward one: as soon as life is breathed into his statue, he longs for the ivory Galatea again; but when the ideal creation of his imagination has been restored, he at once craves the return of the living woman. The play thus encapsulates the "fantasy versus reality" *motif* in a vicious circle of choices that can only be broken when the gods agree not to bring the statue to life a second time.

The plays discussed so far encapsulate the "fantasy versus reality" *motif* in a variety of ways, but they are also linked by being at least partially inspired by material from a previous tradition that has some of the characteristics of myth or

[11] Ibidem, p. 43.

[12] For a discussion of these three works, see Starkey, *Ivory Tower*, especially pp. 46, 53–56 and 49–50.

legend. The later plays on our list continue that dual focus, although the relationship between the different elements varies from case to case.

The first of these plays, *Sulaymān al-Ḥakīm*, which followed a year after *Pygmalion* in 1943, need not detain us for long; indeed, probably its only feature of interest is the eclectic mixture of literary traditions evident in the play, in which Al-Ḥakīm attempted to weave into the Qur'ānic and more popular Arabic traditions several sections of the Biblical *Song of Songs*. The is not a success: the play is disjointed and lacks any consistency of tone, and although the play remains an interesting demonstration of the author's love for technical and structural experiment, it is perhaps significant that he did not again attempt to merge different literary traditions in this way.

By contrast with *Sulaymān al-Ḥakīm*, the intertextual references of *Al-Malik Ūdīb*, first published in 1949, are confined to the Western classical tradition, as represented most obviously by the play by the Greek playwright, Sophocles. The complex story revolves around the mythical Greek king Oedipus, who becomes the king of Thebes while accidentally fulfilling a prophecy that he would kill his father, Laius (the previous king), and marry his mother, Jocasta, thereby bringing disaster on his city and his family. In part, Al-Ḥakīm's text follows Sophocles quite closely, as the truth about Laius's killer and Jocasta's husband gradually emerges, but when Oedipus grasps the truth – namely, that it is he who has killed Laius and married his mother – he refuses to accept it, arguing instead that the power of love overrides all else, and that nothing essential has changed in his relationship with Jocasta. He is prepared, in other words, simply to dismiss the inconvenient truth. It probably hardly needs to be said that this outcome is unconvincing.

In terms of interest and importance, the preface that Al-Ḥakīm attached to the work may well be regarded as at least as significant as the work itself.[13] Al-Ḥakīm here explains that he has set out to reinterpret the legend of Oedipus in accordance with Islamic belief, eliminating the idea of "fate", and replacing it with the same idea as he had used in *Ahl al-Kahf* – the idea of a struggle between man and time. It has to be said, however, that, although this theorising is interesting as an attempt to reconcile two different intellectual traditions, it is at least as unconvincing as the play itself, and the grotesque twist to the "fantasy/ reality" theme evinced by the conclusion of the play is far removed from the spirit of most of Al-Ḥakīm's other drama.

We come, then, to the last of the full-length plays to be considered – *Īzīs* (*Isis*), first published in 1955. This play represents a significant development in Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's career as a playwright, for it was the first time that he used Ancient Egyptian mythology as inspiration for a major drama. According to Egyptian legend,

[13] *Al-Malik Ūdīb*, especially pp. 31–42.

the god Osiris, who was regarded as a benevolent deity, was treacherously murdered by his brother Set, who lured his brother into a chest, closed the lid, then threw it into the Nile. Osiris's body was successfully recovered by Isis, but Set again got possession of the body and cut it up, until through a magic formula Isis was able to reassemble the parts and bring her husband back to life, while Horus, her son by Osiris, took vengeance on Set for murdering his father. As in *Al-Malik Ūdīb*, where Al-Ḥakīm saw himself as attempting to eliminate the idea of "fate", in *Īzīs* he largely discarded the supernatural elements, and all his characters appear as fully human – Osiris, in particular, displaying a philanthropic attitude to the use of his scientific skills, as he employs his expert knowledge of irrigation techniques to bring fertility to what was once barren land.

