

# 'The Wise Thing Is Not Wisdom': Dionysian Wisdom and Human Response in Euripides's *Bacchae*

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At the opening of Euripides's *Bacchae*, Dionysus announces that he is coming to Thebes in order to reveal his divinity so that his rites may be established in his home town. But he does a very odd thing. Wanting to reveal himself as a god, he disguises himself as a man. This sets the stage for a conflict with Pentheus, the king of Thebes and Dionysus's cousin. When Dionysus arrives, Pentheus does not recognize him as a god and considers his rites to be disruptive to the city. Under the influence of Dionysus, in Bacchic mania, the Theban women become Dionysian maenads and forsake the city in order to celebrate the Bacchic rites. This is part blessing, part judgment, for Agave, mother of the king of Thebes, had denied the divine paternity of Dionysus, her sister's child. As king of Thebes, Pentheus tries to act wisely and fights against this disruption to the life of his city. In the conflict that ensues between the god and the man, the god, of course, gains the upper hand. Dionysus places Pentheus under his spell, convinces him to spy on the Theban bacchantes, and leads him to his death at the hand of his own mother, Agave. The unstinting praise of Dionysus by the chorus of Asian bacchantes, which has followed him to Thebes; the manic acceptance of him by the Theban women; and the pragmatic acceptance by Cadmus represent other possible reactions to the Dionysian, each insufficient in its own way. As if removing the god's disguise layer by layer, Euripides leads the audience through a series of reevaluations of both Dionysus and Pentheus and portrays the changing reactions of the chorus, Cadmus, and Agave. The tragedy of Pentheus and his mother reveals the power of Dionysus, but it also raises

the questions of what wisdom is and how one can act wisely when confronting this power. The discoveries of the play, that is, the revelations in the Aristotelian sense of *anagnorisis*, and the changing responses of its characters allow for the audience's own gradual recognition of the full scope of this god's power and reveal to them what wisdom really is in the presence of the Dionysian.

At the opening of the play, the conflict seems to be between Dionysus and Pentheus. Dionysus wishes to be recognized as a god and wants his rites to be celebrated in Thebes. Pentheus has heard that the women of Thebes have left their homes and are celebrating Bacchic revels on nearby Mt. Kithairon. He does not recognize Dionysus as a god and accuses the women of faking their frenzy for the sake of lascivious behavior (215–225).<sup>1</sup> The report he later receives from a messenger and what he himself sees when spying on them belie this accusation: There is no evidence of the lasciviousness with which he accuses them (680 ff., 1047–1058). Still, his concern for the city is not unwarranted, for the women have left their houses and looms (142, 217), ceased the productive activities which contribute to the well-being and ordered life of the city, and even abandoned their children. As king of Thebes, he is rightly concerned. He may be impious, but his impiety has the good of the city in mind. He is intent on doing the wise thing and sends his soldiers to bring the women back into the city (778–782). Pentheus is the champion of restraint and order for the sake of the life of the family and of the city.<sup>2</sup>

In an attempt to reassure Pentheus, the prophet Teiresias tells him that the maenads do not do anything contrary to their character while under the influence of Dionysus (314–318). This holds little reassurance for the man intent on keeping civic order. What if one's character is vicious? In that case, restraint is needed so that one will not act according to one's character. Restraint is necessary precisely where character would be insufficient to ensure order. There is also a further danger associated with the mania of the Theban bacchants. While in the state of mania, one may misperceive or misjudge one's own actions or their object. It may not be in Agave's character to slay her own son, but the mistake she makes in

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1 All references to the *Bacchae* are from Richard Seaford's translation.

2 John M. Tutuska presents an excellent discussion of this understanding of the play. See Tutuska, "Aristotle's Ethical Imprecision," 18–24. In contrast, Richard Seaford sees the conflict to be between family and state, not state and religion. He interprets Dionysus to be representative of moderation and calm over against Pentheus's excessiveness and emotionalism. See Seaford, Introduction and Commentary to *Bacchae*, 47–48. While Seaford is correct that Pentheus is not simply the voice of restraint, he does not give full due either to Pentheus's legitimate civil concerns or to the full panoply of primal forces that Dionysus represents and unleashes.

thinking him a bull (and then a lion) allows her to kill him nevertheless. What can protect the maenads from such a mistake when they are in the Dionysian mania? Character is to no avail. The very course of the play reveals why the restraint that Pentheus seems to champion is so important: the Dionysian harbors danger.

