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"If Imagination Amend Them": Sleeping, Dreaming, and the Expansion of a World in Macbeth and A Midsummer Night's Dream

> Joy Goodwin April 1995 Mr. Fosso

On the bare, evenly-lit Shakespearean stage, words and ideas carried the full weight of the appeal to the audience's imagination. Transformation is not an easy business, particularly when the playwright seeks a setting beyond the kitchens and gardens of conventional comedy. In plays like A Midsummer Night's Dream and Macbeth, Shakespeare wants a wide, supernatural world of heightened emotions and possibilities, a world in which human figures very like ourselves move across a landscape of imagination.

Asking an audience to imagine collectively is bold work. To launch such a journey, Shakespeare knows that he must appeal to the element of common human experience most closely tied to the unreal -- the experience of sleeping and dreaming. It is dreaming, after all, that reveals to us the fearsome power of the imagination, with all its wild concoctions. The vivid dream or nightmare is our first argument for a world beyond the evidence of the senses. Sleep, for its part, is more than the time of dreams -- dreamless sleep is also a wondrous state. Its restoring powers and its luxurious pleasures inspire an almost-spiritual gratitude for sleep itself. And we know that sleeplessness infects the mind with a strain of madness. Like dreams, sleep has a power we do not fully understand. The playwright wisely references these two everyday mysteries to persuade the audience to leap into the expanded, unreal world of his play. By reminding his viewers of their familiarity with the unreal, he breaks down their resistance to the fantastic, encouraging them to submit to the play as they do to a dream, believing in it fully during its short life.

Furthermore, Shakespeare uses of images of sleeping and dreaming to aid him in creating the expansive world of the play. These images open the play outward, developing an unreal -- yet comprehended -- world. They are as key to our sense of spreading vistas as witches and fairies, and they moderate our moods in a similar way. The expansion is aesthetic, emotional, and reflective; because of it, we emerge from the play with our

emotions tingling and with a heightened sense of beauty, having deeply pondered some of the profound mystery in art and life. Hippolyta describes the ideal of this form:

> But all the story of the night told over, And all their minds transfigured so together, More witnesseth than fancy's images And grows to something of great constancy; But howsoever, strange and admirable. (V. i. 23-27)

Obviously A Midsummer Night's Dream and Macbeth are set in very different expanded worlds, but to make the claim that the functions of dreaming and sleeping are "opposite" in the two worlds would be a simplistic and false position. A close examination of sleep and dream references in the two plays reveals uncanny similarities as well as some polar differences. It may be said that while Shakespeare makes different uses of the sleeping/dreaming state, it has certain unalterable, innate qualities.

Night is the realm of sleep and dreams, and we must begin by asking which qualities are associated with night in each play. In the comedy, night gets its initial glow from the title, which suggests mellifluous, peaceful rest with pleasant dreams. In the opening scent, Hippolyta and Theseus converse about the night in the gentle manner suggested by the title:

Four nights will quickly dream away the time; And then the moon, like to a silver bow New-bent in heaven, shall behold the night Of our solemnities.

(I.i. 8-11)

Nights "dream" themselves away, and the moon is a creature of startling beauty, smiling down on weddings. This is a play in which night is linked to coupling -- wedding nights and wedding beds. The "opportunity of night," as Demetrius calls it, is the opportunity for sexual pleasure (II. i. 217). Not surprisingly, night is the friend of lovers. It is "a time that

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lovers' flights doth still conceal" (I. i. 212). It is awaited with impatience, for it signifies reunion with the beloved: "We must starve our sight / From lovers' food till morrow deep midnight" (I.i. 221-2). After a wedding there are "moonlight revels" and dancing (II. i. 141).

Night is a time for pleasure and rest. The "rude mechanicals" are grateful for the privacy of the night woods for their rehearsals, far from the crowded city. Puck calls himself "that merry wanderer of the night," and clearly the fairies take great pleasure in their night-time tasks (II.i. 44). Weddings, sleep, and dreams take place at night -- three of the highest goods in the play. And in this play, nature has a distinctive, spellbinding beauty under the moonlight.

