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GHERARDO UGOLINI*

The Seven at War from Thebes to Aleppo. On Two Performances at the Greek Theatre of Siracusa

Abstract

Aeschylus' *The Seven Against Thebes*, directed by Marco Baliani, and Euripides' *The Phoenician Women*, directed by Valerio Binasco, were staged at the Greek theatre of Siracusa for the 53rd Festival del Teatro Greco from 6 May to 8 July 2017. Although the two plays deal with the same episodes of the Theban myth, that is, the siege of Thebes by the Argive army and the fratricidal conflict between Eteocles and Polynices, they adopt different dramaturgical, ethical, and political perspectives. Both stagings involved estranging and modernizing devices. Baliani succeeded in vividly rendering the motif of fear aroused by wartime violence, turning it into the *leitmotiv* of a production set within an archaic universe whose anthropologically-based values are cast as universal. *The Phoenician Women* turned out to be less convincing, since Binasco's innovative choices, such as Eteocles' ostentatious violence, the chorus of female refugees speaking with an Eastern European accent, and Oedipus' disturbing presence on stage from the opening of the play, did not fulfil their dramaturgical potential coherently and homogeneously.

KEYWORDS: Aeschylus; Euripides; Thebes; Siracusa; Greek tragedy; Baliani; Binasco

The organizers of the 2017 edition of the Siracusa classical festival ("Il teatro e la città" [The Theatre and the City]), which ran from 6 May to 8 July 2017, chose to stage Aeschylus' *The Seven Against Thebes* and Euripides' *The Phoenician Women*. Not only do both tragedies rely on the Theban cycle, but they also deal with the same episodes of this mythical saga: the siege of Thebes by the seven Argive heroes and the fratricidal conflict between Eteocles and Polynices, which ultimately leads to the extinction of the Labdacides family.¹ This choice was inherently very risky for a number of reasons regarding both the two texts and their *mise en scène*. As regards Aeschylus' *The Seven Against Thebes* (dating from 467 BC), the problem was to make such an archaically-patterned tragedy, if not spectacular, at least entertaining for the audience. This was no easy task since the ma-

¹ The third play of the Festival's programme was Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, translated by Olimpia Imperio and directed by Giorgio Barberio Corsetti; the main cast included Salvatore Ficarra and Valentino Picone. It premiered at the Greek Theatre of Siracusa on 29 June 2017.

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majority of scholars deem the play's finale spurious,² while also pointing out that its dramatic texture mostly consists of long *rheseis* [speeches] delivered by the messengers and Eteocles' decryption of the shields. *The Phoenician Women* (dating from 410-08 BC) poses a different set of problems: first of all, its considerable length (1760 lines), which inevitably calls for cuts, secondly the huddling of many characters on stage, and finally the complicated unfolding of the plot, refracted through different viewpoints.³ Indeed, we can safely affirm that *The Seven* and *The Phoenician Women* are particularly difficult to stage today, and it is not coincidental that the Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico di Siracusa [National Institute of Ancient Drama of Siracusa] has rarely produced them in the many decades of its activity.⁴

On the other hand, staging these two plays during the same season allowed the audience to appreciate the different ways in which Aeschylus and Euripides developed a common thematic core in the light of their different dramaturgical, ethical, and political perspectives referable to two very different historical moments, separated by seventy years. Aeschylus' *The Seven Against Thebes* belongs to a time in which the memories of the Persian wars were still vivid and alive in Athens: consequently, the motif of the military siege is treated with almost epic tones, seemingly aimed at concealing the intestine nature of the conflict. Yet, the mutual fratricide, being the unavoidable outcome of Oedipus' curse, is later viewed as just another catastrophe hitting the Labdacides *genos*, who are forced by the will of the gods to atone for their forefathers' guilt generation after generation. Euripides' approach is widely different: he wrote in the troubled years of the restoration of the Athenian democracy after the oligarchic coup of 411 BC, and he re-interpreted the mythical events leaving aside the idea of theodicy and insisting on the characters' psychology, on the often mean motivations that spur their action, and, in general, on the most lugubrious and pernicious aspects of civil war.

