

Concepts of Truth and Falsehood, Fair Description and Misrepresentation in Medieval Icelandic Writings

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Medieval Icelanders were a linguistically energetic people. They accorded high status but not permanent public office to poets and developed a complex legal system which was based on that of Western Norway, from where many of the early settlers had migrated in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. Yet many characteristics of the Icelandic law code had no counterpart in the Norwegian model. These were developed in Iceland to deal with the consequences that followed from the fact that the Icelanders, alone among medieval European societies, had no kings and centralized political institutions. They established a General Assembly (*alþingi*), which met each summer at the same place, Þingvellir ('Assembly Plains'), near modern Reykjavík, under the presidency of an elected lawspeaker, who held office for a period of three years. During his term of office, it was his duty to recite the corpus of the laws and to give members of the public information on specific articles of law (Dennis *et al.*: 1980: Introduction). In such a society it can be assumed that the forensic arts would be highly prized.

Icelanders adopted Christianity about the year 1000 A.D. and with the introduction of Christianity came the technology of writing using the Roman alphabet. Before this Icelanders had possessed a type of restricted literacy, using runic inscriptions on hard surfaces, such as wood, stone and bone. Many of the written genres that Icelanders recorded after their conversion to Christianity are presumed to have had a prior existence in oral form, in some genres stretching back

hundreds of years, though it is now well established that the very process of committing standardized oral forms to writing is likely to bring about changes in the forms themselves. (Goody and Ganda: 1980: Introduction). In the case of Icelandic writings, the changes in morality and ideology that Christianity brought with it, together with inevitable changes in attitude over time to inherited cultural property meant that the texts written down mainly in the thirteenth century were partial reshapings and reinterpretations of older records. This is particularly the case with texts whose subject matter concerned the pre-Christian religion. (Klingenberg: 1983; Harris: 1983).

Nevertheless, even though our chief focus in studying medieval Icelandic culture must be upon the writings and beliefs of thirteenth century Icelanders, it is possible to deduce that certain institutions, such as the office of lawspeaker and the social roles of poets, arose and took on particular characteristics in a society where knowledge was transmitted largely by oral means. Furthermore, some of the characteristics that modern scholars have assigned to the thought and verbal expression of primary oral cultures can be detected even in the writings of thirteenth century Icelanders and the ways in which they depict themselves there as thinking, speaking and acting. One of these characteristics that I have chosen to examine here is the widely-reported concern of oral cultures with agonistic verbal art forms of praise and blame, a concern which is usually accompanied by an interest in what constitutes truth and falsehood in ad hominem contexts (Ong: 1982: 43-5). I want to look at the way in which this concern found expression in several different medieval written genres and, in some cases, related social institutions, and to show that in some instances traditional modes of thought could be reinterpreted in terms of new ideas that came to Icelanders from the Christian ideology available in the schoolroom through Latin texts.

A dominant verbal art in Norway and Iceland, which we can trace back at least to the ninth century, is that of skaldic or court poetry. Skaldic poetry takes its name from the West Norse word *skald*, a term that referred to the kind of poet who composed verse in special metres and style of diction for an elite social group, the retinue (called *drótt*) of Norwegian princes and petty kings (Lindow: 1976). The commonest metre of skaldic verse was called *dróttkvaett*, 'that which is recited before the retinue'. This type of verse seems to have developed at the courts of Norwegian princes and the earliest known skalds whose works survive were Norwegians. After the settlement of Iceland (c.870-930), however, there was a growing tendency for skaldic poets to be Icelanders rather than Norwegians, and it may be said that Icelanders established themselves as specialists in this art.

In its court environment the central concern of the skaldic art was with the praise of those rulers or other aristocrats who were the poet's patrons. Conversely, although we have fewer actual examples of critical or satirical court poetry, we can infer from various records that the skald's role also extended to social and political criticism. Indeed the word *skáld* is thought to be cognate with the English word *scold*. (Onions: 1966: 798; Steblin-Kamenskij; 1969). Like their medieval Irish and Welsh counterparts, Norse skalds lived in a state of fragile symbiosis with their patrons. The patrons rewarded their poets for effective encomia, but, if the poets overstepped the limits of criticism their patrons would tolerate, might find themselves begging for their lives. In such circumstances, a poet might try the effect on his angry patron of a special appeasement genre of skaldic verse. This was called, appropriately enough, the Head Ransom (*Höfuðlausn*) (Nordland: 1956; Clunies Ross: 1973: 59-62; Williams: 1968: 11 and 106-12). The best known Head Ransom poem is said to have been composed by the famous Icelandic skald and viking Egill Skalla-Grímsson, who had composed libellous verses and raised humiliating wooden icons against a Norwegian king, Eiríkr Bloodaxe, and had later been drawn to his court at York by means of the Norwegian queen's sorcery.

