

The Door on the Latch: Ambiguity of the Rape in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*

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Introduction

In Shakespeare's *Lucrece* (or *The Rape of Lucrece*), Tarquin, with burning lust, approaches the bedchamber of the eponymous heroine. When he reaches the door to the room, he finds on it nothing to hinder his entry but "a yielding latch" (339).¹ The ease with which he opens this door is striking, as it forms a clear contrast with the difficulties he previously encountered in breaking through multiple locks and doors on the way. However, this peculiarity has drawn scarce attention from critics, except for a few passing mentions in relation to the "yielding" of Lucrece to the rapist.² In some cases, the condition of the last door is not only simply overlooked but conflated with that of the other doors and consequentially misunderstood as being forced open.³ The present essay, paying close attention to the latch and the door fastened by it, begins by outlining how the door fixture functions and how the circumstances surrounding Tarquin's entry into the bedroom are presented in the poem. It then goes on to examine how deeply the material setting of the door is intertwined with the very nature of the central event in the poem—the rape of Lucrece.

I. "A Yielding Latch"—the Material Setting

Before directing our attention to the poem itself, it would be worth briefly mentioning what a latch is. To merge the definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) with the explanation given by architectural historian Linda Hall, a latch is a device that fastens a door in place, preventing it from

¹ Quotations from *Lucrece* are taken from *Shakespeare's Poems* edited by Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen. The numerals in parentheses following a quotation from *Lucrece* refer to the line numbers given in this edition.

² For instances where the setting of the door draws any attention, see Sanchez (91-100), Ziegler (80), and Catty (16-8, 66-67).

³ For example, in the otherwise very helpful introduction to his edition of the poem, Colin Burrow states without reservation that "the chamber of Lucrece is broken into" (66) and argues, without discriminating between locked and unlocked doors, that "Lucrece's doors 'yield' to Tarquin's battery" (72).

being ajar and allowing it to be opened from the other side.⁴ Typically, the device is connected to an assisting contraption such as a latchstring or a handle—or, more primitively, provided with a finger hole drilled through the door—so that one can operate the latch from the other side of the door.⁵ In short, a latch is a fastening mechanism that serves to make access through the door fast and easy, while still maintaining some privacy and warmth, as opposed to a locking mechanism—such as a lock, bolt, or bar, which is intended to firmly secure the door.⁶ Therefore, in relation to the poem’s phrase “a yielding latch”, it is important to keep in mind that “yielding” is the normal function of the latch, not a failure. As a latch has a different or even opposite purpose from a lock, the last door, which is only fastened with a latch, cannot be discussed in conjunction with the locked doors that Tarquin passes through earlier.

Equipped with this general notion of a latch, let us now examine the description of Tarquin’s journey from his allocated room to Lucrece’s bedchamber:

By reprobate desire thus madly led,
The ROMAN lord marcheth to LUCRECE’ bed.

The locks between her chamber and his will,
Each one by him enforced, retires his ward;
But as they open they all rate his ill,
Which drives the creeping thief to some regard.
The threshold grates the door to have him heard;
Night-wand’ring weasels shriek to see him there:
They fright him, yet he still pursues his fear. (300-08)

These lines reveal the difficulty Tarquin faces en route to Lucrece’s bedroom; as the intervening doors have been locked, he needs to exert force

⁴ The *OED* defines “latch” as “[a] fastening for a door or gate, so contrived as to admit of its being opened from the outside” (*n*¹. def. 2). Hall explains with elaborate drawings how different types of historical latches work (“Dating Doors” 195-209; *Period House* 58-61). For historical latches, see also Salzman (299-300).

⁵ See Hall (“Dating Doors” 195-201; *Period House* 58-61).

