

Hobbes's Translations of Homer and Anticlericalism

In a recent article, Paul Davis has claimed that Hobbes's primary reason for translating Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was to continue his anticlerical agenda.¹ My purpose in this response is to argue that the case he presents is not cogent.

By 1673, when the first part of his translation of Homer's *Odyssey* appeared, Hobbes was eighty-five years old and had been arguing, often acrimoniously, with English scientists, mathematicians, and theologians on a fairly regular basis for more than twenty years. So the reason he took up translating Homer's epics should be obvious. He was tired, had left disputation behind, and wanted to enjoy the little time he expected was left to him. He had written a half-dozen substantial treatises, not to mention others in the range of fifty to one hundred pages. Moreover, many of these works were extended replies to earlier objections to his views. So it is plausible that he realized that he had had his say on all the issues, that he had not yet convinced his opponents and that it was unlikely that he would. There is evidence that he had lost his zest for debating. It was said that 'if any one objected against his dictates, he would leave the company in a passion, saying, his business was to teach, not dispute'.²

Finally, if we look at the most particular and relevant fact about Hobbes's reason for translating and then publishing Homer's poems, namely, the reason he gives, we find a mundane explanation, consistent with what has already been said:

Why then did I write it? Because I had nothing else to do. Why publish it? Because I thought it might take off my adversaries from showing their folly upon my more serious writings, and set them upon my verses to show their wisdom.

This is a witty and sarcastic remark, not at all mysterious, and containing nothing to move us to look for an X-file to supply a motivation. The one he gives is explicit and plausible. In particular, there is no good reason to accept Davis's inflated description of the brief passage above:

Hobbes mixes lofty contempt for his ‘adversaries’ with vindictive stabs at them, the cool elegance of chiasmus (‘folly’/‘serious writings’; ‘verses’/‘wisdom’) with uncharacteristically raw sarcasm.³

Either all contempt is lofty or there is nothing lofty in the contempt shown in this passage. Juxtaposing ‘folly’ and ‘serious writings’ does not count as cool elegance of any kind; the phrase ‘serious writings’ is leaden and banal. The terms ‘verses’ and ‘wisdom’ are neither contraries nor contradictories; ‘verses’ is a nonevaluative term, and ‘wisdom’ is an evaluative one, being used sarcastically. There is no high wit or cleverness. Finally, Hobbes’s two line dismissal of his opponents hardly counts as uncharacteristically raw sarcasm in the light of other remarks by Hobbes. The harshest of these is probably: ‘In sum, it [Wallis’s work] is all error and railing, that is, stinking wind; such as a jade lets fly, when he is too hard girt upon a full belly’.⁴ But many of his jibes at Bramhall cut much deeper, such as his comment that the bishop had ‘drawn up [the issue to be debated] to his advantage, with as much caution as he would do a lease’ and that the bishop ‘hath spent no little part in seeking preferment and increasing of riches’.⁵ In comparison, Hobbes’s quip about publishing his translation is tame.

My description of the reasoning relevant to understanding Hobbes’s motivation is designed to instantiate what I believe are good principles: the use of general propositions about human nature, broad facts about a particular person in his situation, and finally specific facts about what he says and does. Such a strategy forestalls the use of unnecessary, extravagant explanations, explanations that appeal to recondite or overly subtle considerations.

This notwithstanding, interpretation is akin to inductive logic in this way: what counts as a good inference given certain evidence, may not be a good inference given additional evidence. For example, suppose that a bag is known to contain one hundred marbles of unknown colour and that the first ten marbles drawn from it are white. It is a good inductive inference to conclude that the next marble drawn will be white. However, if one gets the additional information that the bag contained only eleven white marbles, the initial inference is nullified; and the new inference is that the next marble will not be white. With regard to Hobbes’s translations, we need to ask whether there is any additional information that should lead us to give up our original conclusion.

Davis thinks there is. He adduces two kinds. First, he claims that there are some passages in the translation that are anticlerical. Second, and much more important, he claims that ‘fundamental characteristics of them’ reveal Hobbes’s anticlerical motivation. He thus concludes that Hobbes turned to translation in order to further his anticlerical agenda. I deny his premises and conclusion. I begin with his second kind of evidence, because he claims that it is stronger than the first.