Skaldic verse is a cryptic verbal art, whose most characteristic form of diction, the kenning, has been compared to the riddle (Lindow: 1975). Although various reasons have been advanced for the complexity and lack of directness of skaldic verse, two suggest themselves as most significant: the need to maintain the exclusiveness of the *drótt* as a social and intellectual elite (Lindow: 1975: 322-3 and 1976) and the need to develop a type of poetic discourse which could be oblique and at times ambiguous in its reference. This latter desideratum came about because of the often agonistic and therefore dangerous nature of its content. If a poet could speak in veiled fashion while still conveying the essentials of his often critical message, so much the safer for him.¹

I have already mentioned that in the colony of Iceland there were neither princes nor kings. The society that took shape there subscribed to an egalitarian ideology which recognised no overt socio-political hierarchy, though in time a *de facto* ruling class of powerful families came to exercise considerable control over large areas of land and its resources, both human and non-human. In Iceland skaldic poetry became democratized to a considerable extent (Schier: 1975); its subject matter was no longer tied exclusively to the praise and blame of princes, but ranged more widely over personal, familial and occasional concerns, though it still maintained something of its encomiastic role. Sagas of famous Icelandic skalds, which belong to a special sub-group within the sagas of Icelanders, represent their protagonists as moving between the

courts of the kings of Norway and their home society of Iceland, though in most cases their passage is not easy and their poetic compositions are the cause of trouble both at home and abroad. (Meulengracht Sørensen: 1977; Clunies Ross: 1978). In the sagas of Icelanders we are also made aware that characters in the narratives who express themselves in skaldic verse are able to reveal a good deal more of their personal thoughts and emotions in the verses attributed to them than they can in the medium of prose, where they are characteristically tight-lipped. Although these sagas are works of the thirteenth century in the form we have them, they reflect an understanding of the power of skaldic verse which is in accord with the provisions of the Icelandic law of the Commonwealth period regarding skaldic compositions, and it is to this subject that I now turn.

The early Icelandic law collection called *Grágás* ('Grey Goose') is considered to contain those laws which were current in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries up to the end of the Commonwealth in 1262 (Dennis *et al*: 1980:9-16). *Grágás*, like cognate West Norwegian codes such as the *Law of Gulathing*, is both explicit and severe about the penalties which an injured party might exact from his antagonist for verbal offences. *Grágás* reveals that people were highly sensitive to any words, especially in poetic form, that might impugn their honour. The most inflammatory of these words were those whose immediate semantic field was sexual and more specifically, given the aggressively masculine ethos of this society, homosexual. In particular, any suggestion that a man had been the victim of phallic aggression conveyed immediate symbolic implications that he was a no-man, a coward, an effeminate. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, the latest of a line of scholars to study these associated concepts, has articulated their relationship thus:

In ancient Icelandic consciousness, the idea of passive homosexuality was so closely linked with notions of immorality in general that the sexual sense could serve to express the moral sense. (Meulengracht Sørensen: 1983:20)

The name given to libel of this kind, whether in verse or expressed in some other mode, was *nío*, and the law regarded *nið* as on a par with the most serious social crimes, such as manslaughter, rape and adultery with a man's close female kin. These were all offences for which a man had a right to kill and they were all crimes that reflected upon a man's honour and that of his family. (See Appendix for the relevant texts.) Love-poetry (*mansöngskvæði*), which a man might compose about a woman to make his interest known to her and perhaps also to compel

her interest, was heavily penalized in early Iceland. It is included in the same section of *Grágás* as lampoons and merits the same punishment - outlawry. Love verses imply the composer's sexual intimacy with the woman concerned, or that he or others might be intimate with her, and so are a direct affront to her male guardians' honour, as it was they who were supposed to control her access to sexual experience. There may have been an additional notion that the composition of love verses was a means to ensorcel the woman.