⁶ On “rural latches” (4. 4. 443), as they are called in *The Winter’s Tale*, and which effectively stand for locking devices, see Hombu.

to draw their “ward” back, and once the locks have been opened, he then needs to deal with doors that resist him with creaking and squeaking.⁷ But despite these obstacles, he successfully obtains for locks and doors to make way for him, as the subsequent lines indicate: “each unwilling portal yields him way . . .” (309); “all these poor forbiddings could not stay him” (323). Finally, he arrives at the last door to find it only fastened with a latch:

Now is he come unto the chamber door
That shuts him from the heaven of his thought,
Which *with a yielding latch, and with no more,*
Hath barred him from the blessed thing he sought. (337-40; emphasis mine)

Although it is difficult to determine whether the latch is the sole extant fixture on the door or the only one functioning at the time he arrives there, the lines clearly tell that nothing other than the “yielding latch” is a hindrance to his progress.⁸ As it is, all he needs to do is pull up the device from the outside with his hand and kick the inward-opening door with his knee, as is succinctly described: “his guilty hand plucked up the latch, / And with his knee the door he opens wide” (358-59). In this way, the door to Lucrece’s bedchamber presents quite a surprise with its bathetic effect and calls for far closer scrutiny than it typically receives.

II. The Door on the Latch and the Ambiguous Nature of the Rape

The crucial door, only fastened by a latch, neither defiantly shuts off nor actively invites those who would attempt to intrude. With this in-betweenness in mind, I will discuss the close relationship between the material configuration of the door and the nature of the rape from two perspectives: first, from the angle of Lucrece’s putative yielding, and second, from that of Tarquin’s criminal act.

⁷ I take this “ward”, according to the *OED*, to mean, “[e]ach of the ridges projecting from the inside plate of a lock, serving to prevent the passage of any key the bit of which is not provided with incisions of corresponding form and size” (*n*². def. 24a).

⁸ It is unknown whether there are any other door fittings and fixtures on the door, but if one should exist it must be malfunctioning or not engaging. I would tend to think that there are no other devices present, because if there were one—one that is not functioning—the poem’s meticulous narrator, I believe, would not leave it unmentioned.

Did Lucrece Yield?

I would like to start with an overview of the meaning of rape in early modern England. Rape is a difficult term to define even in the modern-day world, and it seems more so in early modern and earlier contexts. There, as many studies have indicated, rape was deeply imbricated with crimes such as abduction, elopement, or theft, and was only marginally associated with female consent and bodily autonomy, which now seems to be of paramount concern.⁹ In her influential and now sometimes contested study of rape in early modern England, Nazife Bashar traces the contradiction between court records and commentaries by legal authorities.¹⁰ Built on analyses of the discrepancy, she discusses the fluctuation of the meaning of rape—between rape as a crime against property owned by male relatives (usually a father or a husband) and rape as a crime against female personhood and volition.¹¹ Barbara J. Baines, too, examines the ongoing transition of the meaning of rape in early modern times, though with a different insight from Bashar's. Baines argues that it was the "law's desire to have it [rape] both ways—as a crime against property and as a crime against the person" and relates this to the contradictory position of a woman at the time: "she is both property or passive object and a person invested with agency, with the will and discernment that define consent" (72-73).

The focal points in the controversy surrounding rape are, of course, numerous and complex and cannot be fully addressed here. However, it would be necessary to mention one key issue as it relates to the poem: the traditional entanglement of pregnancy and legal demonstration of rape. The legal tradition can be summarized as, in Bashar's phrase, "conception proved consent" (36) or, in Baines's, "conception negates rape" (73). This tradition, founded upon the Galenic medical view, holds that a woman cannot conceive unless she consented to sexual intercourse and got satisfied.¹² Often accompanied by victim blaming both from third-party

⁹ See, for example, Catty (9-24).

¹⁰ Recent studies on the history of rape law that are critical to Bashar's methodology and discussion include Barker.

¹¹ For case studies of rape in early modern England, see, for example, Walker ("Rereading Rape"; *Crime, Gender and Social Order*).

¹² For discussions on the origin of the legal maxim, see Barker (48-56), Baines (73, 79-84), and Sanchez (100, esp. note 34).

moralists and the victim herself, this theory was totally unhelpful for the injured party, including Shakespeare's Lucrece. Historical, or legendary as the case may be, Lucrece becomes the target of criticism by St. Augustine. Within the strict dualism of body and mind and investing the latter with higher status, he censures her in *The City of God* for being either secretly adulterous or excessively proud. His argument can be summed up broadly as follows: unless she is an accomplice to the crime—i.e., she herself enjoyed the activity—she has no reason to kill herself because she is just a victim and thus her mind is still pure, however polluted her body might be by the other person's crime; the fact that she nevertheless punishes herself with death suggests either that she secretly consented to the act and thus feels guilty or that she is so excessively proud that she cannot abide the loss of her reputation as a chaste wife; in either case, therefore, she is morally blameworthy.¹³

