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Author(s): BARBARA D. MILLER

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The Spanish 'Viviens' of *El baladro del sabio Merlín* and Benjamín Jarnés's
Viviana y Merlín:
From Femme Fatale to Femme Vitale

BARBARA D. MILLER

In the Castilian Post-Vulgate romance, *El baladro del sabio Merlín*, Merlin's lust for the Lady of the Lake fundamentally diminishes the enchanter by impairing his prophetic capacity. But the reversal of Vivien's function in Benjamín Jarnés's experimental novel, *Viviana y Merlín*, shows at least one Arthurian personage to be less than predictable across the ages. (BDM)

Thou read the book, my pretty Vivien!
...A square of text that looks a little blot,
...And none can read the text, not even I;
And none can read the comment but myself;
And in the comment did I find the charm.
—Alfred Lord Tennyson

The manner of the enchanter's death may be the feature which most clearly distinguishes the Spanish Merlin branch of the Post-Vulgate from its French sources. However, an element common among all the medieval French and Hispanic texts is their placement of the blame for Merlin's demise squarely on the shoulders of the irresistible Vivien. In the earliest intact extant form of the Spanish Post-Vulgate *refundición* (reworking), a late fifteenth-century Castilian prose romance entitled *El baladro del sabio Merlín* (*The Shriek of the Sage Merlin*) (1498), Merlín's lust for Niniana, the Lady of the Lake, impinges dramatically on his prophetic essence. Therefore, the woman who functions as the object of the wise man's desire significantly influences his ontology.

In the *Baladro*, produced as it was at the height of the Spanish Inquisition and the reign of Isabella and Ferdinand, the so-called 'Catholic' Monarchs, moral condemnation of sensuality, and of any female character who embodies that natural force, might be anticipated. The precise reversal of the *femme fatale*'s meaning in Benjamín Jarnés's experimental novel *Viviana y Merlín* (1936), which signals the spirit of its own time, is wrought through her symbolization

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of the creative impulse. This transformation of the feminine destroyer into the de facto heroine directly reflects the intensely socially optimistic cultural milieu of the Spanish pre-Civil-War period known as the 'Second Republic.'

Spain passed through continuous social and political ferment in the early decades of the twentieth century. Problems which had plagued the country since its inception as a nation in the late Middle Ages came to a head during this time. Although the political issues are complex, and although some of the more troubling aspects have roots in the earliest history of the Iberian Peninsula, certainly chief among the problems has been economic deprivation and instability, seen in the enormous chasm between the few affluent and powerful versus the many subsisting in abject poverty.

In 1931 King Alfonso XIII fled the country when the Second Republic was proclaimed by popular mandate. The brief period between that date and the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, although unstable in many respects, was a euphoric time when grand social reforms were planned and a new kind of Spain seemed possible. Intellectuals and artists such as the members of the literary 'Generation of 27' began movements toward an open form of education available to all Spanish citizens that was different from the Church-controlled system which had maintained class (and gender) constraints. The inherent egalitarianism and idealism of such hopes was exemplified by Federico García Lorca's famous traveling theater troupe, 'La Barraca,' which brought the experience of live performance to the inhabitants of the most poverty-stricken and remote mountain villages. Benjamín Jarnés, in fact, was a slightly lesser-known member of this very literary school, and typified its idealistic exuberance. The Merlin figure, always intriguing, has received rising popular and scholarly attention in the recent past. Since at least the early thirteenth-century, when Robert de Boron brought the enchanter title-character status within the pivotal component of that author's romance trilogy, Merlin has enjoyed a practical indispensability to Arthurian romance. The only major group of canonical Arthurian medieval texts notable for Merlin's absence is that of Chrétien de Troyes's courtly adventures.

The Vivians of traditional texts act chiefly as Merlin foils. In fact, Merlin's lady is normally portrayed as the unequivocal antagonist who ensnares and ruins the king's irreplaceable wise man. In Jungian terms, Niniana and other medieval Vivians exert the full force of the 'negative anima' archetype. They represent Merlin's inferior inner woman, a constellation of repressed undesirable personality traits, culturally associated with femininity. When the ancient sorcerer psychologically 'projects' these unconscious elements he falls into the fatuous and fatal error of lusting after the nubile Lady of the

Lake. As avatars of the goddess Diana, these Vivians will protect their consecrated virginity through any means, including cold-blooded murder.

