

The "Unexpressive She": Is There Really a Rosalind?

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This would perhaps mean that one does not leave
the epoch whose closure one can outline.

(Derrida 12)

Certainly Shakespeare's Rosalind is an active and daring, as well as an intelligent and witty, woman. But to what end her energy and intellect? The independent woman we see in *As You Like It* is not there at all. As Linda Bamber has noted, even in Shakespearean comedy, "insofar as the Self is within drama and human, it counts itself a member of the dominant social group" (27) and hence male, whereas "the feminine is Other to society's rules and regulations, to its hierarchies of power, and to the impersonality of its systems and sanctions" (28).¹ Thus Rosalind has no identity except as Other to a socially constituted, male Self; she is the periphery brought center-stage. Finally she rejoins the ranks of women in her society--limits her protean character to the traditional roles of daughter and wife in what Peter Erickson calls a "benevolent Patriarchy."² The engaging heroine of *As You Like It* simply disappears, disintegrates into the improved, but nonetheless reestablished, masculine domain of court and marriage. There is, I maintain, no escape from Shakespeare's masculine imagination or from Elizabethan theatrical conventions that privilege the male. Rosalind is constructed solely of male modes of discourse--the product of a male playwright for exchange by and among male actors. The dramatic illusion of the Shakespearean heroine's autonomy, though a playful revolt from the strictures of society and perhaps influenced by the presence of Elizabeth on the throne, deludes the audience: the exchange of Rosalind between

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the male company and the audience circumscribes a benign, but potentially threatening, alien element within a masculine domain. Like the Queen, Rosalind moves in and into a man's world.

The perspective of the play is precisely that of Orlando's half sonnet, in which Rosalind is the "unexpressive she" (III.ii.10).³ She is, as Orlando intends, the inexpressible beloved of the male sonneteer and indeed of the sonnet form; but like the women in such sonnets she is also unexpressive in a more modern sense--unable to express herself. Rosalind is conceived by men; she is the masquerade of man in woman's clothing. No "she" is allowed to speak; there is no female voice. Just as at court the anointed prince will appear in woman's form, as Elizabeth (Marcus 139-40), so at Shakespeare's theater boys will be boys--and girls.

Furthermore, the masquerade of the boy actor undermines Rosalind's apparent freedom, the liberality of the dramatic illusion; in the theater--and, as Elizabeth herself must have sensed, in the world--the female is not only circumscribed by the male, but determined by him. In *As You Like It* the old Christian injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself," which Phebe's line--"Thou hast my love. Is not that neighborly?" (III.v.89)--recalls, has unexpected significance in this regard. Since a man often loves his beloved insofar as she reflects himself, sometimes even as an objectified and idealized version of the Self, Orlando courts Rosalind in the form of Ganymede--and of course, given Elizabethan theatrical conventions, he woos a boy indeed. Or as Rosalind tells him, "you are rather . . . as one loving yourself than seeming the lover of any other" (II.ii.360-62). The witty boy is the accomplished lover Orlando seeks to be--so skilled in love he takes the woman's part and instructs the man in his. As Ganymede, Rosalind parodies Lady Disdain and other feminine postures from traditional love poetry. But if these roles are products of male imagination, what voice, indeed what being, not a function of male terms, can she have?⁴

The feminist theorist and critic Jane Gallop, commenting on the work of the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, provides, I think, a clue to the significance of a theatrical production that so carefully circumscribes the representation of the comic heroine: "Heterosexuality, once it is exposed as an exchange of women between men [for instance, between the woman's father and her husband-to-be], reveals itself as a mediated form of homosexuality" (Gallop 84).⁵ The woman is merely a commodity exchanged between the two significant agents, the men; Rosalind is a Shakespearean product exchanged between Ganymede and Orlando, between the boy actor and the adult male actor, and between Shakespeare, through the boy actor, and the Elizabethan audience.⁶