Davis asserts that two fundamental characteristics show Hobbes’s translations

to be anticlerical, namely, 'their lack of annotation and their low diction'.⁶ Both of these properties are obvious in the translation, and so should be the intent behind them. Since, as Davis admits,⁷ none of Hobbes's contemporaries saw anything anticlerical in the Homeric translations, nor anyone else for three hundred years, it is plausible that Hobbes did not have any substantial anticlerical intentions. To prove that Hobbes meant what none of his audience saw is to carry a heavy burden, one that the evidence cannot bear.

The general problem for Davis's enterprise comes from the nature of (communicative) meaning; specifically meaning requires that the speaker intend to have his audience recognize his intention, and this in turn requires that the means for recognizing the intention be open and observable, 'avowable', to use P. F. Strawson's terminology.⁸ A moment's consideration makes the reason obvious. The sounds and marks that people use for communication are not inherently meaningful. Thus, in order for them to be able to be used to communicate, the intention with which they are uttered has to be recognizable in virtue of various kinds of rules (syntactic, semantic and pragmatic), which have been tacitly agreed upon to express certain things, plus facts about the nonlinguistic context. Given that none of his contemporaries recognized Hobbes to be communicating an anticlerical stance in his translations, it is highly dubious that he meant them in this way.

Turning from this general problem about meaning, let us now consider the first of the two characteristics that Davis thinks show an anticlerical bent in Hobbes's translations, namely, the absence of scholarly notation. There is a simple explanation for it. Hobbes had never been an annotating scholar. There is no substantial scholarship in either his translation of Thucydides or his history of the Civil War, half of which relied on a chronicle by James Heath, who relied on uncritical sources. Aubrey said: 'He had very few books. I never sawe (nor William Petty) above halfe a dozen about him in his chamber. Homer and Virgil were commonly on his table; sometimes Xenophon, or some probable historie, and Greek Testament, or so'. Aubrey goes on: 'He was wont to say that if he had read as much as other men, he should have knowne no more then other men.'⁹ It is not plausible that this octogenarian would suddenly adopt the scholarly stance with tens of thousands of lines of Greek poetry needing to be translated.

What is plausible is that Hobbes would need some kind of excuse for not including scholarly notes in order to forestall objections from some of his critics. What better way than to point his readers to a translation that did include notes? Davis downplays the quality of John Ogilby's scholarly apparatus, in part by saying:

the first two books of his *Iliads* take up sixty-nine pages, and on fifty-seven of those pages annotations teem beneath the text as well as beside it. But the pace of his editing declined soon and steeply; on only thirty-eight out of the two hundred pages which contains books three to twelve do the annotations overspill the margins ...¹⁰

What Davis says is true but does not justify his conclusion, namely, that Hobbes expected his readers to know Ogilby's work, to discount what they would see in the first seventy pages of the book (that is, an impressive volume of the notes), and to focus on the following pages, which contain relatively few notes. I believe that Hobbes could not sensibly have expected his audience to think of such things when trying to understand what he said. Also, since Ogilby could not muster the energy to write a comprehensive commentary on Homer's epics when he was in his fifties, it is plausible that Hobbes, who had never produced a scholarly edition of anything, would not take on such a daunting task in his eighties. It is important to note that Hobbes does not say that no one could provide annotations better than Ogilby did, only that he could not: 'But why without any annotations? Because I had no hope to do it better than it is already done by Mr. Ogilby'.¹¹

Davis unfairly disparages Ogilby's scholarship. Prior to the end of the eighteenth century, referring readers to ancient and medieval commentators on Homer, as Ogilby did, was all that the best English scholars did.¹² According to Davis, Ogilby, like Hobbes, had an anticlerical streak, and Hobbes was making him the butt of a joke. It is not plausible that in the supposed fight against the priests, Hobbes should have gratuitously insulted a comrade, who was also a friend of his friend William Davenant and a friend of Charles II, whom Hobbes had reason not to offend.

Hobbes's commitment to the translation project was initially so tentative that he published only books nine to twelve of the *Odyssey* to see how they would go over. Since no one detected any anticlericalism in these, it is implausible that Hobbes would have continued in the very same vein if promoting anticlericalism had been a large part of his project.