In accordance with this trend, Niniana does indeed fulfill the traditional role of Merlinian nemesis. In the *Baladro*, she represents an exceptionally intense version of the archetypal *femme fatale*. This is not because her appearances differ much in detail from those corresponding in the French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate, but rather, because the unique sections of the *Baladro*, especially when read with an awareness of historical context, result in an intensified Merlin, particularly regarding the emotionally amplified unfolding of his death. One summarily important interpolated tale, told by Merlín to Niniana, has the effect of developing her motive and suggesting her plan to do away with him. His Spanish manifestation embodies a supreme prophet, based on Robert's prototype which was appropriate to the Crusades. Through the textual evolution brought about by Hispanic translators and *remanieurs*, Merlin becomes the perfect emblem for the Inquisition Church-state, bent on total Christian conversion to the ends of a new national consolidation. Related to the peninsular exterior, 'El Sabio Merlín' as Grailquest director implies justification for the campaign of New World Conquest and religious conversion, to the glory of God and their Catholic majesties.

Niniana is essential to Merlín's unsurpassed prophetic status. This is because the key to his quintessential authority in the Spanish adaptation is his supreme martyrdom, born of an absolute merger between love and death. The increased focus on the Spanish Merlin's death episode, compared to the French renditions, is obvious through the direct title reference to it. The 'tale of the shriek' or '*conte del brai*' is alluded to, but never told, in any extant text before the Burgos edition of the *Baladro*. The reader should make no mistake that the sage's '*baladro*'—his bellow, his '*brai*' or his shriek—arrives at apocalyptic proportions as an age-ending prophetic cry, and not only an individually tormented death.

Among the most significant textual components unique to the *Baladro* is the fatal *Estoria de dos amadores* (*Story of Two Lovers*), traced by Harvey L. Sharrer and other prominent Hispanists to Juan Rodríguez del Padrón's '*novela sentimental Siervo libre de amor* (*Free Servant of Love*)' (c. 1406–54). Sharrer, for instance, has studied in particular the different resolutions of the stories' various retellings ('La fusión' 148). In any event, this interpolation, which forms no part of the *Baladro*'s precursors, fundamentally impacts Merlín's prophetic power. This Spanish story of fatal love, is placed in the text after the Diana-of-the-woods interpolations carried over from the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate. The appended Hispanic story, which essentially reproduces

the legends surrounding the murder of Portuguese royal mistress Inés de Castro, underscores and exaggerates the *Baladro* prophet's fate, as well as the role played in it by his faithless lady.

The *Estoria*, although very different in plot from the preceding Diana intercalation, has some key motifs in common with it. The contrasts in plot structure between the two inserted tales, tend to obscure the stories' nevertheless important similarities. Both tales center upon eternal triangles composed of two suitors and one lady. The ambivalent Diana may be read as heroine, victim and/or villain. The lady beloved by the king's son in the Hispanic *Estoria* has the unambivalent role of faithful and self-sacrificing heroine. Yet both ladies meet with gruesome death by decapitation.

A crucial element, common to the contrasting interpolations, is that of the romantic burial theme. The pagan tale begins when Merlín points out to Niniana the tomb of Diana's first lover. The story of Faunus, a victim of burial alive at the hand of his treacherous mistress, accurately foreshadows Merlín's own demise. Therefore the first story told by the foolish sage for his lady's pleasure suggests the form of the crime. The romantic burial element in his second narrative, the Spanish intercalation, provides the actual opening for the deed's perpetration. Niniana lures Merlín into the beautiful underground rooms where the prince and his lady lived, loved, and were buried together. Feigning ecstatic admiration for the model devotion of the two lovers, Niniana insists that Merlín sup with her underground in the lovers' cave. When she has plied the wizard with enough food and drink to render him unconscious, Niniana has her kinsmen carry his body into the adjacent crypt, and hastens to seal him up there forever.