In this sexual economy, love is not really a surrender to an Other, but "a sexuality of sames" (84), as Gallop puts it. Two men exchange the image, the representation of Rosalind. She is a male projection--of Shakespeare's imagination and Orlando's conventional dreams and the boy actor's skill; she is, as all beloveds are, a mental construct: "Let no face be kept in mind/But the fair of Rosalinde" (III.ii.89-90). Despite what Touchstone calls this "very false gallop of verses" (III.ii.108), Orlando's poem reveals the imaginary nature of Rosalind; she is the sign, the mind's image, of the lover's love. What Peter Erickson says of Duke Senior's nurturant, all-male community is ironically true of the whole play as originally conceived and performed by Shakespeare and his male company: "The security of male bodies mirroring and confirming a common physical identity depends precisely on relief from the specifically genital demand associated with the opposite sex" (*Patriarchal Structures* 5). In *As You Like It* the Other is theatrically, as well as psychologically, no more than a function of the male Self--and hence safe.

Furthermore, as with all signs, the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, as Touchstone's love for the unlikely Audrey and the complications of the Phebe/Silvius sub-plot attest. And Orlando's "Rosalinde of many parts," one who "By heavenly synod was devised,/Of many faces, eyes, and hearts,/To have the touches dearest prized" (III.ii.143-46) is the lover's candidate for "transcendental signifier"--"the sign which will give meaning to all others" (Eagleton 131). The pun on "touches" gets to the very heart of the matter: the Rosalind Orlando imagines comprises all the most dearly prized "touches" or features of other famous beloveds and consequently warrants the physical coddling, the "touches," so dearly prized by male admirers like himself. Orlando has constructed only the most generalized sign of his absurdly romantic love--a manifold image signifying every beloved and hence no one. If in *Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare mocks our lack of discrimination in choosing the objects of our desire, here he exposes such love as the creation not of some external Puckish agency but of the mind--and the male mind in particular, whether Orlando's or Shakespeare's. Like Betty, the Victorian wife played by a man in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, Rosalind might say, "I am a man's creation as you see,/And what men want is what I want to be" (4). Such a beloved is the image of masculine desires, and nothing in herself; in this sense, however perfected or idealized, she is determined by and hence reflects a Self implicitly male.

Rosalind is, furthermore, pure illusion. When Ganymede asks Orlando whom the latter addresses, the lover claims to be speaking "To her that is not here, nor doth not hear" (V.ii.102). Rosalind inhabits the stage solely as a variable object of desire: "I will satisfy

you [Orlando] if ever I satisfied man, and you shall be married to-morrow. I will content you [Silvius] if what pleases you contents you, and you shall be married to-morrow" (V.ii.108-11). The illusion of independence is belied by the comedy's hymeneal resolution, in which "truth holds true contents" (V.iv.124).⁷ Since "truth" puns on marital "troth" (*OED*), the line implies that Rosalind has no reality apart from that conferred by the institution of marriage, which exists, as she does, to "satisfy" male desires without threat to the social order. Thus Rosalind's seeming independence is really the freedom of men to project themselves into the role of woman, to imagine what the silent lady of the sonneteers, the beloved, would say if she could--indeed, to have her speak to their hearts' "contents."

The love-object here is the object of male desire, particularly when one considers the actual conditions--homosexual in Gallop's sense--of Elizabethan production by a company of men and boys. If *As You Like It* meant to please Elizabeth herself through its portrayal of a spirited woman or to celebrate indirectly the effluent vitality of the Virgin Queen, its circumscription of Rosalind's independence suggests the anxiety surrounding the Queen as an unmarried, childless monarch--and a woman in power. (Duke Frederick himself worries about the succession and warns Celia that that clever Rosalind "robs thee of thy name" (I.iii.76).) Moreover, though the play celebrates love, subtextually it subordinates love to the maintenance of male hegemony.⁸ (See Montrose, "Place of a Brother" 51.) Love, as Rosalind notes, is not a matter of life and death: "Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love" (IV.i.96-98). Moreover, love is a way of seeing and thinking--entirely a matter of perspective: "men are April when they woo, December when they wed. Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives" (IV.i.134-36). Although, as a wife, Ganymede-Rosalind "will weep for nothing . . . when you are disposed to be merry" and "will laugh like a hyen . . . when thou art inclined to sleep" (IV.i.140-42), even a wife's self-assertion is illusory or at least limited. In fact, the only difference between these maids and wives is that the former play to male desire and the latter thwart it--neither exists independent of it.⁹