² In the finale of *The Seven Against Thebes* (861-1077) a messenger announces the decision, which is attributed to "counsellors (acting on behalf) of the people" (δήμου προβούλοις, 1006), to bury Eteocles and to leave traitor Polynices unburied. Antigone immediately rebels against this (1026-41) and the chorus split into two opposing factions. For a succinct but exhaustive recapitulation of the philological debate about the dubious authenticity of this finale, which seems to imply Aeschylus' knowledge of Sophocles' *Antigone*, see Taplin (1977: 169-91), Hutchinson (1985: 209-21), Centanni (1995: 199-209). See also, among others, Barrett 2007 and Judet de La Combe 2011. We do not know whether the prohibition against burying Polynices' body already appeared in the epic tradition. In Pindar (*Olympian* 6.15; *Nemean* 9.24) there is no trace of it and Polynices is cremated with his Argive comrades. Even Pausanias (9.18.3) mentions a version of the legend in which the corpses of Eteocles and Polynices are placed on the same pyre. The motif of the unburied body recurs therefore in the Athenian theatrical production only.

³ In ancient times, *The Phoenician Women* was a hugely successful and frequently performed drama and its text was therefore often altered and variously augmented.

⁴ *The Seven* has been performed only three times at the Teatro Greco di Siracusa: in 1924 (translated and directed by Ettore Romagnoli), in 1966 (translated by Carlo Diano and directed by Giuseppe Di Martino) and in 2005 (translated by Monica Centanni and directed by Jean-Pierre Vincent). *The Phoenician Women* was staged only once, in 1968 (translated by Enzo Cetrangolo and directed by Franco Enriquez). Suffice it to look at repertories and studies on this topic to verify the nineteenth- and twentieth-century meagre theatrical fortune of these two plays (see, for instance, Zoboli 2004; Flashar 2009).

This noted, it must be remarked that the two directors achieved quite uneven results. Marco Baliani, director of *The Seven Against Thebes*, accomplished the arduous task of mounting an original production that succeeded in having a strong emotional impact upon the audience through a consistent and refined modernizing strategy applied to Aeschylus' play.⁵ *The Phoenician Women*, directed by Valerio Binasco, was not as brilliant and successful: the director's choices exasperated the conflict between the two brothers, enhancing its tone and violence, while scattering comic touches within the overall tragic frame, with a strident effect which undermined their potential for relieving the tension.⁶

Baliani's production especially aimed at thematizing the war motif and suggested a universal perspective by alternating the mythical past of the war between Thebans and Argives with present-day war scenarios.⁷ In this regard, the director faithfully followed a previous staging of the *Seven* by Mario Martone in the Ascoli hall of the Teatro Nuovo in Naples in 1996.⁸ At the time Baliani played Eteocles, but also served as assistant director and contributed to Martone's meticulous preparatory work and in-depth analysis. The Neapolitan staging vividly survives in Martone's 1998 film *Teatro di guerra* [*Theatre of War*] in which the siege of Thebes is constantly associated with the one of Sarajevo.⁹ Twenty years later the topical references are different: the war in Syria, Islamic terrorism, the sieges of Damascus and Mosul. These contemporary events are hinted at both visually (soldiers wearing camouflage uniforms, the women and men of the chorus clad in animal skins that later turn into typical middle-Eastern attires) and aurally (the clattering of horses' hooves, the rumble of helicopters, the blast of machine-guns and cannon fire and so on, until the final edict announcing the end of the war, Thebes' victory, and the prohibition against burying the 'traitor' Polynices, spoken in a stentorian voice through a loudspeaker which produces an inevitable estranging effect).

⁵ *Sette contro Tebe* [*Seven Against Thebes*] by Aeschylus directed by Marco Baliani, translated by Giorgio Ieranò, costumes and stage design by Carlo Sala, music by Mirto Baliani, choreography by Alessandra Fazzino; the cast included Marco Foschi, Aldo Ottobriano, Anna Della Rosa, Gianni Salvo. First performance: Siracusa, Teatro Greco, 6 May 2017. After Siracusa, the production toured the country and had to be adapted and revised according to the requirements of the different theatres. It was mounted at the Terme di Baia (20-21 July 2017), at the Teatro Antico in Taormina (3 August 2017), and at the Teatro Romano in Verona (15-16 September 2017).