Because Dionysus disguises himself as a man, it is understandable that Pentheus does not recognize him as a god. But signs of his divinity are not lacking. Dionysus destroys the palace with an earthquake and deludes Pentheus into chasing a bull and fighting an imaginary fire (585 ff.).<sup>3</sup> Neither Dionysus, nor his followers, can be restrained by chains (444–451, 498–499). His followers, whether in a Bacchic frenzy as are the Theban women, or in full control of their wits and freely following him, like the chorus of Asian bacchantes, do extraordinary things. The Asian bacchantes cannot be held by chains, while the Theban bacchantes suckle wild animals at their breasts and use snakes as clasps for their robes. When attacked, they show extraordinary strength and can defeat armed men with their bare hands (680 ff.). Surely these are signs that they have tapped into a power more than human. These strange activities combine the power one would expect of a divinity with the mysteriousness—the seeming unintelligibility—which is a mark of divine ineffability. Pentheus is caught between the demands of civil order on the one side and the demands of an ineffable divine power on the other. He is confronted with things that are deeper, and perhaps higher, than the order of the city and the rightly-ordered life he stands for.

Given the signs of Dionysus's divinity, it should be clear to Pentheus that he will lose this battle. Yet even when faced with such clear evidence of power, Pentheus denies the god's divinity. Nothing reveals the absurdity of this denial as simply as his insistence, only a few lines after being told that Dionysus's other followers have escaped miraculously, that Dionysus's messenger cannot escape him (434–452). One gets the sense that even if Dionysus had appeared as a god and not disguised as a man, Pentheus would still deny him. He will only be able to recognize the divinity of this god when it is too late and his death is imminent.

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3 Gilbert Norwood asserts that the palace is not really destroyed and that realizing this is the crux of the play. Euripides, he says, presents Dionysus as a god who does not appear as a god, performing miracles that do not appear as miracles. Dionysus has only "cleverness and power" not "divine greatness," and this is demonstrated by the vengeance Dionysus wreaks on Pentheus (Norwood, *The Riddle of the "Bacchae,"* 45, 51–54). Norwood's assumption is that a god would not be so petty. But this assumes a lot. Seaford points out the weakness of the assertion that the palace is not destroyed merely on grounds that there is reference to it later in the play. See Seaford, *Introduction and Commentary*, 195–198. Whether or not the destruction of the palace is illusory, it reveals the power of the god.

Pentheus is striving to do the wise thing for his city, but, as the chorus sings, “the wise thing is not wisdom” (395).<sup>4</sup> The quick and easy moral of the play is that it is dangerous to deny the divine. One should worship the divine even if the city seems to be at risk, for such worship offers the only possibility of avoiding an even worse fate.

This is what is happening on one level. On another, things are not so simple. The opposition of Dionysian frenzy and the rational order of Pentheus is not as clear-cut as it seems. Pentheus, as it turns out, is not the man of moderation and order that he would appear. His actions belie his character. If it is true that under the influence of Dionysus one does not act contrary to one’s character, then the actions of Pentheus when under Dionysus’s spell reveal his character. He is eager to see the revels of the maenads, but he is also intent on ending them.<sup>5</sup> He makes exorbitant claims of strength.<sup>6</sup> But above all, his desire to bury the maenads under the earth reveals something amiss in his character (945–950). Is some deep-seated tendency to violence being exposed? As it turns out, such a tendency was evident even before he was under the spell of Dionysus. Early in the play he threatens to behead Dionysus (237). Later, he threatens to sell the Asian bacchantes into slavery (513). More shocking still, he threatens to slaughter the women of his own city when he says, “I will sacrifice, indeed, stirring up much female slaughter, as they are worthy of it, in the folds of Kithairon” (796–797). Among those women is his very mother—he threatens the same intrafamilial murder that will end the play! The word “sacrifice” emphasizes the similarity between what Pentheus threatens and what Dionysus leads his mother to do. He is the opposite of Dionysus not so much in terms of the opposition of restraint and license, but in the sense of going to an opposite extreme in his restraint. Not only is the wise thing not wisdom, but here restraint is unrestrained. At their extremes the opposites meet and we discover that Pentheus was never free from the Dionysian, even before he was under the god’s spell.