Let us now consider the other characteristic of Hobbes's translation that Davis says marks it as an anticlerical work, namely, its low language. When Hobbes discusses the virtues of an epic, he says it should have 'discretion' in the sense that

every part of the poem be conducing, and in good order placed to the end and design of the poet. And the design is ... to delight the reader.¹³

This goal recommends that the words used by a poet or translator should be familiar ones since 'the first indiscretion is, the use of such words as to the readers of poesy ... are not sufficiently known'.¹⁴ What translations did Hobbes have in mind? They were likely to be George Chapman's translations, which contain 'strange words' and 'verbal innovations', and Ogilby's, which use abstract language.¹⁵ The fact that Hobbes intended women to constitute a large part of his audience and that he thought their language skills were not as developed as those of men also explains the use of familiar words, many of which might be called 'low'. In short, Hobbes aimed at producing, for a broad readership, a translation of Homer clearer and more concrete than the other English translations. No reference to anticlericalism is

needed to explain Hobbes's intentions fully and plausibly. And I have not even mentioned that Hobbes's language is usually appropriate to Homer's often colloquial and graphic language. If his aim were anticlerical, then so would be that of the Royal Society. In his history of that institution, Thomas Sprat, a prominent member of it, rejected 'all amplification, digressions, and swellings of style' in the course of also condemning 'this vicious abundance of Phrase ... this volubility of tongue'.¹⁶

Davis thinks that in Hobbes's context scholarly apparatus was a mark of priest-craft and hence its absence a mark of anticlericalism.¹⁷ But he gives us no good reason to think that scholarship and clericalism were associated with each other at that time. The greatest Renaissance scholars were not priests: Henri Estienne, Isaac Causabon, Joseph Justus Scaliger, Justus Lipsius, and Hugo Grotius. And most priests were not scholars. An attack on scholarship would not be conspicuously an attack on priests but on scholars. Moreover, if Hobbes were attacking scholarship, he would be dishonouring the memory of his friend, John Selden, who was notorious for his overwhelming scholarship and convoluted prose.

All of this notwithstanding, Davis thinks he detects anticlericalism in Hobbes's alleged attack on Homer-Sophos, as promoted by the Cambridge Platonists. The strategy, according to Davis, is to undermine the priesthood by humiliating Homer by using low words. One problem for Davis's view is that he gives no evidence that Hobbes knew of or was concerned about refuting the Cambridge Platonists, who themselves were suspected of heterodoxy at the time. Another problem is that to hold Davis's view is to attribute a very odd psychology. It is not plausible that Hobbes would devote three to five of his octogenarian years to translating one of the greatest poets of all times with the secret intention of humiliating that poet. Still another problem is that Hobbes should be expected to have known that, if he gave the impression of humiliating Homer, the reader would think worse of Hobbes, not Homer.

According to Davis, one of Hobbes's tactics is to use 'fiddler' to translate the Greek word 'ᾠοδός', where earlier translators had used 'poet'.¹⁸ Certainly some uses of 'fiddle' and 'fiddler' today connote condescension, but the OED does not indicate that they had that connotation in the seventeenth century. Also, 'fiddler' was at least as appropriate as 'poet'. Homer's bard/poets often sang their verses as they played a musical instrument. Since seventeenth-century English poets did not typically perform their poems like this, 'poet' is not quite right. Hobbes chose the word 'fiddler' for the person who played the instrument; and since fiddlers play fiddles, it was appropriate for him to translate 'λύγεια' as 'fiddle'. He was under no requirement to follow previous translators in their choice of 'lyre'. Perhaps his choice was influenced by the Latin word '*fidicen*', a lyric poet, or harp, lyre, or lute player. '*Fidicen*' comes from '*fides cano*', as close etymologically as one can get to someone who sings with a lyre or fiddle. And, 'fiddler' is within the

semantic space delimited by Liddell and Scott, who define ‘ᾠοιδός’ as ‘singer, minstrel, bard’.