⁶ *Fenicie* [*Phoenician Women*] by Euripides, directed by Valerio Binasco, translated by Enrico Medda, costumes and stage design by Carlo Sala, music by Arturo Annechino. The cast included Isa Danieli, Guido Caprino, Gianmaria Martini, Simone Luglio, Giordana Faggiano, Michele Di Mauro, Alarico Salaroli, Matteo Francomano, Massimo Cagnina, Yamanuchi Hal, Simonetta Cartia. First performance: Siracusa, Teatro Greco, 7 May 2017.

⁷ As early as the fifth century BC, Aeschylus' contemporaries called *The Seven* "a drama full of Ares" (δραμα . . . Ἄρεως μεστόν). See Gorgias, 82 B 4 D.-K., Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1021.

⁸ Translated by Edoardo Sanguineti and directed by Mario Martone. First performance: Naples, Teatro Nuovo, 19 December 1996.

⁹ Produced by Teatri Uniti and Lucky Red in collaboration with Rai Cinemafiction. The cast included, among others, Marco Baliani, Andrea Renzi, Anna Bonaiuto, Iaia Forte, Roberto De Francesco, Toni Servillo, Peppe Lanzetta, Angelo Montella. The director recollected the theatrical performance and the film in Martone 1998. For a commentary on the film (*Teatro di Guerra*) and its connections with the 1996 theatre production, see Fusillo 2002; Orsini 2005: 86-100; Ricciardi 2014a: 284-326; Marinai 2015; Torrence 2017.

While in Aeschylus' version the impending war is at first presented as brought on by external enemies and its intestine nature is openly revealed only at a later stage, in Baliani's staging it is soon apparent that this is an internal and fratricidal conflict. This effect is achieved by the early introduction on stage of Antigone (unconvincingly interpreted by Anna Della Rosa) as the chorus leader, while the chorus itself is not exclusively feminine but includes men, which symbolizes the whole community.¹⁰ As is well known, in Aeschylus' *The Seven* Antigone appears all of a sudden only in the finale and speaks against the decree prohibiting Polynices' burial thus igniting a new division among the citizens. Setting aside the disputed authenticity of the play's ending, Baliani's alteration – also adopted by Martone in 1996 – is perfectly justified and attuned to the dramatization of the conflict as belonging to the *polis*' and the Labdacides family's internal affairs; and this choice fundamentally aimed at stressing the idea that any war is inevitably a civil one.

The motif of the war and the atrocities it inescapably produces is connected to the one of fear, whose extensive presence in Aeschylus' text is however almost exclusively conveyed by the evocative power of words. In the Siracusa staging, fear (*phobos*) was spectacularized and tremendously emphasized through a visual and especially auditory escalation, which produced a sort of emotional curve on stage. It was a feeling that kept growing until it peaked in the ending, when no reconciliation is ultimately possible. As Marco Baliani remarks in his "Appunti di regia" [Director's Notes], appended to the theatre programme, "fear is the protagonist of the whole play, and is fuelled by the sounds, yells, and echoes of the enemy army surrounding the city".¹¹

Fear-stricken and anxiously anticipating the impending danger, the Theban people call for divine protection by performing tribal rituals around the imposing leafy tree standing at the centre of the sandy stage. Replacing the marble statues of the gods of Aeschylus' text, the tree becomes indeed a totemic object charged with a strong symbolic value. It is a place where archaic worship can be carried out, in continuity with the ancient tradition, a sacred space where people can bring libations and hang votive offerings. The besieged citizens cling to their tree, which, however, finally collapses marking the ultimate downfall of the Theban royal family. Eteocles himself, Thebes' fierce leader who prompts his fellow-citizens to contain their fears, falls prey to anguish and evil premonitions. This troubled but war-ringing Eteocles was masterfully interpreted by Marco Foschi who first appeared on stage haranguing from a raised position behind the cavea, thus making the distance between the king and his people physically prominent (see fig. 1). In the play he initially behaves like a political and military leader and abides by the city's laws and traditional religious rules, and rules his city like a helmsman guiding his ship in a tempestuous sea (see 2ff., 62). Yet, the events, which follow in rapid succession, and above all the awareness of the inexorable curse that weighs on the house of

¹⁰ The interpretation of the chorus in the staging of ancient tragedies has always been the severest of tests for directors. See on this Treu 2006; Foley 2007; Meineck 2013.