Grágás's concern with the individual's honour and reputation is paralleled in other types of medieval Icelandic writing. Sagas of Icelanders, and the compilation known as *Sturlunga saga* which deals with the events of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, abound in incidents in which men taunt one another with *ad hominem* insults. Their antagonists respond with physical violence, either immediate or delayed, or with law suits, which may in their turn lead to physical violence. In the poetry of the *Elder Edda*, a collection of heroic and mythological verse in the common alliterating Germanic verse-form, the gods are represented as participating in formalized exchanges of insults, a standardized literary speech event called *senna* in Icelandic (Harris: 1979 and 1983). According to the early thirteenth century *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, which attempts a synthesis of Old Norse mythology from diverse older sources, one of the gods named Loki is the embodiment of traitorousness, and this quality is expressed as a predominantly verbal facility. He is 'the slander-carrier of the gods' (*rógberi Ásanna*) and 'the originator of deceits' (*frumkveða flaerðanna*) (Faulkes: 1982:26).

Now *Grágás* expressly forbids the composition of *ad hominem* poetry of praise or blame, stating 'No man is to compose poetry of either blame or praise about another [man]' (Finsen: 1852-83; *Grágás* I b:183). These stringent prohibitions, which saga-evidence leads us to believe were often flouted, and the general concern with defamation of all kinds in medieval Iceland, probably derive from the fact, previously mentioned, that the society was without an established socio-political hierarchy. Though it had an elaborate legal code, the implementation of legal decisions was largely in the hands of the individual and whatever supporters, family or otherwise, he could muster. Hence individuals had to protect their good name by their own endeavours and it was only natural that men might become hypersensitive to supposed slights on their honour. At the same time the social conditions that induced this sensitivity also favoured the development of an elaborate formal means of slandering others while appearing to produce quite innocuous utterances. The chief tool for this *double entendre* was versified *níð* and, to achieve their ends, poets employed the resources of skaldic verse

which we have already described as oblique and potentially ambiguous.

There were thus two linguistic strategies available in medieval Iceland for dealing with potential or actual *nið* situations. They were in a sense logically incompatible, but it is probable that both were admired. An individual's resort to one or the other almost certainly depended on pragmatic criteria. If a man found himself the butt of *nið* allegations, he could refer to the stringent penalties of the law and to general ideological support for legal formulations, which one can test out in contexts I will examine shortly. If on the other hand a man wanted to make *nið* 'bite' his enemies, he could resort to the apparent innocuousness of a verse which libelled his antagonist but at the same time made it difficult for precise charges to be laid against him. (Meulengracht Sørensen: 1983:70). There was thus at the same time an impulse to polarize 'true' and 'false' descriptions of individuals and a means whereby these polarities could be obscured.

The moral basis of the opposition to *nið*, as *Grágás* expresses it, is that men should not utter words about others which could be described as exaggeration (*yki*). *Grágás* defines *yki* as 'something which cannot be true about another man or about a possession of his and does so [i.e. someone uses *yki*] to deride him' (*Grágás* II, 392). The West Norwegian *Law of Gulathing* elaborates on this definition: 'It is called an 'exaggeration' if a man says something about another man which cannot be, nor come to be, and has never been' (Keyser *et al*: 1846-95: I, 70). The *Law of Gulathing* gives as examples of *yki* such allegations as 'that a man is a woman every ninth night or has born a child or [one] calls him *gylfín* (? werewolf, unnatural monster).' These fantastic types of insult are to be found in overt and covert form in many saga contexts and in medieval Icelandic poetry. They impute to a man behaviours and functions which the normal operations of the human senses and reason declare impossible.

Nevertheless the fundamental classification error involved — men are not women and cannot bear children — opens up the possibility that a symbolic rather than an actual breach of classification boundaries may have occurred. The suggestion is that the slandered man may have played what was thought of as a woman's part in sexual relations by allowing another man to have intercourse with him or he may have failed in a fight and so called his masculine aggressiveness into question. The function of *yki* in a *nið* context was thus to intimate that a person may have performed acts of the same type, in a symbolic sense, as the impossibility he was accused of. *Yki* therefore suggests a plausible insult under cover of a fantastic proposition. The fact that *nið* belongs to a fantastic discourse mode explains why allegations of unmanliness can sometimes be represented as 'jolly jokes' (Turville-Petre: 1964: 131) and sometimes as insults of deadly seriousness. *Nið* is

an example of what has been called the basic trope of fantasy, the oxymoron (Jackson: 1981: 21).