As it turns out, not only is Pentheus unrestrained in his restraint,

4 This is a version of Tutuska’s literal translation of the phrase *to sophon d’ ou sophia* as “that which is wise is not wisdom.” See Tutuska, “Aristotle’s Ethical Imprecision,” 23.

5 R. P. Winnington-Ingram sees Pentheus’s actions here as confirming him as excessive, emotional and prurient. See Winnington-Ingram, *Euripides and Dionysus*, 45–56. Seaford is more moderate and suggests, among other things, that Pentheus’s desire to see the bacchanals could be merely a desire to prove his own assertion of the nature of their revels rather than an expression of his own repressed sexual lasciviousness. See Seaford, Introduction and Commentary, 225. In any event, as he comes under the control of Dionysus, Pentheus does seem to lose his inhibitions, to shed the self-restraint that he was concerned to enforce at the beginning of the play.

6 These claims are not that exorbitant in light of the superhuman strength possessed by the maenads while under the spell of Dionysus.

but Dionysus is not an unequivocal advocate of license. In fact, Dionysus endorses a type of moderation, saying that "what a wise man does is to exercise self-controlled gentleness of temper" (641).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the accounts of the Theban maenads, at least up until they are threatened by others, are of a group of women who are reveling, but who are neither destructive, nor as lascivious as Pentheus claims. True, their deeds are exotic, but they are not violent. Rather, they present a paradisaic image in which humans and nature live in a state of mutual peace and succor. Women suckle wild animals and live snakes act as clasps for their dresses. In turn, the earth yields wine, milk, and honey for the women. The violence of nature has been overcome with a peace that is more than human and greater in scope than human society: It involves the entire cosmos.<sup>8</sup> The peace the Dionysian can establish may seem unintelligible to the type of reason manifest in civic law, to which it appears only as anarchic, but it has an order of its own. It remains mysterious but not necessarily unintelligible.<sup>9</sup>

The same deep power that unites humans with the cosmos and offers such possibilities of peace is perceived as violent and destructive by Pentheus. Violence is part of the Theban maenads' Dionysian mania, but they turn violent only when threatened (680 ff., 1047–1058). The Asian bacchantes sing this joy and peace experienced by the Theban maenads, but they do not deny the violence. They hint at it in their first ode and accept it as it becomes more pronounced. They even praise Dionysus when they hear of his plan to trap Pentheus, and later when they hear of Pentheus' death (848–911). The Dionysian is a liberation of desires, drives, and powers deep in humans which unite them with primal motions of

7 Seaford refers to the "suggestive tension between apparently wild behaviour and perfect balance" (Introduction and Commentary, 209).

8 Friedrich Nietzsche describes the Dionysian in similar paradisaic terms: "Nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man. Freely, earth proffers her gifts, and peacefully the beasts of prey of the rocks and desert approach" (Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," §1 [37]). His understanding stresses the loss of distinction between the human and the non-human, the full submersion of personality in a primal unity. Nietzsche's characterization to some extent fits the description of the revels of the Theban maenads and the trance Dionysus puts Pentheus into, but does not account, for example, for the Dionysian as it is expressed through the chorus, which has not lost its self-awareness. Euripides, while portraying the harmony established in the Dionysian, does not include the loss of subjectivity as intrinsic to it.