¹¹ "[È] la paura la protagonista dell'intera opera, una paura fomentata dai suoni, dal clamore e dagli echi dell'esercito nemico che circonda la città" (Baliani 2017).

Laius soon make him realize that he is “a fragile hero” and the victim – just like the other characters – “of a spiritual deadlock, a suspension of the action before the massacre or the ultimate fight which will be unescapably ruinous”.¹²



Fig. 1: *The Seven Against Thebes*. Eteocles (Marco Foschi) and Antigone (Anna della Rosa). INDA archive.

The Siracusa *Seven* were also successful in originally translating into stage action what in the Greek original was evoked by words only. This is the case of the military engagement between Thebans and Argives that Aeschylus does not show but has the messengers narrate on stage. Baliani turned Aeschylus’ diegesis into mimesis by means of an animated fighting choreography: samurai-like, the soldiers wrestled hand-to-hand using long poles, while a cloud of smoke wrapped them. The scene in which Tiresias is interrogated was similarly effective; Aeschylus’ drama just touches upon the blind prophet’s prediction of the Argive attack (24-9), whereas Baliani transformed it into a shamanic performance. At first the old *mantis*, blindfolded and wearing a bizarre bird costume sporting feathers and a long beak, stood into a trance and drew concentric circles in the sand without saying a word and then started dancing wildly to exhaustion (see fig. 2).

¹² “[U]n eroe fragile”; “di uno stallo dell’animo, una sospensione di azione in attesa del massacro o della estrema lotta che porterà comunque rovina” (Baliani 2017).



Fig. 2: *The Seven Against Thebes*. The Tiresias scene. INDA archive.

The long scene of the shields was similarly treated: the competent king correctly interprets the shield-icons of the enemies and plans his military reaction against the besiegers by sending seven Theban heroes to the gates where they will face their correspondent Argive adversaries (375-685). This episode, which in Aeschylus is an exaltation of Eteocles' dialectic cleverness, was transformed here into a spectacular primitive dance, distinctly reminiscent of an initiation ceremony. As they were called to the fight, the chosen warriors climbed a mobile wooden grating – yet another totemic object whose shape, square on the outside and round on the inside, alluded to the shields – and subsequently descended from it in order to receive from the king an apotropaic mask that each of them hung upon the gate which fell to his lot. The use of masks and primeval rituals is not unusual in contemporary stagings of Greek tragedies, as many examples from the 1960s onwards show; in this respect it is worth mentioning Siracusa's 1960 *Orestiad* [*Oresteia*], translated by Pier Paolo Pasolini and directed by Luciano Lucignani, with Vittorio Gassman in the protagonist role.¹³ An anthropologically-based approach is common in ancient theatre studies and is instrumental in projecting Greekness on an archaic and primitive backdrop, thus highlighting its distance from the present, while also endowing it with a universal hermeneutic value.¹⁴ The presence of the old singer (*aoidos*), interpreted by Gianni Salvo, fitted into this approach. In the prologue and epilogue, he introduced himself as the theatre's 'caretaker', as a sort of *genius loci* who informed the audience about the antecedents of the Labdacides' myth and exhorted them to preserve the memory of the events sculpted in the site's ancient stones.

¹³ On this famous staging, see Bierl 2004: 62-9.

¹⁴ On the 'tribal classicism' of this interpretation of the *Seven*, see Auteri 2017.

The production of the *Phoenician Women*, directed by Valerio Binasco, had a few analogies with Baliani's *Seven against Thebes*. As in the *Seven*, a character, the female coryphaeus, played by Simonetta Cartia, introduced the action and summarized past events before the actual beginning of the play. Besides, her Eastern European accent immediately provided a clue to the estrangement and modernization effect the *mise en scène* wished to achieve. Indeed, as happens in Euripides' drama, the whole chorus was composed of foreign women. In the original play, the Phoenician women are pilgrims on their way to Delphi who, trapped at Thebes, become involuntary witnesses of the siege; in Binasco's version the women's clothes, their accessories, their cardboard suitcases, the melodies they sing, and their accent were remindful both of World War II deportees and of today's refugees on the Balkan and Eastern routes. Expressionless masks covered their faces emphasizing their anonymous belonging to a mass of people forced to leave their country. They acted in fact as external viewers of the story thus endowing the events with a universal meaning and existential rate, whose perennial worth goes beyond the contingencies of time and space.