Davis criticizes Hobbes’s use of ‘tumble’ and ‘tumbler in this passage:

So quickly down he tumbled to the plain,
I see that there good tumblers are in Troy.¹⁹

But the words are appropriate as indicated by Robert Fagles use of ‘tumbler’ in the same passage:

‘Look what a springy man, a nimble, flashy tumbler! ...
Even these Trojans have their tumblers – what a leap!’²⁰

Although Davis thinks that Hobbes’s so-called ‘low’ language is evidence of an anticlerical intent, he also concedes that this language is appropriate to Homer’s text. For example, he says, ‘Hobbes’s low vocabulary ... does not diminish the dignity of Homer’s original words because those original words are themselves a diminishment of dignity.’²¹ In my opinion, for Davis to think that it is legitimate to attribute a special motive to Hobbes, when Hobbes is simply translating Homer’s text appropriately is to overinterpret. No special explanation for why a translator translated as he did is necessary or legitimate when the translation is correct and appropriate.²²

Even if Hobbes used inappropriate low words about poets, it would not prove that he was trying ‘to clip the soaring wings of a clericalist “Homer”’.²³ Since historically many Christian priests had a low view of pagan poets generally and Homer in particular, the use of disparaging language in connection with Homer or his poets could just as easily be construed as proclerical. (That, of course, is not my view.)

Near the beginning of his article, Davis identifies Hobbes’s ‘adversaries’ as ‘John Wallis and Seth Ward (together with the experimenting allies first at Gresham College and later in the Royal Society)’.²⁴ The phrasing puts the focus on the clerics Wallis and Ward and marginalizes the ‘experimenting allies’ by referring to them parenthetically. This phrasing is not justified because among the people marginalized are Hobbes’s enemy Robert Boyle (and possibly Henry Oldenburg). Also, Davis gives no reason for excluding critics who were not priests and not active in the Royal Society, such as Alexander Ross and Robert Filmer. Davis does not say when Hobbes supposedly became anticlerical; so it is not clear whether it is relevant to mention Hobbes’s many priestly friends and acquaintances such as John Cosin, John Pearson, Marin Mersenne, Pierre Gassendi. A difficult case is the priest Thomas White, who was variously friend and foe. Whether Hobbes liked a person or not was independent of their clerical status, although I don’t know of any presbyterian cleric who was a friend of his. To make it look as if Hobbes’s enemies were only priests and that no priests were his friends is to engage in special pleading.

While both Hobbes and Wallis tried to drag religion into the dispute over

mathematics at various points, usually for the purposes of launching an *ad hominem* attack, these extraneous issues hardly concerned clericalism. So far as the priesthood was concerned, Hobbes, ever an episcopalist (notwithstanding his concession to Independency in *Leviathan*, chapter 47, paragraph 20), was a greater supporter than Wallis, who aided the presbyterians during the Civil War. Hobbes's disputes with Wallis had little or nothing to do with dogmatic theology. He did have such disputes with priests, principally John Bramhall, but Bramhall did not participate in Hobbes's mathematical and scientific arguments. It is important not to conflate the various kinds of disputes.

Let us now consider the first kind of evidence that Davis produces to support his thesis, specific passages analysed to reveal an anticlerical bias. For example, Davis claims that the confrontation between Agamemnon and the prophet Calchas is anticlerical because of this supposedly anticlerical speech by Agamemnon:

Unlucky prophet, that didst never yet
 Good fortune prophecy to me, but ill,
 And ever with a mind against me set
 Inventest prophecies to cross my will;
 And now again you fain would have it thought,
 Because I would not let Chryseis go,
 The gifts refusing which her father brought,
 Therefore this plague was sent amongst us now.²⁵

For the sake of discussion let us assume for now that Agamemnon's speech is anticlerical. Then Davis's interpretation is implausible because the anticlerical words come from the mouth of a detestable figure. Agamemnon is stone-hearted, not supported by any of the other Greeks, and insensitive to the complaint of Achilles, their greatest hero. He spurns the reasonable and heart-wrenching pleas of Chryses, who offers the king gifts to ransom his daughter Chryseis.

To this the princes all gave their consent,
 Except King Agamemnon. He alone,
 And with sharp language from the fleet him sent;
 Old man, said he, let me not see you here
 Now staying, or returning back again,
 For fear the golden scepter which you bear,
 And chaplet hanging on it, prove but vain.
 And take heed you no farther me incense,
 Lest you return not safely to your home.²⁶

In short, Agamemnon bullies an old man. When he eventually is forced to give up Chryseis, he takes the girl that he had given to Achilles. Offended, Achilles withdraws from the war, and this leads to the death of many Greeks. So, if putting anticlerical remarks into Agamemnon's mouth were to have any significance with respect to anticlericalism, it would be that anticlericalism

is favoured by brutish, self-aggrandizing men, whose actions cause many unnecessary deaths.