Niniana, like her French forebears, encourages the sorcerer to show and tell her how the faithless Diana, the first Lady of the Lake, murdered her lover. Thus the plot to do away with Merlín himself is initiated. But Niniana's role as dangerous listener is facilitated pragmatically when the Spanish *Estoria* is introduced. Her rapturous reception of the story, and her immediate seizure of the opportunity presented by the accessible cave, implies the story's reinforcement of her murderous will. The repeated motifs connecting love, death and romantic burial underscore the fatal power of Diana's tale. Niniana treats Merlín with contempt as severe as that of her predecessor from the Post-Vulgate, a story cycle demarcated by Fanni Bogdanow for its doom-filled and bitter tone. The argument that Niniana's evil reaches its pinnacle in the *Baladro* must be based on three essential contextual factors: the textually unique doubled foreshadowing created through the addition of the Spanish fatal love interpolation, the epic result of Merlín's tumultuous dying

prophecies (actually present as an appended book in the 1535 Seville edition), and the cultural circumstance indispensable to reader-response interpretation. The ultra-Catholic ambience of the Inquisition and of Ferdinand and Isabella's Jewish and Moorish expulsion constitutes the original reader setting of the earliest extant *Baladro*. In that world, Niniana as conscious representation of a Jungian negative anima becomes the absolute destroyer of a Spanish Catholic proto-prophet.

In his famous courtly love treatise *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougement argues, in essence, that what the courtier actually loves is death. His inexorable pursuit of release from suffering, often interpreted as excruciating erotic tension, in Rougement's estimation is really a wish for the death-like mental oblivion accompanying sexual climax, and even, for death itself (44–46). Moreover, this idea conforms to Jungian specialist Joseph L. Henderson's association between the negative anima and masculine suicide (187). Niniana seems to embody Rougement's argument perfectly as the sole object of Merlin's passion. Although she has not the least intention of relinquishing her maidenhead, as the paradigmatic negative anima figure she cheerfully affords him that other lovers' consummation: death.

Carol S. Pearson, a scholar deeply influenced by the ideas of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, develops her own definition of a lover archetype and its role in the 'individuation' or personal growth process. Pearson's rich concept of love reminds us that the understanding of eros, as sexual only, narrows its original meaning. Properly speaking, eros embraces all categories of intimate human relationship, from parent-child bonding to friendships and self-esteem. A goal of bliss and oneness, fear of loss and disconnection, a problem-solving response of affirming the positive, a task of commitment to as well as pursuit of the beloved, and, a gift of passionate ecstasy are the elements deemed basic to the lover archetype by Pearson (148). Another necessary component of her paradigm is a contention that the perverse and dangerous shadow of passion often motivates a story in which annihilation is love's outcome. In Pearson's opinion, a major cause of that peril is the patriarchal religious forcing of eros underground. Without a fully sanctioned image of the divine feminine, including its sensual and life-giving aspect, she argues, the denial of nature can lead to such shadow erotica as pornography. Sexuality can be isolated, but not eliminated. Eros in isolation becomes sex for its own sake. Negative anima representations such as Niniana may symbolize this type of distortion.

An interesting reading of Merlin's burial alive may be indicated by Pearson's contention on the relegation of sexual energy to the underground of the

unconscious. According to such a thought mode, the erotic aspect of humanity may be buried in Merlín's tomb, along with pre-Christian religions such as Celtic druidism. Pearson's assertion on the ultimately irrepressible nature of eros, potentially resurging in monstrous or pornographic form, finds its narrative correlation in the medieval Merlín's nightmarish shriek of dark prophecy (and unbearable sexual frustration) issuing from beneath the deadly stone.

If medieval Spanish literature's vengeful feminine prototype seems devoid of redeeming qualities, she is greatly compensated by her twentieth-century counterpart, Benjamín Jarnés's delegated heroine, 'Viviana.' The author designates his 'favorite fairy' (103), as a beauty worthy of Goya (104), and in glowing terms highly suggestive of Jung's individuated wholeness, as the perfect complement for the renowned Arthurian wizard:

Había que pintarla a una hora avanzada de la tarde, a una luz muy parecida a la sombra, a la hora de cerrar, medio en tinieblas. Y nadie consiguió verla a pleno sol, en toda su compleja hermosura y seducción. (103)

