

## **Forest of Arden Revisited: Re-assessing the Role of Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* from an Ecocritical Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT:** As Thomas McFarland, the author of *Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy* cogitates, the landscape of the Forest of Arden plays a greater significant role than being a mere idyllic background to the action of the play. It actually occupies the center stage and becomes the fulcrum in the development of the plot. It's a natural space where the characters are allowed to be themselves, being free from the socio-political burdens of the court. Here they are free to create alternate identities. As Garrard opines, "Pastoral often used nature as a location or as a reflection of human predicaments, rather than sustaining an interest in and for itself." (38) Arden is capable of providing everybody, the Duke, Orlando, Rosalind, Audrey, Oliver, Duke Frederick, what he/she desires. But one of the most interesting aspects of the play is the insertion of the character of Jaques. This is an instance of the variations from the source, Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde: Euphues' Golden Legacy*. This character is purely an original creation of Shakespeare. Then the question that haunts our mind is why is Jaques there in the play at all? What is the purpose of the playwright behind incorporating such a character within the play who is hardly necessary for the development of the plot? A close study of the play demonstrates that Jaques introduces an ecocentric point of view into the text. He is a true lover of nature in its original essence. That's why when everything is happily settled down at the end of the play, and all other characters are returning to the court, he is the only one who refuses to leave the place. A.W. Verity assumes that Jaques is the voice of Shakespeare himself. In this paper, we would partly accept Verity's opinion and try to find out Jaques' role in the play from the perspective of ecocriticism. A careful study divulge one into considering that though Shakespeare was writing a pastoral comedy, his eco-conscious mind could not accept some of the activities of the characters resulting in disturbing the ecological balance of the forest. He might have needed a mouthpiece to express his own ecocentric views. This paper would endeavour to uncover how much the character of Jaques ascertains before the readers the playwright's consciousness for the balance in ecology.

**KEYWORDS:** Idyll, Pastoral, Ecocentrism, Forest of Arden, Balance in Ecology

The fact that even after the passage of more than four hundred years of the demise of the great playwright Shakespeare, his plays continue to speak to the readers is incredibly interesting. His plays, after hundreds and thousands of interpretations

through centuries, still provide the scope for new researchers. One of the newest addition to them is the recently emerging school of literary criticism, Ecocriticism. In this paper, I will try to re-search the playwright's connection to nature within the play *As You Like It*. In this respect, I can never claim that I am the first one to do that. There are excellent works already done on this particular issue by a number of eminent critics. They have explored the way the characters within the plays "speak of the world around them as though it is alive" (Egan 22). Joanne Rebecah Grossman in her dissertation *Shakespeare Grounded: Ecocritical Approaches to Shakespeare's Drama* has investigated into the inversion of the all-inclusive hierarchy of the 'Great Chain of Being' within the plays. Simon C. Estok has further validated this robust presence of natural elements in Shakespearean plays. William Kroeger in his dissertation *The Dramatic Ecologies of As You Like It* has attempted to exhibit the balance between worlds that has been sought for throughout the play. Paul Joseph Zajac in his article "The Politics of Contentment: Passions, Pastoral, and Community in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*" has concentrated the discussion regarding the concept of contentment within the background of the pastoral. Along with considering all these aspects of the portrayal of the natural world within the play under discussion, in this paper I would especially endeavour to pay special attention to the character of Jaques and his valuable comments regarding the rights of the non-human world. This paper would further strive to uncover how much the character of Jaques ascertains before the readers the playwright's consciousness for the balance in ecology.