Ganymede's descriptions of marriage imply also that the daily facts of love are not romantic. Rosalind's early lament for Orlando--"O, how full of briers is this working-day world!" (I.iii.11-12)--recalls the audience to the facts of life because the world of *As You Like It*, however mismanaged by Duke Senior and abused by Duke Frederick and Oliver, is hardly work-a-day. Nor is the beloved what Orlando imagines. If Rosalind--indeed if woman--exists at all in the world of this play, she does so as mediator, as the function that establishes

harmonious relations between lovers (where the woman is always presented in man's own image by a boy-actor--an unformed man), between court and country, between brothers (the Dukes and the de Boys), between the older generation of her father and that of his son by marriage, Orlando. In the last case, as Carol Thomas Neely notes (8), Rosalind can say to *both*: "To you I give myself, for I am yours" (V.iv.110-11). She enables the transfer of power from father to son, which, once accomplished, leaves her none. To her father, finally, she is all daughter: "If there is truth in sight, you are my daughter" (V.iv.112). To Orlando she is not her own self, but his: "If there is truth in sight, you are my Rosalind" (V.iv.113). The image of woman recedes into the male-dominated spheres of marriage, family, and kingship precisely because "truth in sight" is a matter of perspective--and the males, including Shakespeare, have the power to enforce things the way they see them and like to see them (Montrose, "Place of a Brother" 35).

In *As You Like It* Rosalind functions as the fulfiller of desires only as they accord with the laws of patriarchal civilization: thus to Phebe, "I will marry you if ever I marry woman, and I'll be married tomorrow"; to Orlando, "I will satisfy you if ever I satisfied man, and you shall be married tomorrow"; and to Silvius, "I will content you if what pleases you contents you, and you shall be married tomorrow" (V.ii.105-11). Notice here, by the way, whose desire will be thwarted; female desire like Phebe's is, in sixteenth-century terms, irrational and unnatural. It will have to be repressed and, since this is a redemptive comic world, rechanneled toward a proper object: Silvius, whose only qualification is that his heterosexual love and masculinity are privileged. On the other hand, Rosalind's own female desire solves the riddle only because it coincides completely with the patriarchal structure of her civilization--indeed it maintains, even rejuvenates the powers that be and that, for Shakespeare, should be (Montrose, "Purpose of Playing" 67). Rosalind embodies both the riddle, the comic contradictions of the play's society with its conflicting desires, and the patriarchal solution to the riddle.

So who is Shakespeare's Rosalind? Why does she please? In the comic world of *As You Like It* she is the "condition"--as her many conditional clauses toward the end of the play, like those if-clauses already mentioned, suggest--that alleviates the discontents of civilization, most strikingly apparent in the early wrestling match between Duke Frederick's man Charles and Orlando de Boys, or, in Freudian terms, between tyrannical father and ambitious son (Freud 141-46). If that fight reveals that the real conflict and hence the significant relationships exist between man and man, then Rosalind is, like the domesticating woman of the American Westerns, inserted to relieve the

tension, to form and confirm the tie that binds. She is, as Barbara Bono suggests (195), the conditional "if" that Touchstone praises: "Your If is the only peacemaker. Much virtue in If" (V.iv.96-97).

But Rosalind is denied even this prominent syntactic function. At the end, when she appears as herself and when the boy-actor is least himself, Shakespeare replaces her with Hymen, the institution of marriage: "Peace ho! I bar confusion:/'Tis I must make conclusion/Of these most strange events" (V.iv.119-21). At this point in the play the chaos is at most illusory, and barely that. Thus Hymen--the god but also the sign of the chastity so valued by a proprietary patriarchy--steals the praise that rightfully belongs to Rosalind for having already resolved all the conflicts, just as the boy-actor usurps the role of woman. The excellent arguments of critics like Montrose ("Purpose of Playing" 67), Bono (204), and Rackin (36-37) notwithstanding, the woman ultimately disappears from the equation into marital oblivion.