The rape in *Lucrece* is no exception to the above-discussed complications—the poem's heroine has to suffer not only from the sexual assault but also from the criticism backed by patriarchal ideology. She is deeply concerned with the possibility of pregnancy and of the resultant pollution of the bloodline to the extent of feeling that she must kill herself alongside the embryo she might be carrying. What makes this already complicated matter more so is the lexis in which the rape is presented in the poem, including the use of the verb “yield” and its conjugates. In the process of rape, Tarquin first tries to persuade her through words: “First, like a trumpet doth his tongue begin / To sound a parley” (470-1). Next, he starts to brandish his falchion: “This said, he shakes aloft his ROMAN blade” (505). Up to this point, it seems that Tarquin is pressing Lucrece to choose between two alternatives: yield to him or be forcefully ravished. But next, he starts to blackmail her. After repeating the wicked resolution: “this night I must enjoy thee” (512), he threatens that, if she refuses his desire, he will slay her together with a slave and lay the two bodies side by side so as to mislead the world into thinking that they had been lovers. Then he again tries to coax her into submitting by saying, “But if thou *yield*, I rest thy secret friend” (526; emphasis mine). Understanding that she will not be seduced, however, he brings up the former threat once more in paraphrase:

¹³ See Augustine (82-91; book 1, ch. 19). On Augustine's criticism of Lucrece, see, for example, Donaldson (28-39).

Yield to my love. If not, enforced hate
Instead of love's coy touch shall rudely tear thee.
That done, despitefully I mean to bear thee
 Unto the base bed of some rascal groom
 To be thy partner in this shameful doom. (668-72; emphasis mine)

In this way—by employing the threat of ignominy, Tarquin produces a circumstance under which Lucrece, who values good fame and pure bloodline, has to think again about her defiant stance.¹⁴

The question then arises as to whether her resultant surrender achieved by the threat of death and infamy can be called yielding. Jocelyn Catty, for example, troubled by the situation in which Lucrece finally falls victim, suggests that she does not yield despite the duress but resists him even during the rape, causing him to wield physical violence.¹⁵ In support of her argument, Catty cites the following lines, which most putatively describe the act of rape:

The wolf hath seized his prey, the poor lamb cries,
 Till with her own white fleece her voice controlled
 Entombs her outcry in her lips' sweet fold.

For with the nightly linen that she wears
He pens her piteous clamours in her head,
Cooling his hot face in the chastest tears

¹⁴ It should be noted that Lucrece cherishes her fame for the sake of her “owner” Collatine, taking her and his honour as one and the same, as is implied, for example, in the following lines: “Yet am I guilty of thy honour's wrack; / Yet for thy honour did I entertain him” (841-42). On this point, also see Kahn (58-59). It should also be important to note that the bloodline she cares for is in effect her husband's—i.e., the paternal line of their children that must bear the name of Collatine, and/or her father's—i.e., the paternal blood in her inherited from Lucretius, after whom she is called Lucrece.

¹⁵ Catty apparently denies that what she calls “yielding under duress” happens in *Lucrece*, inferring that Shakespeare “found it hard to stomach a definition of rape as ‘yielding under duress’” (67). Here surfaces another conundrum as to, as Catty puts it, “why he leaves her alive” (66) if she did not yield. But it is beyond the purpose of the present essay to expand the argument to that point.

That ever modest eyes with sorrow shed. (677-83)

These highly rhetorical lines, however, make it difficult to detect what exactly happens and when exactly the rape takes place. Accordingly, granted that he actually uses brute force, it is uncertain whether he does so to stifle her before the rape in order to enforce his will, to silence her outcry during the rape, or to muffle her lament after the rape.

Lucrece, on her part, neither declares that she will yield nor that she did yield. But in the following lines, which are apparently meant to assert the innocence of her mind, she inadvertently suggests that at least her body may have yielded:

Though my gross blood be stained with this abuse,
Immaculate and spotless is my mind;
That was not forced, that never was inclined
To *accessary yieldings*, but still pure
Doth in her poisoned closet yet endure. (1655-59; emphasis mine)

In another place too, where she blames her personified hand for having failed to defend her, she seems to confess that the part of her body has yielded:

Since thou couldst not defend thy loyal dame,
And was afraid to scratch her wicked foe,
Kill both thyself and her *for yielding so*. (1034-6; emphasis mine)

These two instances suggest that her body could have yielded even though her mind did not allow itself to be the “accessary” of the body’s yielding.