Act I chiefly serves the purpose of introducing the major characters of the play, as is conventional with Shakespearean drama. At the very opening scene the readers are introduced to the hero of the play, Orlando, along with his friend-like servant Adam. We find them talking in the orchard. Orlando narrates his sub-human condition into which he is forced to live by his brother Oliver. The readers come across a number of animals being compared to his state of being. The next scene shows the two sisters, Rosalind and Celia loitering in the garden of the Duke's palace. Duke senior along with his retinue of Lords and Amiens meet the audience in the Forest of Arden dressed as the inhabitants of the forest. The other major character, Jaques, is also introduced within the natural setting of the Forest of Arden. The minor characters, such as Corin, Silvius, Phoebe, Audrey and others are the original inhabitants of Arden. It could be easily noticed that all the significant characters of the play are introduced to the audience within nature, either uncontaminated or artificial. In Act II Scene (iii) the wrestling between Orlando and Charles demonstrates the signs of primitive animal instinct. The scene also presents the jealous Duke Frederick, being threatened by the good reputation of Rosalind among people, ostracizes her from the court. Celia deliberately takes the banishment upon herself, out of her true love for her sister. They determine to leave the court in disguise. On the other hand Orlando's brother plots to murder him. To escape his own death, Orlando takes refuge into the forest, with Adam voluntarily accompanying him. So now we can see that the playwright has assembled almost all the important characters of the play into the Forest of Arden.

*As You Like It* is primarily considered as a pastoral romance. Now Pastoral is, as M. H. Abrams defines, 'a deliberately conventional poem expressing an urban poet's nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting' (Abrahms 1993, 141). Greg Garrard, the renowned ecocritic, thinks of pastoral as taking decisive role in shaping our constructions of nature. In attempt to answer what 'pastoral' is, and find out its significance for environmentalism, Terry Gifford distinguishes three kinds of pastoral: i) the particularly literary tradition depicting return to the country side from the city, ii) 'any literature that describes a country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban' (Gifford 1999, 2),

and iii) the pejorative sense implying an idealization of country life overlooking the realities of labour and hardship. The first kind among these are depicted in ‘classical pastoral’, the second kind comes to the fore in Romantic pastoral and the third sense comes into existence especially in Marxist critique of Romanticism, providing a ground for contrast of this tradition in cultural criticism with ecocriticism.

Following the criteria set for pastoral by Terry Gifford, we will henceforth look for the glimpses of i) love for nature, and ii) an explicit comparison between the rural and the urban. For the first criteria of the pastoral romance, an appreciation of the natural beauty of the forest is portrayed within the song of Amiens in Act II Scene (v). The song is actually an invitation to a bona fide admirer of nature to lie down ‘under the greenwood tree’ and enjoy the sweet, joyful song of the birds. Here the only enemy is the adversities of the rough, wintry season. According to the song, this is an idyllic place for a person without any worldly ambition, to live in the open air, welcoming the wind and rough weather. Duke Senior too concedes the beneficial effects of the forest—“Find tongues in trees, books in the murmuring brooks,/ Sermons in stones, and good in everything” (Act II Scene i L. 16-17). Again, Act IV Scene (iii) provides a picturesque description of the nature surrounding the sheep-cote owned by Rosalind and Celia. The location of the cottage is in the valley, at the outskirts of the forest. Beside it there is a stream that produces murmuring sound while flowing. A row of willow trees, close to the stream leads the way towards the cottage. The olive trees surrounding the cottage serve the purpose of the fence. The pages sing a song in the last scene, in appreciation of spring, portraying an exquisite depiction of this lovely season. As this is the season of lovers, they too sing in an ecstatic state of mind along with the sweet, tinkling song of the birds.

Greg Garrard sets out three orientations of pastoral in terms of time: “...the ‘elegy’ looks back to a vanished past with a sense of nostalgia, the ‘idyll’ celebrates the bountiful present, and ‘utopia’ looks forward to a redeemed future” (Garrard 2004, 37). In this respect, the present text under discussion is an ‘idyll’. As J.F. Cuddon (1998) explains, the word ‘idyllic’ commonly refers to a serene or euphoric state or environment which is ‘remotely attainable and idealized’. The author of *Shakespeare’s Pastoral Comedy*, Thomas McFarland, claims that the landscape of the Forest of Arden plays a more considerable role than being a mere idyllic background to the action of the play. It actually monopolizes the center stage and becomes the fulcrum in the development of the plot. It’s not simply a neutral site to escape to. It’s a natural space where the characters are allocated to be themselves, being free from the socio-political burdens of the court. Here they are emancipated to fashion alternate identities, and perhaps the title of the play is originated from this aspect of Arden. Garrard opines, “Pastoral often used nature as a location or as a reflection of human predicaments, rather than sustaining an interest in and for itself” (Garrard 2004, 38). Arden is accomplished with providing everybody what he/she aspires for. In this way we see the duke with his retinue has to hunt to get their food, while Audrey could manage all her needs by keeping goats. For Orlando’s poems, there is abundance of receptive tree barks. The snake and the lioness that welcome Oliver into the forest help him in his reformation. And Duke Frederick meets an old religious man, sent by the forest, to bring the change into him.