In fact, the confrontation between Agamemnon and Calchas has no anti-clerical significance, because Calchas is not a priest but a prophet; and the difference was important to Hobbes. In *Leviathan*, chapter 36, he says that the word 'prophet' is ambiguous. In addition to meaning a person who delivers messages from God to people, it sometimes means anyone who says 'public prayers for the congregation'. Further, 'the poets of the heathens that composed hymns and other sorts of poems in the honour of their gods' were prophets. Sometimes 'prophesying' means 'no more, but praising God in psalms and holy songs, which women might do in the church'. Consequently, while some prophets are priests, others are women, heathens, or poets.²⁷

Even if Agamemnon's confrontation with Calchas were one between a king and a priest, it goes beyond the evidence to view 'the scene as an episode in the historic battle between civil and ecclesiastical authority'.²⁸ Nothing in Hobbes's passage suggests that anything more is going on than a dispute between individuals, one king, one priest, and one prophet. To think that institutional jurisdiction is at stake is to overgeneralize.

If the exchange between the king Agamemnon and the prophet Calchas echoes any biblical text that Hobbes cared about, it is the one between wicked king Ahab and the prophet Michaiah.²⁹ Hobbes's translation of Agamemnon's words,

Unlucky prophet, that didst never yet
Good fortune prophecy to me, but ill,

might be compared to this one: 'I hate him [Michaiah], for he doth not prophesie good concerning me, but evil' (1 Kings 22:8). Hobbes's Agamemnon plays Ahab to Calchas's Michaiah.

Now perhaps a case could be built for some form of irreligion or anticlericalism, if no god intervened on behalf of the priest. But Apollo does.

His prayers to Apollo up he sent. ...
His prayer was granted by the deity;
Who with his silver bow and arrows keen,
Descended from Olympus silently
In likeness of the sable night unseen. ...
And first his arrows flew at mules and dogs.
But when the plague into the army came,
Perpetual was the fire of funerals;
And so nine days continued the same.³⁰

So as far as the story goes, and there is nothing else to go on, god exists, has providence, and protects his priests.

Another similarity between the prophets Michaiah and Calchas is that they are right and their respective kings are wrong. Ahab does not believe Michaiah's prophesy and is killed as a consequence. Agamemnon implies that the

priest Chryses has no divine support and is proven wrong, as we have seen. In Hobbes's translation, Calchas explains the suffering of the Greeks:

'Tis not neglect of vow or sacrifice
 That doth the God Apollo thus displease;
 But that we do his priest so much despise,
 As not his child for ransom to release.
 And more, till she be to her father sent,
 And with a hecatomb, and ransomless,
 The anger of the god will not relent,
 Nor will the sickness 'mongst the people cease.³¹

Davis needs to explain how Hobbes could be transmitting an anticlerical message when he writes that Agamemnon suffers because Apollo is protecting his priest.

Let us consider another passage that Davis thinks is significant, namely, Achilles' reply to Ulysses in the underworld near the end of book eleven. Ulysses says,

Death hath not chang'd your state; you still enjoy
 A regal power,

In response, Achilles says,

Talk not to me of honour here in Hell;
 I'd rather serve a clown on earth for bread,
 Than be, of all things incorporeal,
 That are, or ever shall be, supreme head.³²

Davis says Achilles' use of the phrase 'things incorporeal' is an 'epithet' that Hobbes 'commonly adduced to indict them [priests] of using "names that signify nothing"'.³³ This is true but does not support Davis's thesis. Hobbes's main objection to the phrase, 'incorporeal substance' is its use in Christian theology; it is a phrase that comes from Plato and Aristotle and other heathens, who had false beliefs about the world. What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem? In the following passage criticizing Wallis, Hobbes makes his objections clear:

What kind of attribute, I pray you, is, *immaterial*, or *incorporeal substance*? Where do you find it in Scripture? Whence came it hither, but from Plato and Aristotle, heathens, who mistook those thin inhabitants of the brain they see in sleep, for so many incorporeal men; and yet allowed them motion, which is proper only to things corporeal? Do you think it an honour to God to be one of these?³⁴

So it is understandable why Hobbes uses the phrase when Homer is referring to shades in Hell. If Hobbes is denigrating anyone or anything in this passage, it is Greek folklore, superstition or philosophy, not Christian clerics.