In addition to her direct remark that could be read as an acknowledgement of yielding, some of the lines by the narrator of the poem can be taken as hinting at her collusion. For example, describing the rape that supposedly took place just before or in progress then, the narrator calls the couple made of the rapist and the raped “[t]his forced league” (689).¹⁶ Taken as referring

¹⁶ The *OED* defines “league” as:

not only to the resultant conjunction but also the confederacy of the two parties formed before the rape, the word “league” carries a sinister connotation, one that she is his accomplice with a share of interest in the act—namely, that she can maintain her reputation as a chaste wife by giving up her body to him, or even that she may find pleasure in being ravished.

On balance, I believe that she did yield, though under a serious menace, of course. The situation would thus be labelled as coerced yielding or, to borrow Catty’s phrase, “yielding under duress”.¹⁷ In other words, Lucrece did not surrender willingly, yet neither did she thoroughly resist regardless of the blackmail. And it is only in this compromised, alternative position that she can stay alive until she gets the chance to tell her relatives her version of the events in order to pre-empt the devious version Tarquin threatened to disseminate. Ironically, however, this strategy brings ambiguity to the nature of the rape.

What echoes with this middle-of-the-way option that resultingly drives Lucrece into a compromised position is the physical state of the door to her bedroom, one that is neither locked nor open but on the latch, thus neither firmly protecting nor actively exposing the inhabitant. Considering the common trope of the analogy between a container and a female body, also prevalent in the poem, the material configuration of the door can be taken as symbolizing the state of Lucrece’s body. And it is in this patterned analogy that the door at the threshold can be understood as prefiguring the compromised nature of her putative yielding at the start of the rape. To be more specific, her body is presented as neither firmly guarded nor readily inviting, but “weakly fortressed” (28), and thus neither willingly abandoning nor defiantly defending the content—i.e., her chastity.¹⁸

Is Tarquin a Thief or a Burglar?

How to perceive the nature of Lucrece’s passive participation in the rape is closely connected to how to see Tarquin’s active engagement in the crime.

[a] military, political, or commercial covenant or compact made between parties for their mutual protection and assistance against a common enemy, the prosecution or safeguarding of joint interests, and the like; a body of states or persons associated in such a covenant, a confederacy. (*n*². def. 1a)

¹⁷ See note 15.

¹⁸ On the close association of body and chamber in the poem, see Ziegler (80).

The question I aim to raise here is whether Tarquin's action constitutes theft or burglary. Although, to my knowledge, this question has never been asked, investigating the nature of his activity in terms of property crime should be crucial for assessing the rape of Lucrece, given the way in which the poem thoroughly objectifies her as someone else's possession.

Thus, before addressing the problem of the distinction between the two kinds of larceny, let us examine how the heroine is portrayed. At the very beginning of the poem, she is introduced as a valuable item possessed by her husband, variously referred to as "treasure" (16), "priceless wealth" (16), "rich jewel" (34), or "so rich a thing" (39). It is not only the narrator of the poem but also Tarquin, her husband Collatine, her father Lucretius, and their friend Brutus who regard her as a movable asset, so to speak.¹⁹ This patriarchal thinking permeates the poem even to the extent that Lucrece herself analogizes herself to stolen property, as is observed in the following lines addressed to Collatine in her soliloquy after the rape: "thy int'rest was not bought / Basely with gold, but stol'n from forth thy gate" (1067-8). On the other hand, Collatine is described as the person entitled to the property: "the owner" (413) and later as the person deprived of his commodity: "the hopeless merchant of his loss" (1660). Under this train of thought, his boast of his own wife, which causes the whole trouble in the first place as is unfolded in the Argument, is called into question as if it is a reckless administration of property. The narrator asks in puzzlement:

¹⁹ Collatine and Lucretius, after Lucrece's death, engage in a lengthy quarrel with each other about who can claim more of a right over her. The strife that continues across 56 lines ends with the following bickering, in which she is completely treated as their possession:

'O,' quoth LUCRETIUS, 'I did give that life
Which she too early and too late hath spilled.'
'Woe, woe,' quoth COLLATINE, 'she was my wife;
I owed her, and 'tis mine that she hath killed.'
'My daughter' and 'My wife' with clamours filled
The dispersed air, who, holding LUCRECE's life,
Answered their cries, 'My daughter' and 'My wife'. (1800-06)

On Brutus's utilization of Lucrece for his own political purpose, see Dubrow (*Captive Victors* 126-28); see also Dubrow's subsequent monograph, where she softens the tone adopted earlier and develops a more nuanced argument (*Shakespeare and Domestic Loss* 59-61).

Or why is Collatine the publisher
Of that rich jewel he should keep unknown
From thievish ears, because it is his own? (33-5)

In other places, too, Collatine is suspected of his negligence in asset management: “he [Collatine] . . . / Unlocked the treasure of his happy state” (15-16); “Honour and beauty, in the owner’s arms, / Are weakly fortified from a world of harms” (27-28). In this way, Lucrece is categorically commodified as a valuable item that should have been kept securely in a container but was accidentally “unlocked” (16) and exposed to other man’s desire by the owner himself, who wanted to flaunt what he possesses. It is a direct corollary of the commodification of a woman and the ensuing rivalry between men over the commodity that the rapist is given the epithets of “creeping thief” (305) and “foul usurper” (412). After all, whatever the legal definition of rape is, the poem very evidently treats rape as a property dispute between men—between a genuine male owner and an illicit male usurper, not a crime against female personhood.

Considering the circumstances in which Lucrece is placed in the poem, it would be pertinent to delve into the type of property crime Tarquin committed, with a view to examining the nature of the assault inflicted upon her. Viewed in this light, it is clear that his act constitutes a crime of larceny, but what kind of larceny is not clear. Feminist critiques especially have paid great attention to the objectification of Lucrece and male rivalry over her (or it).²⁰ However, even those who, with feminist perspectives, focus on the aspect in which rape is regarded as a violation of proprietorship, do not take the further step of examining the exact nature of the property crime. In this regard, Heather Dubrow is exceptional in mentioning, in any manner, several types of thievery. She even cites Edward Coke: a burglar is one who “in the night breaketh and entereth into a mansion house of another” (*Shakespeare and Domestic Loss* 30). Nevertheless, she unquestioningly calls Tarquin a burglar, taking no heed to whether he “breaketh and entereth” or just enters (30, 45-49). But the distinction, despite appearing incidental, is not unimportant, as it must have significant consequences for evaluating

²⁰ Notable instances include Kahn, Vickers, Dubrow, Belsey, and Berry.

the nature of the rape, given the body/room analogy present in the poem; if he is considered a mere thief, it may signify that he slyly entered her body and stole her chastity without receiving resistance, whereas if a burglar, it may indicate that he broke into her body and forcibly wrested her chastity.

The two categories of larceny give disparate impressions in general and entail different legal consequences. On one hand, theft was a relatively light crime receiving light punishment. According to B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol, it was characterised by a “furtive or stealthy” manner and “the offence was primarily of dishonesty” (326). On the other hand, burglary was a felony that, theoretically, garnered the death penalty. As Amanda Vickery writes, “[b]reaking and entering a house in the night-time constituted the hanging offence of burglary, even if the burglar failed in the attempt to steal” (155). The exact definition of burglary in the early modern context has been disputed on several points, such as whether it should necessarily take place at night-time and, if so, when night begins and ends, or whether there should be at least one inhabitant at the place and time of the crime. Nevertheless, one feature seems to be agreed upon among jurists and early modernists; in a burglary, the house or room must be *broken into*.²¹ Furthermore, Vickery, analysing proceedings at the Old Bailey, argues that “[a]s burglary had to involve a break-in, by extension a house had to be seen to be secure for a robbed victim to bring a successful case” (157). The act of breaking in must be counted as a key element that demarcates burglary from mere theft in early modern England, and whether the dwelling is secured or not may play an important role in the distinction between the two.