The world of *Macbeth*, in contrast, has a terrible beauty under the night sky. The murders of Duncan and Banquo, the eerie banquet, and the sleepwalking scene all take place by night. It is a dark, somewhat forsaken state, as in Banquo's remark: "There's husbandry in heaven / Their candles are all out" (II. i. 4-5). Night provides cover for murders and escapes, and most importantly, cover from one's own conscience:

Come, thick night, And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, That my keen knife not see the wound it makes, Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark To cry 'Hold, hold!'

(1. v. 48-53)

Though we are told that Macbeth fears nothing by day, not even those "strange images of death" he himself makes on the battlefield, at night he is terror-stricken (I. iii. 97). It is the time of greatest fear and vulnerability. Awakened from sleep, the nobles rush downstairs at the castle with their "naked frailties" "suffering in exposure" (II. iii. 122-3). Macbeth fears his own potential at night, the time when dark impulses are acted or "outed," and also when the conscience rises up and threatens sanity. Whereas in A Midsummer Night's

*Dream*, everyone seems to look forward to the nights and their glimmerings, the weird extension of night into day has a horrifying aspect:

By th'clock 'tis day.

And yet the dark night strangles the travelling lamp.
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb
When living light should kiss it?

(II. iii. 6-10)

Similarly, there is great foreboding in a later exchange, when Macbeth asks his Lady, "What is the night?" She responds, "Almost at odds with morning, which is which" (III. iv. 126-7). She does not make some cheery prediction of sunrise; their dark deeds make them more at home in the black hours.

The composition of the cast of spirits is a key to the mood of the night. The delightful fairies that hide in acorn cups bear scant resemblance to the "weird sisters."

Puck has a bit of the darker magic in him, but when he gets worked up in telling tales of "damnéd spirits" of the night, Oberon replies, "But we are spirits of another sort" (III. ii. 388). Shakespeare is telling us, "That world is *out there*, but not *in here*." The spirits of this place may move about until the last of sunrise; their natures are gentle and helpful. In contrast, Lady Macbeth calls on "you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts" to "unsex" her and "fill [her] from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (I. v. 38-41).

Many of the images of night in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contribute to the goal of aesthetic expansion. The fairy, in her all-important opening speech, creates the spritely world in which she moves: "I must go seek some dewdrops here, / And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear" (II.i. 14-5). The special fairy magic and its poetry govern night; at morning Oberon and Titania dance upon the earth to "rock the ground whereon these sleepers be" (IV. i. 85). "The glimmering night" (II.i. 77) suggests a night shimmering with fairies the size of fireflies, bathed by a kind midsummer moonlight, in which things shift and dazzle. In such a scene, we are not surprised that night should have magical

possibilities."And certain stars shot madly from their spheres / To hear the sea-maid's music" (II.i. 153-4). Night, as we know, can play strange tricks on the senses; Hermia notes that "Dark night, that from the eye his function takes / The ear more quick of apprehension makes" (III. ii. 177-8).

A Midsummer Night's Dream deliberately rejects the night world of Macheth, with its rollicking Pyramus and Thisby send-up of the tragic night: "O grim-looked night, O night with hue so black / O night, which ever art when day is not!" (V. i. 167-8). That "grim-looked night" is taken absolutely seriously in Macheth; its poetry opens its borders out to a cruel, black region:

Now o'er the one half-world Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse The curtained sleep. Witcheraft celebrates Pale Hecate's offerings; and withered murder, Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf, Whose howl's his watch, thus with stealthy pace, With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design Moves like a ghost.

(II. i. 49-56)

The shimmer of nature under moonlight has been replaced with a frightening blackness—
"Nature seems dead." Instead of fairy magic there is witchcraft, and the signature of this
night is the howl of the wolf. It is a world aesthetically expanded, but it is a rather perverse
aesthetic. Macbeth describes the scene gruesomely: it is a "seeling night" that "scarf[s] up
the tender eye of pitiful day" (III. ii. 46-8).