Act I portrays Orlando as a discontented young man, melancholic, compelled by his fate to bear with the tyranny of his brother. He has lost all his hope within this miserable life. But the Forest of Arden, a space free from the norms of hierarchy, brings out of him a loyal courtier and a fervent lover. The ambience encourages him to express his passion through verses, however bad they are, engraved on the barks of the trees. Forest of Arden presents before us a refurbished Orlando—joyful, bubbling with

vivacity and energy, just like his poems which are the expressions of intimate ecstasy. The transformation that Oliver and Duke Frederick undergo too is very unambiguous. They had to suppress their better selves, the feelings of kinship and other virtues as they became the victims of the socio-political structure of the court. But the moment they enter Arden, it persuades them to nurture those qualities. Again, Celia is swayed to explore her potential as a successful homemaker which she had to suppress in the court. Here she builds a family based on mutual love and empathy. Here, their love is never disrupted by sibling rivalry, greed or power-lust. However, the most significant transformation that is visible is within Rosalind. The moment she slips into men's apparel, her latent courage and potential comes out. As soon as she becomes free from the bounds of the court, she turns out to be the regulator of the actions and emotions of almost all the other characters in the play. This is most imperative in the climax when she controls and directs, and even prompts the other characters their dialogues. This is the most precious gift that the Forest of Arden allots for her.

Usually, the Forest of Arden is regarded as an enchanted forest. A wicked fellow like Oliver, who even plots to kill his own brother Orlando by burning him alive, encounters a magical transformation after Orlando rescues him from the attacks of the snake and the lioness. Duke Frederick too, an usurper who banishes his brother after snatching his dukedom, retires from the worldly life after restoring all his wealth and power upon his brother at the end of the play. And as for the reason behind these conversions, commonly the magical power possessed by the Forest of Arden is foregrounded. But if we look into it from the perspective of nature study, a more rational interpretation could be offered for this particular phenomenon. As we know, nature itself has a benevolent influence upon all the creatures. Once one comes under its comforting effects, one finds calm and peace of mind within oneself. This is what may have happened with Oliver and Duke Frederick too. After the perilous ways of life in the court, when they enter into the peaceful and serene atmosphere of the forest, they realize the absurdities of wealth, power and lust leading nowhere but to damnation. So, they overthrew all their evil designs in order to live a new life in the lap of nature.

Now I would like to discuss about the concept of wilderness very briefly. Wilderness is an idea emerging out from the urge to protect particular habitats and species within their original abode. The concept of wilderness, as Greg Garrard thinks, signifies nature 'in a state uncontaminated by civilization' (Garrard 2004, 59). This idea of wilderness emerged in the eighteenth century. The 'wilderness advocates' see the transition from the hunter-gatherers to the farmers in Neolithic age as a "crucial turning point, marking a 'fall' from the primal ecological grace" (Garrard 2004, 60). Wilderness has been presented as a threat in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In Judaic scriptures, wilderness is depicted as 'the place of exile' (Garrard 2004, 61) after being driven away from Eden. With the flourishing of romanticism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries wilderness began to lose its repulsiveness. European romantics as well as some Americans from the urban regions started responding to the wild nature with favourable attitudes along with literary interests within it. Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) forwarded the concept that terror and horror in regard to nature originated from exultation, awe and delight and not from dread and loathing. In his *Emile* (1762) Jean-Jaques Rousseau argued in favour of incorporating primitive qualities within modern man for the betterment of their distorted civilized life.

Now if we think about the basic features of the Forest of Arden, we can see that this concept of wilderness fits too well within it. Arden is actually a place that is free from being contaminated by the agents of civilization. All its inhabitants, along with the shepherds and shepherdesses live a free and happy life here, without being corrupted by

any kind of instrument of the sophisticated society of the court. They never want to be. The conversation between Touchstone and Corin is the most explicit instance behind such claim. Again, the idea of wilderness as ‘the place of exile’, as has been expressed by Judaic scriptures, also is very aptly applicable to this forest. It literally serves as the ‘place of exile’ for Duke Senior after his banishment from the court. So is for Rosalind too. For Orlando and Celia, the forest offers physical, as well as emotional shelter, thus becoming the place of psychological exile for them.