As in Baliani's *mise en scène*, the stage was dominated by a huge tree; yet, differently from the one in the *Seven*, this tree had dry branches and sticking out roots, which could be interpreted as "the passage from Aeschylus' age to Euripides', seen as devoid of lively political perspectives"¹⁵ or as an allusion to the Labdacides' impending doom. The large flat space of the orchestra was covered by a red cloth, probably to symbolize the shedding of blood in the *polis* during the war. In this area, uniformed soldiers moved around while stentorian military commands were heard coming from the loudspeakers. All in all, the setting brought to mind a barracks town or a militarized community, which constituted a further *trait d'union* with Aeschylus' *Seven*. In fact the play opened with the excessively pathetic tones of a mourning Jocasta (Isa Danieli) who, sighing and moaning, recalled her family's misfortunes and prayed to Zeus that he put an end to her tribulations. In the meantime all the other characters spread out across the stage, some on the wings and some in the back; among them was the old and blind Oedipus – interpreted by the Japanese actor Hal Yamamuchi – who, in Euripides' drama, does not appear on stage until the end of the play. This idea of turning the protagonists of the story into second-degree spectators of the events was undoubtedly a most original directorial choice; yet, such metatheatrical and nearly-Brechtian estrangement device ended up being hardly effective in the staging of a Greek tragedy, especially one so densely populated with characters. As a result, the spectators eventually felt as if they had watched a half-sketched experiment, undefined and lacking direction or purpose.

The protagonist of Binasco's *Phoenician Women* was definitely Jocasta (fig. 3), while the other characters moved around her and never seemed to emerge fully in the performance, thus remaining in a secondary and nearly accessory position. Binasco drew on various elements of the ancient mythological tradition, turning Jocasta into the symbol of universal and unconditional motherly love and the guard-

¹⁵ "[I]l passaggio dall'epoca eschilea a quella euripidea, vuota ormai di prospettive politicamente vitali" (Barone 2017).

ian of the family customs of an accursed and unfortunate *genos*. Nonetheless, her last-moment attempt to reconcile her sons and save them from the fratricidal duel proved unsuccessful. Evidently, the director wanted to highlight the polarity between the female and male universes; in Binasco's vision, the former is characterized by a longing for peace and reconciliation as well as willingness to pursue dialogue and mutual understanding, while the latter is dominated by violent and prevaricating impulses. Antigone (Giordana Faggiano) also had a share in this ideological polarity when she restlessly tried to spot her exiled brother from Thebes' walls, although never failing to show her unreserved devotion towards her aging father.



Fig. 3: *The Phoenician Women*. Jocasta (Isa Danieli) and Polynices (Gianmaria Martini). INDA archive.

Eteocles (Guido Caprino) was presented as a particularly violent and unrestrainedly ruthless character. The director's interpretation rested on some despotically accented Eteocles uses in Euripides' drama when he exalts tyranny and declares his craving for absolute power even if it is unjust (499-525ff.). The Siracusa production, however, brought his aggressiveness to the extreme, as not only words but also stage action was imbued with it. Eteocles knocked down his brother Polynices (Gianmaria Martini) and punched him while his thugs restrained him. Such brutality reached its peak in the Argive soldier scene: the prisoner was chased after, captured, tied down, blindfolded by Eteocles' guards and eventually killed by Eteocles himself, who slit his throat on stage. Significantly enough, this final act of violence occurred at a key moment in the play, that is, right after the loyal Creon (Michele di Mauro) had urged the king to appoint seven Theban heroes to defend the city gates against the Argive attackers. This display of ferocious strength may be read

as a rather transparent allusion to the barbarities of Islamic terrorism, even though the exhibition of a bloody human sacrifice appeared to be totally disproportionate and out of place. This turned out as especially disturbing since the highlighting of the gory aspects of the drama was paired with an exaggerated pursuit of ludicrous and grotesque effects. Such combination was particularly evident when the messenger (Massimo Cagnina) announced Thebes' victory and the imminent duel between Eteocles and Polynices and, later on, the two brothers' deaths and Jocasta's suicide. The grotesque found its iconographic representation in the messenger's bizarre helmet and his cautious gesturing; yet, what the audience found particularly hilarious was his awkward Sicilian accent and his stock-phrase, "chiedo scusa" "I beg your pardon". The oscillation between high and low registers, comedy and tragedy, may prove a successful dramaturgical device, but in Binasco's *Phoenician Women* it seemed to have been employed casually, showing no clear direction or function.