9 This is in contrast to Nietzsche's view of the Dionysian, which stresses its unintelligibility. Interestingly, though, even Nietzsche says that the Dionysian can become intelligible in some way through music. Nietzsche even uses the strong phrase "to make it intelligible and grasp it immediately (*einzig verständlich und unmittelbar erfasst*)" rather than a form of the weaker verb for knowing (*erkennen*) (Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," §24 [141]). When he does so, he hints that his own earlier emphasis on the unintelligibility of the Dionysian may have been an exaggeration.

nature. These desires, drives, and powers are dangerous, but they also hold the promise of a deep communion with other living things, one that is joyful, even peaceful. To fear the violence is to forgo the joy.<sup>10</sup>

The paradisaical revels of the Theban maenads are an image of the type of peace and flourishing that seems outside of, or beyond, what can be attained by the wise things of the civic law that Pentheus champions; however, they are also a reminder of what those same wise things are meant to strive for: a harmony among humans in which they can joyfully flourish. The Bacchic frenzy reveals the deep desires and profound powers in the human soul that are the very foundation of the possibility of all human flourishing. The bacchantes can be violent, but the violence we see is only in response to the attack upon them by those whose view of law and peace is narrower. Granted, the Bacchic frenzy of the Theban maenads disrupts the life of the city, but it also reminds the rulers of the peace and harmony that civic life is meant to serve but is not fully capable of producing. The limitation of civic law is manifest in its very champion, Pentheus, who is discovered to be less rational, less wise, than his command of the law would make him seem. In doing the “wise things” by trying to uphold the order of his city, he has lost sight of wisdom. The measure of his blindness is his inability to recognize the profound good and beauty in the harmonious and joyful celebration of the Theban maenads.

The conflict in the play, however, is not between the unbridled passion of Dionysus and the typical civic order as represented by Pentheus, with his concerns for restraint and domestic productivity. Rather, the action of the play concerns how one is to confront these Dionysian powers. The miracles in the play and its eventual outcome reveal the futility of denying the deep passions aroused by this god. The question, then, is not how to overcome him, but what is the best way to embrace him. This is what the repeated references to “wisdom” and “sense” in the play are trying to elucidate. The Asian bacchantes’ unquestioning and joyful acceptance of everything Dionysus does offers a contrast to Pentheus’s stubborn opposition to the god—it is a contrast between Dionysian wisdom and

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10 Winnington-Ingram comes to a very different conclusion when he says that “Euripides makes the beauty of Dionysus skin-deep, turns his wisdom into cleverness and his calm control into the calculating pursuit of a personal vendetta” (Winnington-Ingram, *Euripides and Dionysus*, 27–28). This also reveals the simplicity of readings which reduce the Bacchae to an opposition between restraint and pleasure. Charles Segal, for example, oversimplifies when he says that “The *Bacchae* is about pleasure, and about resistance to pleasure. It is about man’s urgent need and drive for pleasure, raised by Freud into a universal ‘principle,’ which, like everything in the realm of pleasure, necessarily coexists with that which denies, obstructs, and destroys it” (Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides’ Bacchae*, 9–10).

human force. Pentheus's attempt to reestablish civic order brings human law in conflict with the very peace and flourishing which is its goal. When this goal is lost sight of, attempts to enforce human law become manifestations of mere force rather than of wisdom. The opposition of Dionysian wisdom and human force is articulated in the very first exchange between Dionysus and Pentheus. Dionysus says, "I, who have sense, tell you, who have no sense, not to bind me." Pentheus responds, "And I, who have more authority than you, say to bind you" (504–505). This recalls Teiresias's earlier warning, "Pentheus: do not boast that it is mastery that has power over humans" (310).<sup>11</sup> Pentheus's attempt to enforce order in his city amounts to trying to tame the Dionysian passions through sheer force. But the god is more powerful than the mortal, and such attempts are doomed to failure. The wise thing Pentheus attempts to do is not wisdom.