Even as a boy, in fiction and in fact, Rosalind is circumscribed by patriarchal institutions, conventions, and perspectives--like the original Ganymede, she is the beloved and the servant of the all-powerful male, whether father or lover. The heroine of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is an example of woman conceived and represented by and for men--the "you" who "like it." Shakespeare's "you" is the Self associated with the dominant male powers of Elizabethan society, insofar as it reflects and reproduces the ideology of those powers and that society. Even Elizabeth herself had to negotiate between her womanhood and the masculine domain of Tudor kingship.¹⁰

And what is that It, that object of desire? A woman, we would like to say in accordance with the theatrical illusion. But also "no woman," if we see through Ganymede's refrain (V.ii.84). Indeed, a boy; the boy of the epilogue who, if he were a woman, would kiss all the pleasing men; the boy who represents the continuance of male dominance--the indisputable royal heir that Elizabethan society desired but lacked. Even in the supposedly powerful female world of this Shakespearean comedy, then, and perhaps to a frightening degree on our own world's stage, the woman disappears. The epilogue extends, beyond the bounds of the play, the mediating role to which men wish to confine women and which the play itself performs: "My way is to conjure you . . . that between you and the women the play may please" (Ep. 10-16). The boy-Rosalind of the epilogue embodies the patriarchal bias of this mediation (P. Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures* 35). Woman propagates society--she marries, she bears children, of whom only the boys like our boy-Rosalind will grow to "make a proper man" (III.v.114). Elizabethan staging and this play in particular give practical corroboration to the exclusion of women not only in the world "as you like it," but in the institutions of sixteenth-century

English society--like the theater. Because women, as the epilogue demonstrates, are produced and exchanged by men in the economy of the Elizabethan stage, the play fosters the rightness of "little women" giving way to little men."¹¹

As You Like It is made to order for a patriarchal society, ruled by a strong but aging woman with no child (C. Erickson 381-407; Marcus 142-44, 148-49). If this romantic comedy seems to de-emphasize the rigors of the society it ultimately re-establishes, that effect derives from its transference of the periphery, the marginal woman, to center-stage--in other words, from the seeming dislocation of male hegemony within the comic world. In his discussion of *The Merchant of Venice*, among other Shakespearean texts, Jonathan Goldberg focuses on such dislocation and aims "to examine the law of the patriarch and to find within its power the slippages that undermine authority and permit vocalization" (120). In Goldberg's view, the theatrical "fantasy is *also* part of the culture" (134). From this perspective, *As You Like It's* fantasy of a sovereign female voice, of an expressive she, is as much a part of Elizabethan culture as the patriarchalism of the comic genre's marital resolution, that "arbitrary limit on texts that would never end otherwise" (Goldberg 130), or as the material conditions that restricted Renaissance women.

But not even Shakespeare could escape the ideological implications of his all-male mode of production and of the fundamentally patriarchal structure of the society. He could not avoid their inscription in the text; every woman, like the disguised Celia, is literally *Aliena*. Shakespeare may feel the discontents of his civilization, but in *As You Like It*, at any rate, he does no more than wish them away through the illusion of change. There is no metamorphosis; Shakespeare's comedy reproduces his "ideology" in the Althusserian sense, as a "'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 162). Ostensibly Shakespeare's comedy makes the conditions of Elizabethan life seem fluid and bearable, its problems surmountable; it implies that an individual like Rosalind, or behavior like hers, can make a difference for everyone--women, men, society. But Rosalind's participation in a patriarchal fantasy--of male benevolence and female sovereignty--hardly warrants Goldberg's sanguine view of such textual play, that "perhaps--just perhaps--the reason we cannot find Shakespeare reflecting his culture's supposed patriarchalism and sexism is that the culture represented on stage *is* the culture off-stage" (134).¹²