As is not uncommon in Al-Ḥakīm's plays, much of the action seems designed primarily as a "peg" on which to hang more abstract philosophical debates of various kinds, the two main issues in the present case being whether the end justifies the means, and the function of the artist in society. Two possible references to contemporary Egyptian concerns may be suggested. First, it is tempting to speculate that Al-Ḥakīm's portrayal of Osiris's skills in his play may have been influenced by the debate about the construction of the Aswan Dam that was taking place at the time of the play's composition. Secondly (and less speculatively), the resolution of the play almost certainly returns us to contemporary events, as Isis declares that "the people" alone are entitled to give judgment on who should be their ruler; in this respect, it is significant that the play appeared only three years after the Free Officers' Revolt of 1952 had put an end to the Egyptian monarchy.[14] The romantic nationalism hinted at here is perhaps more reminiscent of the spirit of Al-Ḥakīm's early novel '*Awdat ar-Rūḥ* (*The Return of the Spirit*) than of anything the author had written since, suggesting that the revolution of 1952 may have given rise to the same sort of patriotic sentiments as had been stirred by the events of 1919 from which '*Awdat ar-Rūḥ* derived its inspiration. And in this reading also, the play might perhaps be interpreted, at least in part, as an example of the technique (well-known from works such as Ǧamāl al-Ġīṭānī's *Az-Zaynī Barakāt*, among others) of using a historical narrative as a means of commenting on present events.

Having described these six or so plays in outline, it is now time to attempt to draw together some of the threads that hold them together and distinguish them from one another in regard to Al-Ḥakīm's use of his mythical, legendary, and other related material. The first point to make is an obvious one, that the range of material is exceptionally diverse, encompassing, as we have already seen, at least

[14] For which, see, for example, Martin Daly (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 2: *Modern Egypt from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 334–393.

four sets of different cultural sources: the first, religious – mainly Islamic, as we would expect, but also including the biblical *Song of Songs*; second, the "popular" literature of the Middle East, represented most obviously by *Alf Layla wa-Layla*; third, the literature of the European classical tradition of Greece and Rome; and finally, the cultural tradition of ancient Egypt. Each of these potential sources of inspiration brings with it its own set of issues and dilemmas, which any author who attempts to utilise them as a basis for their own work, or as intertextual references, will be bound to take into account. Before considering each of these four categories of material individually, however, a few general remarks about Al-Ḥakīm's use of this material will be in order. The first is that, as will already be clear from the preceding discussion, it is difficult to find any logical progression from one set of material or cultural reference points to another through the course of Al-Ḥakīm's career. On the contrary, he appears to have little hesitation in jumping from one set of cultural material to another in an almost arbitrary fashion, his intellectual approach being best described as "eclectic". The second point, which is closely related to the first, is that Al-Ḥakīm's use of myth appears to have little or nothing in common with writers we might more obviously associate with the use of "myth" in an Arabic literary context – most obviously, perhaps, the so-called "Tammuzi" poets,[15] who deliberately revived the pre-Islamic myth of Tammuz as a symbol of cultural and political rebirth; for although, as we have seen, it is possible sporadically to link Al-Ḥakīm's use of myth and legend to contemporary concerns, there is little, if any, apparent consistency in his use of such material. Nor are his works characterised by the evocative atmosphere of mystery evinced, for example, by the Libyan writer Ibrāhīm al-Kōnī's use of myth: by contrast, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's interest in the use of such material seems entirely intellectual. The third point is that, as we have again already seen, Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm is fond of theorising about his material in a way that sometimes adds little to (and may arguably sometimes even detract from) the literary appeal of his own work. Take, for example, his explanation for his use of the Qur'ānic story in his play *Ahl al-Kahf*, which he tells us he saw as an "Egyptian tragedy", depicting the struggle between man and time. In fact, however, while the "time" element in the play is obvious, there is almost nothing there that is specifically Egyptian, and Al-Ḥakīm's explanation leaves entirely open the question of whether the play is intended to be read as a reference to the reawakening of the Egyptian national spirit following the revolt of 1919.

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[15] For whom, see, for example, Nazeer El-Azma, 'The Tammūzī Movement and the Influence of T.S. Eliot on Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88/4 (1968), pp. 671–678.

Let us return, then, to the four categories of material used by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and consider them for a moment individually, in an attempt to some of the more general issues they may raise when used by an Arab author. The least problematic in this respect would appear to be material such as the *Alf Layla* and other works from the popular heritage, with which the average Arab reader is certainly likely to be familiar. Although for a long time excluded from the Arabic literary canon and regarded as unworthy of the name of '*adab*', its intertextual use by writers of all registers in the Arab world has, as already noted, been commonplace from the earliest phases of the *Nahḍa*.