The night worlds of the two plays clearly set the scene for what will occur, yet the movements of "fate," carried forth by witches and fairies, leave little room for human choice. The world outside clearly impacts the world inside the mind; but does it work both ways? Are the lovers more deserving of fairy mercy than Macbeth? The evidence suggests that this is not the case. The lovers abuse one another mightily, and Macbeth, we know, is "too full o' th' milk of human kindness"(l.v.15). It is possible that Shakespeare's value system placed star-crossed lovers ahead of conspiring would-be kings, and yet Macbeth

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does not actively seek power before he encounters the witches. It appears that the characters are dropped in these heightened worlds and must live under their forces.

Night is a different thing to A Midsummer Night's Dream and Macheth, but they agree on the importance of sleep. Lady Macheth calls sleep "the season of all natures," recognizing its vitality (III.iv. 141). For a fuller understanding of the blessing of sleep, we look to A Midsummer Night's Dream. "Sing me now asleep," Titania instructs, and a chorus of fairies murmurs a lullaby like a midsummer breeze (II. ii. 7). Its syllables are the sounds of comfort, caressing the ear and the voice that speaks them, rich Is andm's: Philomele, melody, lulla, lulla, lullaby, spell, lovely, well. This is the luxuriousness sleep of a "flow'ry bed," the spiritual balm of rest. In this same, generous spirit, Lysander and Hermia wish each other good night in the following scene: "Sleep give thee all his rest! / With half that wish the wisher's eyes be pressed" (II.ii. 64-5). Titania offers Bottom the same deep luxury of sleep:

l'il give thee fairies to attend on thee,
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,
And sing while thou on presséd flowers dost sleep;
... And for night tapers crop [bees'] waxen thighs,
And light them at the fiery glowworm's eyes,
To have my love to be and to arise;
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes.

(Ill.i. 142-5, 155-9)

The blessing of sleep grows in its beauty and allure as lover after lover falls down, exhausted. Hermia's sore need for sleep makes its generous healing powers radiant: "Never so weary, never so in woe, / Bedabbled with the dew and torn with briers, / I can no further crawl, no further go" (III.ii. 442-44). Puck responds with an uncharacteristic gentleness; he ministers to the wounds of the dream with a spell-lullaby of his own:

On the ground, Sleep sound. I'll apply To your eye, Gentle lover, remedy. When thou wak'st,
Thou tak'st
True delight
In the sight
Of thy former lady's eye;
And the country proverb known,
That every man should take his own
In your waking shall be shown.
Jack shall have Jill,
Naught shall go ill,
The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well.
(III. ii. 448-63)

The lullaby is so warming that it is only appropriate that the play should end with one.

"Sweet friends, to bed," Theseus says, and the fairies "through the house give glimmering light," encasing the house in a lullaby against the stormy spirits Puck describes (V. i. 357, 380). It is a lullaby for the lovers in the house, for the wedding guests first watching the play, and now for theater audiences.

Nature's night songs in *Macbeth* are far from Iullabies, inducing the sleeplessness that haunts the characters. Lennox, arriving at the castle, describes the wretchedness of their sleepless night:

The night has been unruly. Where we lay
Our chimneys were blown down; and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i' th'air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying, with accents terrible,
Of dire combustion and confused events
New hatched to th'woeful time. The obscure bird
Clamored the livelong night. Some say the earth
Was feverous and did shake.

(II. iii. 50-57)

The wake-up calls are no sweeter: "What's the business, / That such a hideous trumpet calls to parley / The sleepers of the house?" Lady Macbeth demands, in shrill tones (II. iii. 78-9).