As for the second criteria for the pastoral comedy, ample evidences of comparison between the forest and the court are scattered throughout the text. The second act of the play, that introduces Duke Senior to the audience, opens with a speech by him relating the advantages of life within forest. Addressing the Amiens and other Lords, his companions in exile, he advocates the superiority of the benevolent nature of the forest over the artificial glamour of the court. Through a series of rhetorical questions he avows his preference of the banished state within the heart of nature. The woods here are much more free from the jealousies and rivalries of the artificially glittering, perilous court. The only hardship they have to endure here is that of the ‘penalty of Adam’, the biting cold of the winter wind. But he smilingly accepts even the sting of the wind as “Counsellors/ That feelingly persuade me what I am” (Act II. Scene I, 10-11). With beautiful metaphor he compares it with the venom and the lack of beauty within the frog that bears a ‘precious jewel in his head’ (Act II. Scene i, 14). On the contrary, Touchstone’s first impression of the Forest of Arden is not at all romantic. Entering the forest, he sarcastically remarks: “Ay, now am I in Arden; the more fool I; when I was at home, I was in a better place” (Act II. Scene iv, 13-14). The Forest of Arden, without any amenities of the ‘civilized’ life to offer within its premises, hardly has any special charm for him.

Paul Joseph Zajac identifies the revival of pastoral as the chief mode of English Literature coinciding with the attempt to ‘represent and reform’ (Zajac 2016, 318) contentment in his article “The Politics of Contentment: Passions, Pastoral, and Community in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*”. In *As You Like It*, the playwright accentuates the pivotality of contentment to this pastoral comedy by focusing on the term within the argument between Corin and Touchstone regarding the merits and demerits of country and court. Corin the ‘most conventional pastoral figure’ of the play, moralizes contentment. Augmented by Touchstone to defend the life of the shepherd, he replies, “No more but that I know the more one sickens, the worse at ease he is, and that he that wants money, means, and content is without three good friends” (Act III Scene iii, 20-22). But at the same time, Corin is not oblivious of the concerns of material existence. He affirms, “Sir, I am a true labourer. I earn that I eat, get that I wear; owe no man hate, envy no man’s happiness; glad of other men’s good, content with my harm; and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck” (Act III Scene iii, 63-66). He recognizes contentment as the idyllic reaction to adversity, the one that alleviates the emotional being without marring the possibilities of delight and satisfaction.

The specific goal of each pair setting out for exile in Arden is that of attaining contentment. When Celia, Duke Frederick’s daughter escapes from the suffocating environment of the court along with her cousin Rosalind and the clown Touchstone whom she mentions as ‘a comfort to our travel’ (Act I Scene iii, 125), professes, “Now go we in content,/ To liberty, and not to banishment” (Act I Scene iii, 131-132). By defying her tyrannical father, she actually perseveres upon the unification between herself and Rosalind. Similarly we find Orlando using the same tongue of contentment while preparing to escape from the evil designs of his ‘tyrant brother’. He confides with Adam, “We’ll go together,/ And ere we have thy youthful wages spent,/ We’ll light

upon some settled low content” (Act II Scene iii, 67-69). Zajac observes: “Orlando’s prediction that they will ‘light upon’ contentment reflects an openness to the workings of fortune...Orlando associates his imagined contentment with lowness and poverty” (Zajac 2016, 321). This line by Orlando evokes within our mind Celia’s recognition of contentment within companionship. Again, the ‘three or four loving lords’ who voluntarily accompanied the Duke Senior in his exile at the personal cost of ‘lands and revenues’ (Act I Scene i, 88-89) did so entirely for the sake of being with one another, just like Celia and Rosalind or Adam and Orlando.