The noun *yki* is related to the Old Icelandic verb *auka*, 'to add to, make bigger or exaggerate' (de Vries: 1962: *yki, auka*). To utter *yki* is to exaggerate the perversity of an individual's actions by placing them in the realm of the unreal. We have seen that *yki* was a concept central to the legal definition of *nið* (Meulengracht Sørensen: 1983: 29), and I think it was also central to a related and much-used Icelandic verbal art, that of giving people nicknames. Nicknames are names additional to an individual's given name which attain some currency in his social group and by which he may be known either in combination with the given name or alone. Although many societies, perhaps all societies, use nicknames the extent to which they use them and the nature of their use are culturally determined (Morgan, O'Neill and Harré: 1979). Even a cursory acquaintance with medieval Icelandic literature would be sufficient to indicate to the modern reader that Icelandic society made frequent and highly inventive use of nicknaming. Any saga one chooses to examine reveals a large number of characters with nicknames, *Laxdoela* saga, for example, (Sveinsson: 1934: Magnússon and Pálsson: 1969) throws up Óláfr the Peacock, Unnr the Deep-minded, Óláfr the White, Ketill Flat-Nose, Jörunn Wisdom-Slope, Thorbjörn the Feeble and Killer-Hrapp, among others.

It is obvious that many Icelandic nicknames verge on the derogatory or insulting and yet these were given with impunity and publicly borne by those who attracted them, though they may often have felt uncomfortable with nicknames like 'porridge-nose' (*grautnef*) or 'short horn' (*körtr*), 'merchant-ship bosom' (*knarrarbringa*) or 'arse-cleft' (*bakrauf*) (Jonsson: 1907; McGrew: 1970: 449-58). How, then, did people get away with giving such names? Some people of inferior social status may have been powerless to prevent pejorative nick-naming, but, for those who could retaliate the matter again turns on the notion of *yki*. If an individual could mobilize sufficient support, he could bring legal action against another man for putting about a nickname which disgraced him (*til háðungar honum*) (Finsen: 1852-83; *Grágás*, II *Staðarhólsbók*, 391-2). The penalty for this was the lesser outlawry. This sort of nickname is termed *auknefni* in *Grágás*. The first element of the word, *auk-*, is related to the same semantic set as *auka* and *yki* and, indeed, to the English word 'nickname', which is really an 'eke' or additional name (Onion: 1966: 609). In Icelandic, however, there is good evidence that the term *auknefni* applied to those names that were exaggerated as well as additional to their bearers' given names.

Icelandic lexis made a distinction between those additional names that expressed empirically verifiable attributes of their referents, and

those that used *yki* to misrepresent or insult. The attributes referred to in the additional names might be physical, intellectual or characterlogical or they might be based on some memorable incident in which the bearer took part. Names based on fair descriptions of their referents' attributes were the *kenningarnafn* 'attributive name', *sannefni*, 'appropriate (proven) name' and the *við(r)nefni*, 'soubriquet'. Those that misrepresented their bearers or would-be bearers were called *auknefni*. This contrastive terminology is nicely expressed in a passage in *Fóstbroeðra saga* where the narrator remarks: 'Helgi had a recognised name (*kenningarnafn*) and was called 'the fair' (*hvítr*), and for him that was no exaggerated name (*auknefni*) because he was a good-looking man' (Þórolfsson and Jónsson: 1934: 181).