One would have to paint her during the late hours of the afternoon, by a light very close to shadow, at the time of sunset, half in darkness. And no one got to see her in full light, in all of her complex beauty and seductiveness. (author's translation)

Beyond the intimations of such lyrical descriptions, coupled with Viviana's top billing within the title of the author's experimental prose work, we know the authenticity and depth of Jarnés's admiration for his heroine, by his citations and allusions in others of his works. Rafael Conte notes several examples including Viviana's and Merlín's 'collaboration' in *Paula y Paulita* (1929), the conversion of the magical pair's story into a theatrical work in *Tántalo*, in which one of the actresses bears the name 'Viviana,' as well as mentions of both the enchantress's and the enchanter's names in the author's *Libro de Esther* (1935) and in his *Eufrosina o la gracia* (1948).

The optimistic nature of Viviana is completely logical, considering such a writer as Jarnés as her source. Jarnés was a dedicated disciple of Ortega y Gasset, and a man imbued with the idealistic social reformist spirit of Spain's Second Republic. Ironically, the definitive edition of *Viviana y Merlín* would be released in 1936, a year when the hopes of many Republicans were to be decimated by Francoist violence including the death of Lorca, and the beginning of the Civil War. It should be noted, however, that Jarnés's book makes a fitting symbol for the indestructibility of his own optimism. Although he himself was exiled to Mexico until a month prior to his death, Jarnés believed fervently in the continuity of life and hope in the face of disaster. Viviana incarnates this courageous attitude.

Feminist archetypal critics such as Estella Lauter and Carol Rupprecht dissent from purely traditional Jungian analyses because of the inherently sexist aspects of Jung's theories and case interpretations. As might be anticipated, any examples of Jung's writings on the anima archetype reveal such biases as the belief that women's biological natures destined them, collectively, for maternity. A dream analysis cited in the chapter of *Man and His Symbols* written by Joseph Henderson, for example, culminates in the judgement that a young female patient should relinquish her intellectual aspirations for the sake of her natural maternal and domestic role (128–30). In light of the female decapitation motif common to both *Baladro* interpolations, it is irresistible to mention a specific of Henderson's dream interpretation. He viewed a scenario in which the dreamer stood calmly in a long line of women, willingly awaiting her turn to be guillotined, as a message from her unconscious that she 'was ready to give up the habit of 'living in her head'' [that is to say, primarily through her intellect] (129).

The distinction between feminist archetypal interpretation and that of its Jungian original is motivated by a wish to employ the richness of Jungian concepts while transcending some of their limitations, especially those related to unfortunate stereotyping. However, the figure of Jarnés's Viviana personifies the undeniably traditional Jungian archetype of the positive anima. Although she brings about a surpassing humanity through her love of Merlín, Viviana fails to transcend the formal details of the benevolent version of the Jungian construct. Her beautiful sensuality, symbolic of undiluted eros, is the most disturbing Jungian element, following Lauter and Rupprecht's ideas, within a feminist value system (5–6). However, it is this very defining quality of the persona which makes Viviana readable as Niniana's positive double, and, as demonstrated consistently throughout Jarnés's text, also makes her the perfect complement to a Merlín embodying rigid logos, in the sense of arid intellect.

Jarnés organizes his version of Arthur's castle into three distinctly separate levels. As the author explains it, the ground floor in which the kitchen is located corresponds to the unconscious or instinctual human aspect. The core of the palace, which comprises the main floor, houses Arthur's court, making it the place where social and monarchical activities are played out. It represents the human heart and thus the emotions, which may be unconsciously motivated, but which are visible to observers. When Arthur requires wisdom to make governing decisions he appeals to the fully conscious plane of reason. This is symbolized by a Merlín who, normally inhabiting an isolated and high tower, must descend to the king's level in order to act as

his counselor. Thus the main floor corresponds to both the emotional and the intellectual facets of human personality.

Although Jarnés admired the Arthurian legends, and in fact infused his own retelling with lyrical originality, he also saw in the medieval versions a surfeit of unfortunately illusory elements. Through his perfectly symmetrical castle construct, he chides the authors of a fantasy universe that may be seen as a little too ordered. Geometrically styled perfection reflects a community that operates almost mechanically, and thus, needs the life-giving power of Jarnés's *femme vitale*. What Viviana accomplishes is nothing less than the liberation of this Arthur's world from its predictable ways. Most importantly to her, she knows that Merlín, the man with whom she is genuinely in love, needs her to breathe warmth and life back into his withering parchment-enlaved old age.