All the same, one of the most felicitous moments of the performance, worth mentioning here, was the Tiresias scene. The prophet (Alarico Salaroli) was played as a staggering and sulky old man, in a loose red dressing-gown and flip-flops, holding a plastic bag in which he kept the golden crown he won thanks to his excellence in the divinatory art. At Creon's request to show the Thebans how they could find a way out and be saved, Tiresias responded with an uproarious fit of laughter; this completely cancelled the prophet's hieratic solemnity – which, in the *Seven*, Baliani had reinterpreted as shamanic rituality. Binasco's rendering of the Tiresias scene, however, highlighted, if indirectly, a few undertones of the Euripidean text. Firstly, the characterization of Creon as a loving father, who put the life of his son, Menoeceus (Matteo Francomano), before the *polis'* well-being and secondly, Menoeceus' own metamorphosis. Early designated by Tiresias' vaticination as a sacrificial victim, the boy gradually turns from a weak youth, completely subjected to his father's will, into a tragic hero ready to give his life for his country. It is precisely this transformation – and Menoeceus' decision to die as a sacrifice for his people – that unlocks the action, ultimately allowing Thebes to win the war.

In addition to this, Oedipus' appearance on stage in the final scene was both gripping and successfully accomplished (fig. 4). If for an Athenian audience of the fifth century BC, his entrance must have come as a surprise, Siracusa's spectators were already familiar with his presence. As pointed out above, the old blind king had been sitting on stage, veiled and in silence, since the beginning of the play, while Jocasta, his mother-wife, lovingly assisted him. His imposing and menacing figure stood as the concrete representation of Thebes' misery, and his body physically symbolized his family's damnation. Only after his two sons' deaths and the fulfilment of the curse, did Oedipus stand up and speak, accepting to go into exile. As happened with the chorus of female refugees, the peculiarity of Oedipus' portrayal heightened the estranging effects of the production and, at the same time, allowed for the boundaries of the myth to be stretched to a universal dimension.



Fig. 4: *The Phoenician Women*. Oedipus (Hal Yamanuchi). INDA archive.

In an interview Valerio Binasco explained the choice of a Japanese actor – Oedipus sported the oriental looks and the foreign accent of Japanese actor Hal Yamanuchi who delivered a charismatic interpretation of the character – underlining his difference with the other heroes of the mythical saga:

For Oedipus I needed someone coming ‘from afar’: he belongs to a different story from that of his kin. He already belongs to the sacred and the myth. . . . [Oedipus] is not lacerated by psychological issues: he is stony, solid, archaic. He is animated by a completely different expressive tradition than the other characters of the drama, whom Euripides depicted as his own ‘contemporaries’, that is, full of weaknesses, uncertainties, and nervous complexities. Oedipus is different. He comes straight from the heroic times. The time of heroes finishes with Euripides. But Oedipus is still there, he is one of them. No one can sustain the weight of his singularity.¹⁶

As a matter of fact Oedipus, for all his being archaic and hieratical, eventually leaves his homeland and goes into exile. He, too, becomes a refugee.

English translation by Carlo Vareschi.

¹⁶ “Per Edipo mi occorreva anche qualcuno che arrivasse ‘da lontano’: Edipo appartiene a una storia diversa da quella dei suoi famigliari. . . . Appartiene già al sacro e al mito non è dilaniato da temi psicologici: è arcaico, pietoso, solido. È mosso da una tradizione espressiva molto diversa da quella degli altri personaggi del dramma, che Euripide delinea in modo molto ‘contemporaneo’, pieni di debolezze, di incertezze, di nervosa complessità. Edipo, no. Lui viene direttamente dal tempo eroico. Il tempo degli eroi finisce con Euripide. Ma Edipo è ancora lì, tra loro. Nessuno riesce a reggere il peso della sua estraneità” (Di Rosa and Tisano 2017).

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