Sleep is important not only in the sense of providing physical rest, but as a vital escape from thought or strife. Helena appeals to sleep in this sense: "And sleep, that sometimes shuts up sorrow's eye, / Steal me awhile from mine own company" (III. ii. 435-36). In such cases, the great punishment is to be deprived of sleep. Puck, thinking he

has Demetrius, snarls "Churl... When thou wak'st, let love forbid / Sleep his seat on thy eyelid" (II. ii. 80-1). In *Macbeth*, the first witch chants a similar curse over an unidentified mortal: "Sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid. / He shall live a man forbid" (I. iii. 19-21).

Sleep in a fairy world is mostly pleasure, but in a wolf's world, it can become an uneasy state. Macbeth and his Lady fear sleep, for they know it reduces them to their most guilt-stricken state. Lady Macbeth insists that above all, "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad," and sleep has a way of bringing the deeds back to the surface, and with them, the madness (II. ii. 32-3). Early in the play, Lady Macbeth points out this danger of sleep, when she derides Macbeth, asking if his ambition has "slept" and woken with lesser conviction: "And wakes it now to look so green and pale / At what it did so freely?" (I. vii. 37-8). To these two, sleep is a weakness, a vulnerability. She delights in planning to drug the grooms, scoffing at their "drenchéd natures" lying in "swinish sleep," and there is relish in her language when she instructs him to "smear the sleepy grooms with blood" (I. vii. 67-8, II. ii. 48-9).

But for all her attempts to downplay sleep, their own sleeplessness is the chariot that races them toward madness. Macbeth is obsessed with sleeping soundly; he rants about it, he brings it up endlessly. He envies the dead who sleep well; he is "afflicted" by "terrible dreams that shake us nightly" (III.ii. 18-19). In her "slumb'ry agitation" Lady Macbeth is a deeply pathetic creature; crying "To bed! To bed!" -- though we know she cannot rest when she reaches it (V.i.11, 61). Sleeplessness is the distinct symptom of madness in the play; the doctor tells us that "Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles. Infected minds / To their deaf pillows will discharge secrets" (V.i.66-68). Without sleep, which she once disdained, Lady Macbeth collapses into madness; her husband is not far behind. Thus sleeplessness is the agent carrying the play into a world of terrifying madness.

We have seen how sleep and sleeplessness expand the emotional and aesthetic ranges of the plays. There is another way in which sleep extends the imagination. This is the continual reference in both plays to sleep's close connection to death. *Macheth* calls sleep "death's counterfeit," and Shakespeare plays with this case of mistaken identity frequently. When Helena comes upon Lysander, asleep on the ground, she immediately supposes him dead, for no apparent reason. It is night, he is tired; why should he not be asleep? Yet she begins:

But who is here? Lysander, on the ground?
Dead, or asleep? I see no blood, no wound.
Lysander, if you live, good sir, awake.

(11. ii. 100-102)

Hermia, too, rapidly assumes that Demetrius has killed Lysander "in his sleep" (III. ii. 47). "Durst thou have looked upon him, being awake? / And hast thou killed him sleeping? O brave touch! Could not a worm, an adder, do so much?" (III. ii. 69-71) she demands.

The question has an uncanny applicability to *Macbeth*, which would be written ten years later, for Lady Macbeth is terribly aware of the innocence of a sleeping face to the "adder" who means to stab the body: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (II.ii. 12-3). This clearly refutes her later claim that "the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures" (II. ii. 52-3). When Macbeth asks the doctor for a "sweet oblivious antidote" for his wife, his words simultaneously suggest sleep and death. By bringing the shadow of death to rest on sleeping figures, the play layers the largest mystery over its smaller ones, and raises the emotional level a notch.

Before we can discuss the impact of dreams on the plays, we must define "dreams." The playwright has limited choices in presenting dreams onstage. A character may recount them, or they may somehow be shown. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, the events that take place between the lovers' first sleep and morning are "dreams." The device of re-awakening the characters and placing them in "reality" during their dreams is the only

one available to the playwright, if he wishes to show and not simply tell the dream. In *Macheth*, there are both recounted dreams and the famous sleepwalking scene, in which Lady Macbeth's speech and actions enact her dream for the viewer.