Viviana's novelty and her spritely yet subtle humor emerge with every scene in which she appears. Two examples of her characteristically witty approach reflect what becomes an all-out siege on the childishly fairy-tale castle with its Pythagorean strata. The first, a master stroke of Jarnés's own inventiveness, creates an amusing intertextual joke. The Arthurian idols of the literary world who people *Viviana y Merlín* take themselves much too seriously. The form of their rescue from ego inflation, much to their dismay, involves a certain palace tapestry brought by Viviana to the king's hall and shamelessly displayed during one of the nightly banquets. In this way she launches her indirect attack on the deadening foible of self-importance at the instinctive kitchen level, since the scene takes place during a feast. Because the setting is the great hall, this preemptive strike simultaneously addresses the emotional courtly level. Jarnés employs Spain's (and indeed the Western World's) most obvious and celebrated parody, that of *Don Quijote*, as Viviana's heroic armament by having her introduce a knight 'digno de sentarse en la Mesa Redonda. Un caballero enamorado. Un amor purísimo...' (Worthy to sit at the Round Table. A knight in love. A love of the utmost purity...) (132). She enters the feast and hangs her enchanted silver tapestry. When the courtiers realize that the pathetically emaciated knight depicted there is meant to ridicule their vanity, the reaction to unpalatable truth becomes predictable.

Los Caballeros de la Mesa Redonda alargan las cabezas. Quintañona alza escandalizada los brazos. Ginebra y Lanzarote lanzan un grito a duo, porque comparten todos sus vehemencias. Arturo, sacudido por una emoción violenta, exclama:

—¡El tapiz está embrujado!

—¡El tapiz está embrujado!

...—Calma, señores míos. Es un loco, tal vez; pero un loco enamorado, como todos vosotros. Y en modo alguno ofenderos. Dejadlo llegar. Tiene su alma cautiva por la sin par Dulcinea. (133)

The Knights of the Round Table pull long faces. Quinañaona flings her arms upward, scandalized. Guenevere and Lancelot let fly a dual scream, since they share all their passions. Arthur, rocked by violent emotion, exclaims:

—The tapestry is bewitched!

—The tapestry is bewitched!

...—Calm yourselves my lords. He is a madman, perhaps; but a madman in love just like all of you. And by no means take offense. Let him enter. His soul he makes captive to the peerless Dulcinea.

The situation deteriorates chaotically; food flies at the textile icon to Arthurian vainglory, and pages hasten to tear its revelation from sight. This violent reaction demonstrates that Viviana has hit her mark. Even before this episode, however, the text directly articulates her final goal. 'Viviana quiere lograr algo más alto: quiere conquistar a Merlín, a Merlín desdénoso, que nunca ha accedido a escuchar a la doncella desvalida. Viviana quiere cautivar al viejo arisco que sólo mira a las estrellas' (Viviana wishes to reach something higher: she wishes to conquer Merlín, disdainful Merlín who has never condescended to listen to the ill-appreciated maiden. Viviana's desire is to captivate the old savage who only looks at the stars) (131).

Viviana enjoys the first whisper of victory when the castle brouhaha draws Merlín down from his superior vantage point. He is forced to address her, and not just the stars, in his efforts to set things to rights. Thus the stage is set for the seduction which follows. Viviana slithers up the stairs to the outer reaches of the leviathan formed by Arthur's castle, thus gaining the tower of intellect. This ascendant invasion encompasses deliberately serpentine and phallic imagery, used by the author to describe a glorious anima who is as much anti-Tennysonian seductress, as she is counter-Niniana (Jarnés 105). If Merlin's nature is truly 'doomed by its own sensibility' (Goodrich 223) in the *Idylls of the King*, in Jarnés's recounting the wise man will be saved by that once destructive force. If any lingering doubt of Viviana's life-giving nature attends the reader, it must dissipate once and for all when she states unequivocally her intention to sweep the obstinate wizard away with her into a forest of delights. She begins her seduction of timeless (if antitextual) magic as follows.