Now, as I have proposed in the introduction to this paper, I would be trying to critically view the characteristics of Jaques from the perspective our present context. There is a lot of controversy among the critics regarding the melancholic nature of this character. A group of them believe that Jaques actually suffers from a kind of melancholy. Agnes Latham suggests that one should rather try to trace the general traits of the melancholy man within Jaques than to assume him a caricature of some real character. For Carlo Falvo Heffernan, Jaques should be seen as a ‘comic prefiguring’ of Hamlet. He supports the nineteenth-century critics who considered Jaques through positive gaze and found within him a melancholic philosopher. Bridget Lyons explains the perceptions of melancholy in the sixteenth century, “(It) was clarified as a disease, condemned as a vice or exalted as the condition and symptom of genius... But all these diverse traditions about melancholy expressed implicitly, the idea of its social importance—it was a physical and psychological condition that expressed an orientation towards the world and society...” (Lyons 1975, 1). And Jaques’ criticism on the strange behavior of the other characters in the play leads some of the critics to pigeonhole him as a melancholic character. For Gene Fendt, argues that Jaques represents that type of comic catharsis which even after recognizing the charm and virtue of the comic ending chooses to leave it, only for the sake of his genuine melancholy.

There is another group of critics, as I have mentioned earlier, who tend to be critical regarding the genuineness of the melancholic attributes displayed by Jaques. Furness is of the opinion that this character has incited a good deal of controversy of which some judgments seem to be contradictory, mutually exclusive. Robert Bennett interprets Jaques as a malcontent affecting melancholy as a “fashionable pose” (Bennett 1976, 192). He further argues that “for understanding Jaques...fashion must not be confused with reality” (Bennett 1976, 192). One such opinion presents Jaques as a misanthrope whose chief pleasure is to deride humanity and all its affairs. Within the play we see Orlando implying that Jaques’ wit is merely something congregated from incorporating the popular saying rather than real humoral condition. Even when Jaques is thrilled about the fool Touchstone, his melancholic nature leads him to indicate the corruption within the human world. But A. W. Verity disposes of the idea of labeling Jaques as a misanthrope. For him, he is a man of ‘great intellectual and imaginative power and even great sensibilities’ (Verity 1967, xxxi). In this paper, we would partly accept Verity’s opinion and try to find out Jaques’ role in the play from the perspective of ecocriticism.

Keeping in accordance with the note of Verity, it can be taken into account that in his melancholic state Jaques rumbles upon the images he bumps into the natural world surrounding him within the Forest of Arden. Not only that, he makes use of them for the purpose of remarking on the nature of humans around him. This aspect of his character incites an ecocritical intervention within the portrayal of Jaques in the play. G. Aparna observes, “The early positioning of Jaques as an observer and critic of life around him anticipates his role in the play” (Aparna 2000, 134). We find the first glimpses of Jaques in Act II Scene (i) through Duke Senior’s proposition of going for hunting deer. From the speech of the First Lord, we come to know about Jaques’ reaction at seeing a stag

wounded by the arrow of a hunter. Being separated from the main herd, it came to the riverside to die a slow death. In addition to moralizing over the matter, Jaques calls the Duke and his peer intruders, unjustly taking possession of the woods and scaring away the animals from the forest which has been allotted to them by nature herself. In his opinion, "... you do more usurp/ Than doth your brother that hath banished you". In this particular matter, the Duke fails to penetrate into the effect of their activities upon the natural inhabitants of the forest.

Not only sympathizing with the injured deer, Jaques is equally fascinated with the other elements of nature too, like the flora and fauna of the forest. The lords continue to illustrate his condition in the same scene:

...under the oak whose antic root peeps out  
 Upon the brook that brawls along this wood  
 To which place a poor sequestered stag  
 That from the hunter's aim had taken hurt  
 Did come to languish. (Act II, Scene i, 31-35)