In A Midsummer Night's Dream, we see that ideas whispered or fairy potions administered to a sleeper create the dream. In Macheth the conscience is the main architect of dreams. Dreams are rapid and have a visionary quality; Lysander implies that they are as "brief as lightning," part of a category of things which flash and "in a spleen, unfold both heaven and earth / And ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!'" (I.i. 146-7).

Hermia's dream has a mysterious power to absorb the events that have taken place in the play's intermediate reality — the night of the wakened. Her nightmare is a true rendition of what has been going on around her while she sleeps: "Methought a serpent eat my heart away, / And you sat smiling at his cruel play" (II. ii. 149-50) she says to Lysander, who is not there, but has stolen away with Helena. Duncan's two men respond to his death even in sleep, unnerving Macbeth: "There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried 'Murder!'" he reports, terrified (II. ii. 22). The sleeping groom imports the murder outside into his dream, as Titania and the other three lovers import whispers and potions into their dreams.

Dreams work in other ways. A submerged daytime feeling may expand and spend its fierce energy in a dream. In *Macbeth*, Banquo dreams of the "three weird sisters" and their prophecies, an unleashing of energy so frightening that he fears sleep. "Merciful powers, / Restrain in me the curséd thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose," he pleads (II. i. 7-9). In the same way Helena, who has barely repressed her resentment of Hermia by day, sees that feeling erupt in a tirade of accusations during her "dream." Macbeth fears this terrible power of the imagination; for him, "Present fears/ Are less than horrible imaginings" (I. iii. 137-8).

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The dream that dredges up feeling and lets it expand accomplishes much. One might ask what good all the wailing and accusing of the lovers' dream accomplishes. We

must remember that one of Shakespeare's perennial ideas is that lovers should face a test to cement their love. We find a good summary of that position in *The Tempest*: "They are both in either's powers. But this swift business / I must uneasy make, lest too light winning / Make the prize light" (I. ii. 451-3). The reason for this hurtful, confused midsummer night's dream is that it makes Hermia and Lysander's love stronger through difficulty, and somehow works through the obstacles to three other happy unions (Helena and Demetrius, Titania and Oberon, Hippolyta and Theseus). The dream accomplishes much. "How shall we find the concord of this discord?" Theseus asks (V. i. 60). The whole play is asking that question; it is Theseus's question when he stumbles upon the four sleeping lovers:

How comes this gentle concord in the world That hatred is so far from jealousy To sleep by hate and fear no enmity? (IV. i. 142-44)

The answer is immediately before him, in the reply of Lysander, who begins "My lord, I shall reply amazedly, / Half sleep, half waking" (145-6). It is through dreams that "gentle concord" enters the world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Demetrius says "I wot not by what power / (But by some power it is) my love to Hermia, / Melted as the snow" (IV. i. 162-4). It is, of course, by the power of dreams.

MacBeth's subconscious rises up in the form of daydreams. Often his "dull brain" is "wrought / With things forgotten" (Liii. 149-50). These daydreams almost dispense with the line between real and imagined:

Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible To feeling as to sight? or art thou but' A dagger of the mind, a false creation Proceeding from the heat-oppresséd brain? I see thee yet, in form as palpable As this which now I draw.

(II. i. 37-42)

The daydream focuses upon the dagger in a way that his "awake" mind will not. These daydreams, like the vision of Banquo at the banquet, are the only clear workings of the conscience within, the only moments when emotion expands and rings true. In such moments, Macbeth wonders how his wife can "keep the natural ruby" of her cheeks while his are "blanched with fear" (III.iv.115-16). Yet he does the same kind of acting when dreams leave him, and she drops the mask when her sleepwalking fits come upon her. The conscience rises up in dreams, and demands free reign. Just as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the submerged feeling is freed and played out by the dream.