These native distinctions between just descriptive names and misrepresentative ones seem to have been aligned by some Icelandic writers with concepts they encountered in medieval theological writings. In a passage in the Old Norse translation of the popular Latin work *Elucidarius* of Honorius of Autun, the Icelandic word *kenningarnafn* translates the Latin *agnomen*. The subject under discussion is the nature of the names men have given angels in order to distinguish one from another. These, the passage claims, are given on the basis of the perceived accidental qualities of angels, their *accidentia* (Icelandic *atburðir*), as opposed to their essential qualities or *substantia* (Lefèvre: 1954: 366, Helgason: 1957: fol. 6r, l.17 - fol. 6v, ll.1-8). A similar passage, explaining how the god Óðinn acquired his many names, occurs in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (Faulkes: 1982: 21-2; Young: 1971: 48-50). In both these contexts and in the contrastive terminology of nicknaming in Old Icelandic, stress is laid on the fact that appropriate secondary names are based on accurate perceptions of the referent's circumstances and attributes.

It seems reasonable to infer from the stringency of Icelandic legal penalties for *yki*, *níð* and the use of *auknefni*, that the impulse to indulge in these damaging speech acts was frequent and strong. People are certainly represented in medieval Icelandic literature as so indulging. At the same time, the moral imperative to be fair in *ad hominem* contexts seems to have been equally well developed. There were, of course, heavy penalties to be paid by an offender if his accuser could make a case stick and organize the implementation of a legal decision. Nevertheless, on a more general conceptual level, there seems to have been a tendency in early Icelandic society towards the polarization of ideas about naming practices and attitudes towards them.

This disparity can be clearly seen in certain theories put forward in poetic treatises of the thirteenth century compared with the realities of skaldic praxis, particularly in *níð* poetry. It has already been mentioned

that several characteristics of skaldic verse made it a suitable vehicle for oblique comment and innuendo. These included a flexible word-order that facilitated the interpretation of verses in more ways than one and a rich vocabulary of polysemous words which could have sexual connotations. These words could be construed in either an 'innocent' (i.e. non-sexual) or a sexual sense (Meulengracht Sørensen: 1983: 66-7; Clunies Ross; 1973: 85). In addition, the riddle-like nature of the kenning was such that it could be construed in certain circumstances as having more than one possible referent. Meulengracht Sørensen (1983: 70) gives clear evidence that this facility of skaldic verse to be interpreted in either a 'good' or a 'bad' sense was something well known to twelfth and thirteenth-century legislators and he provides examples from saga literature of the use of such *double entendre*.

Skaldic diction is very 'nouny'. Thirteenth century poetic theorists treated these nouns as sets of alternative names for the common subjects of skaldic verse. Snorri Sturluson recognised three major types of skaldic diction in his *Edda* of c.1225; the *heiti* or synonym which is a simplex; the *kenning* or *kennt heiti*, a noun phrase composed of two or more elements, whose 'meaning' or identified referent is found by working out the nature of the relationship between the elements. A simple example is the ship-kenning 'horse of the sea'. The third category Snorri called *fornafn*, which is probably an Icelandic calque on the Latin *pronomen*. In medieval grammatical theory pronouns stood only for proper nouns and so, largely, do the examples Snorri gives of *fornofn*. Although there has been a great deal of debate about what Snorri meant by his three categories, my own view is that he saw them as secondary names for the referents of skaldic verse. His terminology depends on the same dualistic way of thinking about nouns which underlies Icelandic nicknaming practices.

Kennings that rely on metaphorical relationships between their elements and the referent are a dominant group in skaldic verse and were probably much admired. Yet both Snorri and his nephew Óláfr Þorðarson, who also wrote a treatise on poetics, show an overt preference for kennings that might be called 'true descriptions' of their referents, kennings, that is, where there is no metaphorical relationship or only a very weak one between the terms (Clunies Ross: 1986). The very term *kenning* and its compounds *sannkenning* and *viðkenning*, remind one of the compounds *kenningarnafn*, *sannnefni* and *viðnefni*, which refer to secondary names dependent on fair description of their referents. Indeed, before Snorri applied the noun *kenning* to a type of skaldic diction, it had two major semantic fields: on the one hand *kenning* expressed the notion of 'teaching, preaching (in a Christian sense) and proclamation', on the other the concept of human sensory

perception (Fitzner: 1973: III: 276 and Clunies Ross: 1986: Ch. 4).

As we have seen, the basis of fair naming was thought to involve the secondary name's expression of its referent's verifiable accidental qualities. These were accessible to the human senses. In medieval Icelandic the phrasal verb *kenna við* referred to the act of deriving a name from the perception of accidentals and the related noun *kenning* referred to the end result of such a process, the secondary name itself. These words, and the concepts they express, are central to both the terminology of nicknaming and of poetic theory and to the underlying ideology which differentiates fair description from exaggeration. It may be noted here too that although malicious intention is part of the *ýki* concept in Old Icelandic and Norwegian law, it is not central to its definition.