So, it seems to be very clear that right from the beginning the playwright has fashioned the character of Jaques with a close affinity with the nature and the natural world around him. In this context the observations of Duke Senior in the seventh scene of the same act is very significant. There he exclaims, "I think he be transformed into a beast,/ For I can nowhere find him like a man" (Act II, Scene vii, 1-2). He conceives Jaques along with his involvement with the natural world (and the elements of it such as the deer, water, trees) as being engrossed into the physical environment. Moreover, Jaques is portrayed as a kind of 'dramatic host' (Kroeger 2019, 42) of the forest. In contrast, we see Corin playing the role of the 'domestic host' (Kroeger 2019, 42) within the natural setting of the agricultural community of the forest. We can see him comfortably roaming through the forest on different occasions. Cynthia Marshall gestates the existence of Jaques as a 'split within the subject' (Marshall 1998, 379) for his subsistence in 'an interstitial buffer zone' ((Kroeger 2019, 43) between the actors and the audience. She advocates that Jaques serves as the 'linguistic and psychological placeholder' (Marshall 1998, 379) in the forest. For her, his melancholy is a kind of psychological negation that drags towards him the venom of hindered emotion.

Now before we enter into the discussion regarding the ecocentrism, let us have a glimpse of the concept of Ecocentrism first. In contrast to environmentalism, Arne Naess places the idea of Deep Ecology movement in which "Pollution is evaluated from a biospheric point of view, not focusing exclusively on its effects on human health, but rather on life as a whole, including the life conditions of every species and system" (Naess 1995, 71). As a movement deep ecology began with the publication of Aldo Leopold's essay "Land Ethic" in *A Sand County Almanac* (1948) in which Leopold argued in favour of protecting *all* the elements in the ecosphere (emphasis mine). This perspective, which sees all the elements of nature in equal terms, is called 'ecocentrism'.

It is Jaques who brings in an ecocentric point of view into the present text under discussion. The first scene of the second act of the play shows Jaques feeling sympathy for the wounded deer. He concedes the unassailable right of the deer to live in their original habitation without any kind of infringement as well as hostility on the part of the human. In his response to the deer's troubles he expresses his opinion that each and every creature of God has an equal right to survival within this world. The attack upon the deer only for the sake of sport enrages him to the extent that he bursts out against the injustices meted out to the natural world by human. Though Robert Bennett interprets this reaction of Jaques as 'absurdity' (Bennett 1976, 196), from an ecological point of view his actions are anything other than absurdity. Rather it is the

anthropocentric view that leads one to decipher his actions as the signs of absurdity. Later in some other occasion we find him scolding Orlando for marring the barks of the trees by writing love-poems on them. He suffers the pain of the trees while inscribing the letters on them. Even the earliest human inhabitants of the forest, the shepherds and shepherdesses, share some of his compassionate feelings. This becomes more evident through the role he plays in the Touchstone-Audrey story. Touchstone's designs towards Audrey are not at all honorable. Though he weds her at the end of the play, Jaques is suspicious that Touchstone is not so much keen on a long-term allegiance to the excessively moral Audrey. Driven by his doubt about the matter, initially he tries to make their nuptial bond stronger by formalizing the marriage not in secret, rather in the presence of almost all the other characters of the play. Thus, he endeavours to save Audrey, from being ill-used by the so-called 'civilized' people in his own way. Moreover, his exile into the forest seems to be deliberately undertaken, unlike the other characters, free from any kind of compulsion,. He is a true lover of nature in its quintessence. That's why when everything is happily settled down at the end of the play, and all the other characters are returning to the court, he is the only one who refuses to leave the place.

Now, as we know, this specific play by Shakespeare is derived from *Rosalynde: Euphues' Golden Legacy* by Thomas Lodge. Evidently, we can detect some derivations from the source in the play. One such deviation is the incorporation of the character of Jaques who is not present in the original play. Then, the question that perturbs our mind is why is Jaques there in the play at all? What is the purpose of the playwright behind incorporating such a character within the play who is hardly necessary for the development of the plot? This character is essentially an instance of Shakespeare's fabrication of characters. In this respect A.W. Verity observes, "In his utterance, some people hear the voice of Shakespeare himself." (Verity 1967, xxix). Perhaps, in spite of the fact that here Shakespeare was composing a pastoral comedy, his eco-conscious self could not admit some of the activities of the characters that created disturbance in the ecological balance of the forest. Therefore the playwright needed a spokesperson to articulate the ecocentric views realized by his own self. And the introduction of a character like Jaques very subtly brings into the forefront an all-new facet of the dramatist. It betrays the ecocentric attitude of him along with his deep concern for the ecological balance.

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