More problematic is the use of material from other cultures. To take first the cultural context of Ancient Egypt, almost inevitably this material is likely to be more accessible, and of greater interest to, the Egyptian reader than to readers from other parts of the Arab world. In Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's case, it seems unlikely that this was a factor influencing his choice of material, for, as has frequently been noted, most Egyptian writers (and we can certainly include Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm among them) have, at least until recently, appeared quite uninterested in regions of the Arab world outside their own country, the only issue that has appeared to arouse much wider interest being that of the ongoing Palestine / Israel dispute.[16] The related issue of whether to write in one's own dialect (thus restricting the potential readership, particularly for non-Egyptian authors) rather than in *fuṣḥā*, is of little relevance to the plays under discussion – though in this respect we should note that although the author's more "intellectual" plays, such as those that form the subject of the present paper, were written in *fuṣḥā*, he also wrote several dozen plays in colloquial Egyptian for the more popular stage.

Somewhat different issues confront the Arab writer wanting to use the European classical tradition as a basis for their own work – namely, how much of this tradition can he assume that his intended reader will be familiar with? This is an issue which Al-Ḥakīm clearly had to confront directly in *Al-Malik Ūdīb*, where he uses a classical Greek myth that most Arab readers would probably not be familiar with in any detail. It, therefore, required explanation within the text, not to speak of a lengthy preface, explaining the thinking behind his work. This is clearly not a strategy likely to hold widespread appeal, either for writers or readers.

Finally, therefore, we come to perhaps the most contentious of the four different cultural areas that we have identified as underlying this group of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's works: religion. We are all familiar with examples of how religious sensitivities have inhibited the output not only of imaginative literature but also of scholarship in the

[16] An obvious exception to this generalisation is Ṣun' Allāh Ibrāhīm, whose novel *Warda* deals with the fate of the Arab Marxist Dhofar Liberation Front in the 1960s and 1970s.

Arab world. In this context, we may recall in particular that Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's near contemporary Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, the "Dean" of modern Arabic literature, had been forced to withdraw and rewrite sections of his 1926 study on pre-Islamic literature *Fī aš-ši'r al-ǧāhilī* (reissued the following year as *Fī al-adab al-ǧāhilī*), because it conflicted with the orthodox Islamic view of the literary and linguistic context at the time of the Prophet;[17] and that in 1931, only two years before the publication of Al-Ḥakīm's *Ahl al-Kahf*, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn had lost his post at Cairo University. Since then, in the field of imaginative literature, many authors may have discovered to their cost that the use of religious material in non-religious contexts is a risky undertaking: witness the fate of Naǧīb Mahfūẓ's *Awlād Ḥāratinā*, which could not be published in book form in Egypt for several decades, not to mention the later physical attack on the author in 1994, which left him almost unable to write. More recently, we may recall the Iranian *fatwā* issued in 1989 in response to the novel *Satanic Verses* by the Indian-born writer Salman Rushdie, which was followed by a physical attack on the author in 2022. So far as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm is concerned, his religious convictions appear to have been rather vague for much of his life, but his interest in the beginnings of Islam is evident from the monumental play *Muḥammad*, published in 1936, in which he attempted to retell the story of the Prophet's life in dramatic form.[18] More significantly, perhaps, towards the end of his life, he devoted renewed effort to development of a personal Islamic theology, in particular attempting to construct a dialogue with God through a series of newspaper articles that were later republished in book form as *Al-Aḥādīṯ al-Arba'a.* For this, he attracted much criticism from some Muslim theologians, one of whom suggested that the answer to the question raised by the title of the book (*Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm… to Whom Did He Speak?*) was the Devil.[19]

Taken together, Al-Ḥakīm's works present us with a bewildering variety both of forms and of themes, making any overall judgement on his contribution to modern Egyptian literature difficult. What is clear is that, in the field of the Arab "intellectual" drama, he effectively founded a new literary tradition, in which the use of myth, legend and related material plays a crucial, if sometimes ambiguous, role. As such, we can be confident that they will continue not only to give pleasure but also to be studied and debated for many years to come.

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[17] On this, see Pierre Cachia, *Ṭāhā Ḥusayn: His Place in the Egyptian Literary Renaissance*, London 1956.

[18] See William Hutchins, *Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm: a reader's guide*, Boulder Color. 2003, pp. 222–229.

[19] For a short but useful discussion of Al-Ḥakīm's theology more generally, see ibidem, pp. 215–235.

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