—Merlín, Merlín, ¿qué haces aquí con la nariz hundida en el texto de Plotino? ¿Por qué no sales a cazar con el rey? ¿Por qué no bajas al patio, donde los pajes y las doncellas de Ginebra te enseñaran —¡Oh, hurraño maestro! ¿Lecciones de coquetería no sabes? Archivo ambulante: Si no estudias para vivir más

intensamente, ¿por qué estudias?

...¿Eres necio, Merlín! A nadie podrás hacer feliz, ni siquiera a ti mismo... ¿Por qué no intentas buscar tu felicidad en mis brazos, como en otro tiempo? (141)

—Merlin, Merlin, what are you doing here with your nose buried in that textbook of Plato? Why don't you go out hunting with the king? Why don't you go down to the courtyard, where Guenevere's pages and ladies-in-waiting would teach you? —Oh, you antisocial school master. Don't you know any lessons in coquetry? You walking archive: if you do not study in order to live more intensely, then why study at all?

...You are a fool, Merlin! You cannot make anyone happy, not even yourself... Why don't you try searching for your happiness in my arms, as in another time?

She wins, although he does put up a 'manly' fight. She bears him off joyfully to the forest primeval, weaving her spell of integrated wholeness, shadow into light. Two souls destined for each other make the alchemical marriage. Whether the reader chooses to see Viviana and her consort as merging components of the Jungian self, as the utopian coupling of science and art, or, as symbols for the Spanish Camelot of the Second Republic, in the author's words their union becomes as a prayer.

Que en todos nuestros actos, aún en los más menudos, vayamos siempre del brazo con la pareja más encantadora de toda la Edad Media y de todas las edades. Con la gracia y la sabiduría. Con Viviana y Merlín. (280)

That in all our deeds, even the most ordinary ones, may we go always arm in arm with the most enchanting couple of all the Middle Ages and of all ages. With grace, humor and wisdom. With Viviana and Merlin.

The comparative interpretation of the two Spanish 'Viviens,' and their respective stories, forms a figurative approximation to Jarnés's symmetrical castle. Both symbols and themes of *Viviana y Merlín* create reversals and striking differences when juxtaposed to corresponding ones in the medieval adaptation. For instance the motif of decapitation is structurally significant in both texts. This act of violence kills the women of both the *Baladro*'s interpolated love stories, and forms a key aspect of a strangely repetitive foreshadowing of Merlín's own death. In Jungian terms it could be said that these anima figures, one negative and one positive, are cut off from their lovers just as the wise man is cut off by his beloved from Arthur's kingdom. Joseph Henderson's judgement that a woman cannot properly live too much 'in her head,' because of her fundamentally erotic nature suggests an important message within Jarnés's tripartite castle. Viviana's ultimate act of

heroism is to 'cut off the head' of a decaying corpus in order to free and rejuvenate its imprisoned and stagnating genius.

The idea of two lovers as twin halves of a single soul is peculiarly ingrained in Spanish culture, as shown through the language, for example, in the common endearment 'alma mía' (soul of mine). In order to conclude that Niniana and Viviana stand for negative and positive animas, respectively, we must consider the differences which make their consorts into opposite kinds of Merlins. The sage of the medieval text is defined by his function as a nationalistic and religious prophet of hyperbolic resonance. Niniana's seemingly ruthless act of burying Merlín alive, in one sense makes her the midwife of the celebrated death-cry of prophecy. The most intense and significant truths emerge only through the agonized shriek elicited by means of her apparent brutality. Moreover, when she lays her lover down in the womb and tomb of earth, she precipitates the healing reunion of masculine and feminine principle. However her enthrallment may differ from the sacred marriage culminating Benjamín Jarnés's work, Niniana too accomplishes sacred integration between a star-gazing sage and an earth-dwelling goddess.

WESTERN STATE COLLEGE

Barbara D. Miller is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado. Her dissertation, completed at the State University of New York, distinguishes the Merlin figure in Spanish literature, and culminates in a close reading of the *Baladro* texts. She has recently published a chapter surveying filmic Merlins in *King Arthur on Film*, as well as an article treating Merlin in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* which appeared in the *Bulletin of the Cantigueiros de Santa Maria*.

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