The power of dreams is indeed great, and yet our language is full of phrases that devalue them: "It was only a dream, just a dream -- it wasn't real," Oberon borrows this attitude, assuring us that the lovers shall return to Athens "And think no more of this night's accidents / But as the fierce vexation of a dream" (IV. i. 67-8). At another point, Oberon tells Puck: "When they next wake, all this derision / Shall seem a dream and fruitless vision" (III. ii. 370-1). Madeleine Doran, editor of the Penguin edition, gives a revealing definition of "fruitless" here: she construes it to mean "of no consequence in the world of reality." Though this language echoes our basic method of separating the fanciful visions of sleep from our waking reality, the play is out to blur that division; Bottom's dream "hath no bottom." Dreams matter a great deal, and they are a mode of reality. The play opens wide this mystery of the reality of dreams in the conclusion of Act Four Scene I:

DEMETRIUS.

These things seem small and undistinguishable, Like far-off mountains turned into clouds. HERMIA Methinks I see these things with parted eye, When everything seems double. HELENA

So methinks;

And I have found Demetrius like a jewel, Mine own, and not mine own. DEMETRIUS

Are you sure

That we are awake? It seems to me That yet we sleep, we dream.

(IV. i. 186-94)

Hermia's musing that "everything seems double" gives a keen insight to the poet's own suggestion about the two realities, one sleeping and one waking, that hold equal sway over us. The dream draws its substance from the waking hours, while the waking hours derive many of their motivations from dreams. The line between dreams and daytime reality is not so sharp as we have made it; in the earliest morning, we know this well ("Are you sure / We are awake?" ). Bottom, whose waking immediately follows, echoes the doubt and wonder we have come to associate with the word "methinks," as well as the blurred division between waking and sleeping:

Methought I was -- there is no man can tell what. Methodght I was, and methought I had -- But man is but a patched fool is he will offer to say what methought I had.

(IV. i. 205-8)

The world of dreams cannot, will not translate into waking without losing its magic, as Bottom (the poet) well knows, but Shakespeare is intent on preserving as much of the power and mystery of that heightened dream world as be can and infusing his art with its radiance.

It is Macbeth who perhaps most fully understands the importance and the healing power of sleep and dreams. While the lovers muse on the value of dreams, Macbeth fully describes the role the night plays in working through our daily crises, its immense restorative power. Macbeth murders the life-giving source, and with it his own sanity. He is given this knowledge only because he is losing the privilege forever, but nonetheless, the knowledge is wondrous:

Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep!' -- the innocent sleep. Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleave of care, The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath, Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course. Chief nourisher in life's feast. Still it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the house; 'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more.'

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Note our familiar "methought," the indicator of a speculation on the nature of things, and the lean clear fit of the metaphors to the solaces of sleep. Macbeth would not say "just a dream;" he has had too few of them lately. His play says that the subconscious will not go away, that the waking hours are only half of life; that dreams are as real as deeds.

Why, then, should A Midsummer Night devalue its dream, calling it "just a dream"? Puck suggests the reason in his epilogue. While we are awake, we like to think of our terrors and fears as safely stored in the subconscious; we keep them separate because the surface of the dream is troubling, cloudy, uncertain. Dwelling too much in the unsorted emotions of dreams might make us side with Macbeth, thinking life "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (V. v. 26-8). A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedy; it needs to escape such conclusions and balance humors. The best escape is to say, "It was only a dream; " for if we think but this, then all is mended:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this and all is mended -That you have but slumb'red here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.

(V. i. 414-19)

As Hippolyta knows, it is ultimately the audience's imagination that must create a fairy wood or a vanishing witch, and, at another level, the profound emotional structures we call comedy and tragedy; it is the viewer-listener's imagination that "amends" the play before it (V.i.210). Using images of night, sleep, and dreams, Shakespeare fashions a powerful appeal to the imagination, engendering our cooperation in raising the play to the plane of imagination.

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In any case, prince for a very fune paper!

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