The very existence of stringent legal sanctions against the use of *níð*, love poetry and the putting about of inappropriate nicknames suggests that many members of Icelandic society were impelled to use such verbal weaponry. The literature also supports this inference with many an example of insulting name-calling and *ad hominem* slander. This is the social and ideological basis for Snorri Sturluson's literary theory, which favours non-oppositional kennings over those which employ metaphor. Even those kennings which are inescapably metaphorical to a modern analyst are explained in Snorri's *Edda* by recourse to the referent's accidental qualities (Clunies Ross: 1986).

Snorri's reluctance to admit to metaphorical processes in skaldic language no doubt stems from his awareness of the potential dangers of its ambiguity. On a broader intellectual front, Snorri and his nephew Óláfr were educated in the Latin grammar of the medieval schoolroom as well as in traditional native arts. In private, both theorists may well have relished skaldic innuendo and ingenuity, but in their writings they were probably aware not only of a native moral imperative against it, but of the commonly held late classical and early medieval view of the nature of figurative language as embellishment (*ornatus*) rather than as an integral element in the cognitive value of discourse. (Caplan: 1954: 342-3) This non-organic conception of metaphor encouraged the prescription of congruence between its terms and is to be found in the most widely-used grammars and rhetorical textbooks up to Snorri's day. Some of these texts were certainly available to thirteenth century Icelanders and probably reinforced a native ideology that stressed the rightness of just descriptive naming in the face of a well-established societal bent towards misrepresentation for agonistic purposes.

Appendix:

Relevant legal texts

(translations by J. Turville-Petre in Meulengracht Sørensen: 1983)

If a man makes an 'exaggeration' (*yki*) about someone, the penalty is lesser outlawry. It is 'exaggeration' if he says something which cannot be true about another man or about a possession of his and does so to deride him. If a man makes *nið* about someone, the penalty is lesser outlawry and it is to be prosecuted with a panel of twelve. It is *nið* if someone carves 'timber-*nið*' directed at someone or cuts or set up a *nið*-pole directed at someone. There are three words - should exchanges between people ever reach such dire limits - which all have full outlawry as the penalty: if a man calls another *ragr*, *stroðinn* or *sorðinn*. And they are to be prosecuted like other *fullrettisorð* and, what is more, a man has the right to kill in retaliation for these three words. He has the right to kill in retaliation on their account over the same period as he has the right to kill on account of women, in both cases up to the next General Assembly. The man who utters these words falls with forfeit immunity at the hands of anyone who accompanies the man about whom they were uttered to the place of their encounter.

Grágás II, 392

Nobody is to make verbal *nið* about another person, nor 'timber-*nið*' either. If he becomes known for this and is found guilty of it, his penalty is outlawry. Let him deny it with a six-man oath. Outlawry is the outcome if the oath fails. No one is to make an 'exaggeration' if someone says something about another man which cannot be, nor come to be, nor have been: declares he is a woman every ninth night or has born a child or calls him *gylfin* (a werewolf, an unnatural monster?). He is outlawed if he is found guilty of that. Let him deny it with a six-man oath. Outlawry is the outcome if the oath fails.

West Norwegian Law of Gulathing,
(Norges Gamle Love, I, 70)

NOTES

1. Lindow (1975:324) has argued that after skaldic poetry passed beyond the circle of the *drótt* (after c.1000), its diction became 'simpler, more elegant, easier to understand'. While this is partly true, it seems to me an oversimplification, and disregards the undoubted ambiguity of much skaldic verse from after 1000. This is especially the case with *njó* poetry, where the ambiguity is essential to the poem's illocutionary effect.
2. *Bandamanna saga* (Magerøy: 1981: 20/11) provides a good example of the verb *auka* in the sense 'to exaggerate': "Ófeigr svarar: 'Eigi mun þat aukit, þó at hann sé sagðr ríkastr maðr á Íslandi'", "Ófeigr answers: 'It will not be exaggerated, even if he is said to be the richest man in Iceland.'"

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