In contrast to Pentheus's exercise of force stands the manner in which the maenads, especially the chorus of Asian bacchantes, respond to this powerful and contradictory god: with praise. Their odes set an example of accepting everything this god brings. However, their joyful praise of Dionysus is not the last word. Their attitude toward the Dionysian is given an important nuance in their encounter with Agave at the end of the play. When the messenger first tells the Asian bacchantes of Pentheus's death, they respond, "Let us dance for Bacchus, let us shout aloud the disaster of Pentheus, the descendent of the snake" (1153–1155), but they add, "Kadmean bacchantes, you have made your hymn of triumph, famous, into lamentation, into tears" (1161–1162). The encounter with Agave which follows will alter the tone, if not the substance, of their praise. First they commend her, but as the full reality of what she has done comes home to them when they see the head of Pentheus paraded about by his own mother, there seems to be a change. The dialogue is marked by long sentences on the part of Agave and short ones on the part of the Asian bacchantes. Agave is glorying in her kill. The short sentences of the Asian bacchantes, especially their single word answer to Agave's question of whether they praise, indicate some reticence on their part to rejoice quite as joyfully as they have previously. They state, simply, "I praise."<sup>12</sup> It is short and succinct, with none of the exuberant poetry of the earlier odes. It is a sudden, sober statement. Even they, the willing, dedicated bacchantes of Asia, are struck by the terror of the deed. They express their

11 Seaford points out that *krátos*, the word translated here as "mastery," often refers to political power (Introduction and Commentary, 178).

12 This is a single word in Greek: *epainô* (1192).

pity in the epithet they give to Agave when they tell her to show the town her conquered prey: "O poor woman." But they know to praise the god all the same (1168–1201). Indeed, they simultaneously affirm Pentheus's punishment as just and recognize the grievousness of the situation of his mother and grandfather, Cadmus: "Your fate I grieve for, Kadmos; but your grandchild has a punishment that is deserved, but grievous for you" (1327–1328). They speak as if to affirm that there is something right, and even good, in the depth of Cadmus's and Agave's sorrow, even in Cadmus's accusation against Dionysus that he is excessive and too ruthless (1346, 1348). To all the contradictory desires and drives of Dionysus can be added the deep sorrow at tragic deeds and the suffering they cause. The revelation of the Dionysian movement in the soul is complete when it not only acknowledges the promise and the danger of deep human desires, their connection with primal nature and all the joy and terror they awaken, but also recognizes the terror as terror and allows suffering to be suffering.

The *Bacchae* calls us to see the full scope of human passion. We must see the need for moderation but also the power of more primal desires, and we must recognize what these desires promise. The undisturbed revels of the maenads are an image of eschatological paradisaic possibilities, of a harmony in which the antagonism of man and animal has passed and they can live side by side in peace. Indeed, they can live in a heretofore unimagined mutual concern and care for each other. This is a peace far beyond the typical human-ordered life of the city. There is something deeper in humans than law and custom that is the ground of the possibility of this peaceful and joyful coexistence. It is a peace that is cosmic and not just human in scale. But danger is there as well—the danger of losing one's life, or, worse, of committing an unthinkable crime, such as killing one's own son.<sup>13</sup> Still, to evade the latter forcefully is to forfeit the former. One must risk the danger to have the hope of the joy and peace. If one deems both to be bad, then destruction is assured.

At the end of the play, when he encounters his daughter holding the head of her son, Cadmus sees the full implications of the question of recognition. He realizes that she is out of her wits, but also that if she comes back to her wits she will suffer. If she remains in her mania, she will be unfortunate, but not think herself so (1251 ff.). Which is better, a false perception or a sorrowful reality? Misperception has led to tragedy—

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13 Of course, in the cases of Pentheus and Agave we see previous misdeeds that were the cause of their misfortune and are the motive for Dionysus's revenge on them. Still, these misdeeds were of the same character of denying Dionysus's divinity.

both Agave's misperception of her son as a beast, but also, her earlier misperception about her sister's chastity. Perception of the truth can also lead to tragedy. If she is led to perceive the truth about her victory, she will suffer yet more. Her denial of reality brought about the first tragedy—the objective state of affairs. To admit the reality will bring her suffering—a subjective state of affairs. Recognition aligns the subjective with the objective, and risks bringing suffering. On the other hand, denial brings disaster. The Asian maenads' acceptance of everything Dionysus does endorses recognition over denial.<sup>14</sup> They recognize all facets of Dionysus, the peaceful and the violent, and they also rejoice in these facets. Agave and Cadmus will recognize and suffer. Only their recognition of the justness of Pentheus's end and of Cadmus's and Agave's punishments, together with how painful they are, comprise a complete recognition of reality.