The play--textual and theatrical--belies a deep-seated fear of Rosalind's female power, even to the carefully circumscribed extent it operates in Arden, and marriage is the literary and social convention that contains the woman--both limits and holds her for ends not her

own. Rosalind herself, at one point, swears "as I love no woman" (V.ii.113); Shakespeare's marital resolution and dismissal of his heroine reflects just such a lack of love for woman, an underlying uneasiness with her in a central and independent role, a role he could conceive but not finally sanction. Even an artist as great as Shakespeare does not transcend the boundaries of his culture, which we can see as he could not. And it isn't just a matter of his privileging of male bonds as the price of the fully realized feminine Other. To pretend that Rosalind in the Forest is all the Rosalind we need means forgetting that in the end we don't even have her; it means blindly complying with the subliminal satisfaction of generic expectations fulfilled and thereby reproducing in our own age a sixteenth-century comedy's mystification of marital bliss and male-female relations. We may find such a view hard to believe when we see productions of the play or think about Rosalind, but then we live in a tradition, several centuries old, in which women have re-created, reinterpreted, and re-cast Rosalind, as they move from society's periphery to its center-stage.

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Notes

1. Though I agree with Bamber's feminist interrogation of Shakespeare's construction of women, Jonathan Goldberg is correct when he suggests that Bamber's assumptions are ahistorical (117-18). For instance, according to Goldberg, Bamber assumes a rigid opposition between male and female, not characteristic of the period, and ignores what New Historicists see as the "improvisatory relationship of Shakespeare to his culture" (117).

2. In *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama* Peter Erickson shows how *As You Like It* established a "benevolent patriarchy," which nonetheless "cannot be mistaken for the attainment of fully independent female characters" (13): "The liberation that Rosalind experiences in the forest has built into it the conservative countermovement by which, as the play returns to the normal world, she will be reduced to the traditional woman who is subservient to men" (23). Though he does not treat the combination of self-effacing rhetoric and masculine masquerade that simultaneously create and deny the character of Rosalind, Erickson establishes the primacy of male relationships in the play, particularly that between Orlando and Duke Senior, which precedes the romantic encounters with Ganymede-Rosalind (25-31). Erickson's excellent treatment of "male bonding" (4), which appeared as I was completing an earlier version of this essay for the session on Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare (Carolyn Asp, Chair) at the 1985 MLA Convention in Chicago, complements my analysis of Rosalind's self-presentation and representation.

3. Quotations from *As You Like It* are taken from Sergeant's Penguin edition.

4. Lisa Jardine argues convincingly that "wherever Shakespeare's female characters in the comedies draw attention to their own androgyny, . . . the resulting eroticism is to be associated with their *maleness* rather than with their femaleness" (20). I should note, however, that Kathleen McLuskie cautions that our interpretations of Elizabethan plays and theatrical documents may be too greatly

affected by modern psychology and stagecraft: "the nature of women was a continual focus of discussion and anxiety and it was this ideological focus rather than simple sexual attraction or disruptive metatheatrical confusion which determined the relationship between the audience and the boy actors of the Elizabethan stage" (128).

5. Though the word *homosexual* is intentionally inflammatory in this passage from Gallop's book, I adopt it for precisely the reason that Peter Erickson rejects it in favor of the safer term *male bonding*: "the term *homosexual* is avoided as an automatic characterization of the physical component of male bonds in order to distinguish between the explicitly sexual relationship and the attraction that is part of male camaraderie" (4). Both Gallop and Erickson are referring to "the relations that form the basis for male-oriented institutions" (P. Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures* 4). But how can one so neatly distinguish between *homosexuality* and the attraction of male camaraderie in connection with the physical facts of Elizabethan theatrical production, when part of the play's excitement derives from its comic self-consciousness about the homosexual implications of its staging? Though Catherine Belsey does not discuss homosexuality in *As You Like It*, her analysis suggests why I find Erickson's displacement of its homosexual implications problematic: "Visually and aurally the actor does not insist on the femininity of Rosalind-as-Ganymede, but holds the issue unresolved, releasing for the audience the possibility of a disruption of sexual difference" (183). Erickson is trying to defuse the disruption.