Further analysis is not necessary. As Davis says,³⁵

it stretches credibility to suppose that the answer to that question is to be found in the few isolated pockets of anticlericalism there are in the translation. I doubt whether even Hobbes disliked priests enough to have been ‘inspired ... with a resolution of translating not only the *Odyssey* entire, but the *Iliad*’.³⁶

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Notes

- 1 Paul Davis, ‘Thomas Hobbes’s Translations of Homer: Epic and Anticlericalism in Late Seventeenth-Century England’, *The Seventeenth Century*, 12 (1997), 231–55.
- 2 Walter Pope, *The Life of the Right Reverend Father in God Seth Ward* (London, 1697), p. 462.
- 3 Davis, p. 233.
- 4 *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes* (hereafter ‘EW’), ed. William Molesworth, 11 vols (London, 1839–45), IV, 440.
- 5 *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, in EW, VII, 3.
- 6 Davis, p. 237.
- 7 Davis, p. 237.
- 8 See H. P. Grice, ‘Meaning’ and P. F. Strawson, ‘Meaning and Truth’ in *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. A. P. Martinich, fourth edn, (New York, 2001).
- 9 John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Andrew Clark, 2 vols (Oxford, 1898), I, 349.
- 10 Davis, p. 238.
- 11 EW, IX, x.
- 12 Maynard Mack, ‘Introduction’, in Alexander Pope, *The Iliad of Homer, Books I–IX* (London, 1967), pp. lxxi–lxxiii, lxxvii.
- 13 EW, X, iii.
- 14 f12 EW, X, iv.
- 15 Allardyce Nicoll (ed.), *Chapman’s Homer* (New York, 1956), p. xiii; see also p. 689. For some examples related to Ogilby’s translation, see A. P. Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 340–1.
- 16 Quoted from H. G. Lyons, *The Royal Society* (Cambridge, 1944), pp. 54, 55.
- 17 Davis, p. 237.
- 18 Davis, p. 247.
- 19 Davis, pp. 246–7; Hobbes’s *Iliads*, book 16 lines 731–6.
- 20 *The Iliad*, tr. Robert Fagles (New York, 1991), book 16, lines 868, 873. Concerning Hobbes’s use of ‘tumbler’ at his *Odyssey* book 4, lines 17–19, cf. Robert Fagles *The Odyssey*, (New York, 1996), book 4, lines 21–2, and Stanley Lombardo, *Odyssey* (Indianapolis, 2000), book 4, line 21.
- 21 Davis, p. 247.
- 22 See my ‘Interpretation and Hobbes’s Political Philosophy’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming).
- 23 Davis, p. 246.
- 24 Davis, p. 233.
- 25 Hobbes, *Iliads*, book 1, lines 105–12.
- 26 Hobbes, *Iliads*, book 1, lines 26–36.

- 27 See 'The Answer to the Preface to *Gondibert*', in EW, IV, 445 and 447–8. Davis might have used this as evidence for his view; of course I do not think these passages are conclusive.
- 28 Davis, p. 235. An anonymous referee thinks that Davis's use of 'civil and ecclesiastical authority' is anachronistic.
- 29 *Leviathan*, c. 32, paragraph 7, and c. 36, paragraph 20.
- 30 Hobbes, *Iliads*, book 1, lines 39–55.
- 31 Hobbes, *Iliads* book 1, lines 93–103.
- 32 Davis, p. 234.
- 33 Davis, p. 234.
- 34 EW, IV, 426–7. It is not relevant to Hobbes's point that Homer preceded Plato and Aristotle. Davis quotes Hobbes's passage on his p. 235.
- 35 Davis, p. 236.
- 36 I want to thank Erwin Cook for his heroic assistance with Homer's texts, and two anonymous referees for their comments.

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