With the two categories in mind, let us turn to the poem’s description of Tarquin’s act as a property crime. The rhetorical diction of the poem, however, does not solve the problem but only deepens the crux. First of all, explicit words such as “burglar” and “burglary” are not used in the poem.²²

²¹ For legal discussions surrounding burglary and other types of thievery in the early modern English context, see Holdsworth (360-9), Baker (*The Oxford History* 564-73), Baker (*An Introduction* 574-75), Walsh (21), and Brooks (356). For the elimination of the concept of “breaking” as a requirement for burglary in the twentieth-century English legal system, see Ormerod and Williams (247) and Phillips et al. (131).

²² Shakespeare does not use the word “burglar” in any of his works. He uses “burglary” only once in Dogberry’s line from *Much Ado About Nothing*: “Flat

Instead, as we have seen, Tarquin is referred to as a “thief” or a “usurper”, the act is called “theft”, and Lucrece is said to be “stolen” or “purloined”. This could be understood as suggesting that there is only theft, no burglary. But there are also lines that muddle this understanding. Let us see the portrayal of the crime given in direct speech by Lucrece:

If, Collatine, thine honour lay in me,
From me by strong assault it is bereft;
My honey lost, and I, a drone-like bee,
Have no perfection of my summer left,
But robbed and ransacked by injurious theft:
 In thy weak hive a wandering wasp hath crept,
 And sucked the honey which thy chaste bee kept. (834-40)

Here, in the cry addressed to her husband in her imagination, Lucrece compares herself to a bee whose hive is deprived of its content, “honey”. Given the prevalent metaphors of room and body as containers that store treasures, what is denoted by the words “hive” and “bee” are, of course, her bedroom and her person; and considering the sexual connotation the word bears and the context in which it appears, the “honey” must represent female chastity. But how the “honey” (chastity) was expropriated is not clear as the first five lines and the ending couplet carry contradictory implications. The former, on one hand, may be suggesting the possibility of burglary, as the phrases “strong assault”, “robbed”, and “ransacked” are evocative of the use of physical violence in the act of entering the dwelling and the body.²³ In the couplet, on the other hand, adopting the word “crept”, she is unlikely to think that the hive was *broken into* but appears to think that it was *sneaked into*. Moreover, she describes the “hive” as being “weak”, a description

burglary as ever was committed!” (4. 2. 52). Dogberry’s line, however, does not seem to convey a specific legal meaning, as it must be meant nonsensical. Regarding the line, Sokol and Sokol presume that “Shakespeare may have spoofed the uncertain definition of ‘burglary’ in his employment of the word” (44).

²³ It should be noted that in the poem Lucrece is compared to a walled city and the rape to a raid on it. For example, Tarquin’s hand, with which he assaults her, is likened to a battering ram to breach the wall and enter the city (463-69). In addition, according to Baker, burglary was associated with “[b]reaking” of “town-walls” in some early modern legal discussions (574, note 91).

echoing back to the earlier one by the narrator on the valuables Collatine possesses that “[a]re weakly fortified” (28). The couplet thus could be understood as suggesting that there was no forcible intrusion, hence no burglary, because there is no need and even no chance for a break-in if the place is not firmly secured in the first place.

As it is, the nature of Tarquin’s offence as presented in the poem cannot be accurately categorized. This indeterminability turns us to the description of the material configuration of the door to Lucrece’s bedroom. However, the condition of the door, which must be the primary consideration in determining whether there was forceful entry, just further complicates the issue; it renders the nature of the crime equivocal, defying simplification by, as we have seen earlier, inhabiting a middle ground—being on the latch.

Conclusion

The significance of the door to Lucrece’s bedchamber fastened by a “yielding latch” has been completely overlooked in extant scholarship. However, given the peculiarity surrounding the poem’s doors and door fittings, especially when taken together with the circumstances in which Tarquin is first warmly welcomed at the gate of the house, then resisted by the locks and portals, and lastly faced with that door in an in-between state, we cannot possibly dismiss the material configuration as merely trivial. On the contrary, it prefigures the compromised nature of the yielding of Lucrece, betokens the obscure nature of Tarquin’s offence as presented against another man’s proprietorship, and, consequently, symbolizes the uncertainty underlying the rape. To conclude, the last door being on the latch should be counted as an essential prop that epitomizes the ambiguity in which Lucrece is fatally entangled, the ambiguity that exists at the centre of the poem.

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