6. The dynamic here coincides with what Louis Adrian Montrose identifies as the shift that distinguishes Shakespeare from the "medieval dramatic tradition": "What is involved is a decisive shift in the orientation of drama's dialectics toward the merely human plane: to a dialectic between characters within the playworld; between the fictional world of the characters and the experiential world of the audience; and between the professional players and those who pay to see them" (Montrose, "Purpose" 70). I agree with Montrose that "the professional players' performances hold up to nature a mirror that not only reflects but also anatomizes and shapes the very age and body of the time," that "Shakespeare's professional milieu is a paradoxical Elizabethan world" (71). But I find even the comedies more complicit than revolutionary; indeed though Shakespeare may capture and "anatomize" the discontents of his civilization, he seems more concerned with reconciling conflicting elements within the social order than in transforming the order itself. As a successful entrepreneur, he aims to please both the popular audience and the courtly powers that be.

7. Malcolm Evans deconstructs this line in "Truth's True Contents" (Chapter 6 of his book *Signifying Nothing*). He summarizes the line's effect in "Deconstructing Shakespeare's Comedies," where he notes that "Hymen's precondition . . . for the marriages that signal 'atonement'--'If truth holds true contents' (V.iv.124)--makes . . . gestures towards the truth contained at the heart of truth, identical with itself, only to break down in a delirium of wordplays on 'truth,' 'holds,' 'true,' and 'contents' which leaves no centre but tautology, endless supplementation, and a textual process whose closure can only be as you like it" (82-83).

8. I am employing Raymond Williams' definition of "hegemony": "it is a lived system of meanings and values--constitutive and constituting--which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is . . . in the strongest sense a 'culture,' but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes" (110). The concept applies especially to the seductive, yet self-defeating allure of Rosalind: "Her casting herself in the role of male possession is all the more charming because she does not have to be forced to adopt it: her self-taming is voluntary" (P. Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures* 25).

9. See Montrose's article, "'The Place of a Brother' in *As You Like It*: Social

Process and Comic Form," on love banter and "the issue of mastery in the shifting social relationship between the sexes" (49); the author also discusses "the gynephobic response to Rosalind" (50) and the play's "containment" of her (52).

10. My sense of Elizabeth's position as the unmarried female *prince* of England in this paper derives in large part from Carolly Erickson's *The First Elizabeth*, a well-documented, popular biography that needs no apology--particularly for its sensitivity to Elizabeth's gender and sexuality. Elizabeth's evasion of marriage, as a political strategy and personal preference, is one of Erickson's themes throughout (e.g., 264-65). See also Phyllis Rackin on the decline of the status of women during the Renaissance, despite Elizabeth's rule (31-32).

11. The "second ending" of *As You Like It* (P. Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures* 35) raises various issues. Though the self-conscious theatricality of the epilogue would probably not have surprised Elizabethan audiences, the Variorum and New Variorum editions of the play both suggest that indeed it was "not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue" (Ep. 1). But they contend that "Rosalind may have been the first woman character to speak an epilogue on the Elizabethan stage; at any rate, no earlier epilogue of this kind has survived" (NV 301 n.). That claim must be qualified, for the court plays of Lyly provide one significant example--*Gallathea*. Lyly's play was performed by boys and concludes with Venus suggesting the transformation of the title character into a boy as a solution to the love predicament. The boy-actor playing Gallathea appears in his female role, en route to his sex change, to give the epilogue. The suggestive parallels to Shakespeare's play do not indicate direct borrowing, but do remind us that popular and court, as well as academic, theater had more in common and probably more interplay than our categories imply. Phyllis Rackin has an excellent discussion of these two transvestite comedies, as well as others.

12. For an excellent discussion of the tensions between the New Historicism of Goldberg and others and the aims and practice of feminist criticism, see Peter Erickson's recent article "Rewriting the Renaissance, Rewriting Ourselves" in *Shakespeare Quarterly*. Erickson suggests that the "escapist sentimentality" of this Goldberg essay, particularly evident in the passage just cited, reflects a "need to demonstrate that deconstruction [or at least Goldberg's deconstructive version of New Historicism] can be associated with a positive politics of liberation. The problem is that the politics are based on a false idealism: the pursuit of radical indeterminacy leads to an indiscriminate redemption of Shakespeare and of Renaissance culture" ("Rewriting" 334).

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