The full discovery of Dionysus's divinity comes to Pentheus too late, at the moment he meets his death. Agave's discovery of whom she has killed adds to the deep sorrow and suffering of the tragedy. The discovery for the audience is of themselves to themselves. It is the recognition of the Dionysian in themselves through recognizing the Dionysian in Agave and Pentheus. Dionysus's disguise as a human speaks to the difficulty of making this recognition and to the ease with which one can deny it. But it also indicates how intimately entwined the powers of this god are with the depths of human nature. Fear and pity aroused by the portrayal of Pentheus, Agave, and Cadmus help drive home the wisdom of acknowledging this god and how what appears to be the wise thing

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14 This points out the difference between Euripides's and Nietzsche's conception of the Dionysian. Nietzsche stresses unintelligibility and total submersion of personality in a primal unity that is full of simultaneous contradictions. For Nietzsche, this unity is extreme, almost literal. He stresses that in the Dionysian "each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him, as if the veil of *māyā* had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity" (Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," §1 [36–38]). Euripides, on the other hand, would consider such a submersion of subjectivity in a primal unity with the forces of nature to be, at most, only one moment in the experience of the Dionysian. Neither the mania of the Theban women, nor the trance into which Dionysus puts Pentheus fully manifests the Dionysian, for, as Cadmus recognizes at the end of the play, and as the Theban bacchants have exhibited all along, the Dionysian must include an awareness of the primal desires and powers, together with the good and the suffering that they bring. Nietzsche recognizes the need for something like this awareness, but he understands it as that encounter of the unindividuated Dionysian unity with Apollonian conceptualization which gives rise to Greek tragedy, rather than as the full flowering of the Dionysian itself.

to do may be foolishness instead.<sup>15</sup> It suggests, through the word of the messenger and then of Cadmus, that the wise thing is to recognize that one should honor the gods in order to avoid their wrath (1149, 1327). But the wisdom of the play is really deeper and more abstract than this. It is not about the wise thing to do but about wisdom. It is about the recognition of the Dionysian.

Dionysian wisdom involves recognizing the deep, primordial desires and powers in human nature that unite humans with the rest of the cosmos. Such a recognition must be more than Cadmus's initial pragmatic acceptance of Dionysus, more than the Theban maenads' unknowing celebration of the god in their Bacchic frenzy, more, even, than the Asian bacchantes' joyful assent to the god and his deeds. One must recognize and affirm these Dionysian desires and powers in all their promise of peace and prosperity *and* in their threat of destruction, a recognition that is not complete until one gives praise for them even while admitting and accepting the sometimes tragic outcome as tragic. This is the full unmasking of Dionysus, disguised as a man at the beginning of the play. The discovery of the god in the man is the discovery of this god in every man. Such recognition of the Dionysian in all its breadth and profundity comes only with a discovery of oneself to oneself, for the Dionysian lies within every human—the Asian bacchantes, Agave and the Theban women, Cadmus, and even Pentheus, the champion of civic order against Bacchic revelry. To recognize the Dionysian involves remembering both the peace and flourishing that human law strives for and the deep desires and powers in the human soul that link it to the cosmos and make every form of peace and prosperity possible. To lose sight of the foundation and the goal of human flourishing is to risk turning wise things into mere force, for wise things are not wisdom, but should be in the service of wisdom. Wisdom is the recognition of these deep desires and powers within the human soul, with all they threaten and promise—wisdom is this deep recognition in each of us of the Dionysian.

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15 Winnington-Ingram comes to a similar but stronger conclusion. He asserts that Euripides understands Dionysus to represent beauty inextricably linked to cruelty and adds that "Euripides recognised, but hated Dionysus. He recognised his power, and saw that there was only one weapon to employ against him, which was to understand him and to propagate understanding of him" (Winnington-Ingram, *Euripides and Dionysus*, 179). He overstates his case, considering the tenderness that the Asian bacchantes show to Agave and Cadmus at the end of the play. Euripides's understanding of Dionysus and the Dionysian is precisely a warning against viewing it as an antagonistic enemy. The recognition the play leads to is more medicinal than belligerent.

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