incur divine vengeance (277-83). Oedipus makes it clear that his legacy will only be effective as long as the Athenians themselves sustain the piety and other virtues which brought him to their polis in the first place.

Addressed to Theseus, such warnings are scarcely necessary, as Oedipus politely acknowledges (1539). For this king embodies the very values for which Athens is being rewarded, and can be trusted to continue acting upon them after Oedipus' death (1760-7, 1773-6). This is symbolized by the monument to Theseus' friendship with Peirithous, a 'trusty pledge' of permanent friendship even after death[78], which marks the entrance to the underworld in the vicinity of Oedipus' mysterious end (1593-4)[79]. But Theseus, as king of Athens and sole witness to Oedipus' disappearance (1643), is also the link connecting Oedipus with the Athens of the future, supernatural mystery with human reality, myth with history. Oedipus' secret is to be passed down from one leader to another (1530-2), in a chain linking the legendary past to the historical present and King Theseus to the leaders of democratic Athens, in whose hands Athenian ideals and Athenian safety now lie. The continuing protection of Athens from the 'sown men'[80] depends not just on Oedipus' presence in Attic soil, but on the cooperation of all the city's future leaders (1533-4)[81]. If they are to profit from Oedipus' presence, they must continue, from one generation to the next, to display the virtues of the ideal Athens that first welcomed him. The play thus predicates future Athenian prosperity on the city's ability to continue living up to the ideal with which it presents us.

[78] Note ἀεί (1594). The word ξύνθημα recalls the mysterious 'pledge' or 'watchword' of Oedipus' approaching end (46) (cf. Segal 1981:377).

[79] The scholiast ad loc. tells us that this is not otherwise attested as their route (but cf. Kirsten 1973:9).

[80] There may be a pun here on σπαρτοί and Σπάρτη.

[81] It has rightly been noted that Oedipus' language avoids specifying Theseus' biological heirs, and is thus applicable to any subsequent ruler (see Jebb 1900 and Kamerbeek 1984 ad loc.).



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# Comic hero versus political élite

In this paper I want to offer some general thoughts about the conflict that occurs, in six of Aristophanes' extant plays, between a main sympathetically portrayed character who can be called heroic and unsympathetically portrayed opponents (onstage or in the audience) who belong to the Athenian political élite[1]. How are the hero and his/her élite opponents generally characterized, and what might Aristophanes have wanted to accomplish by portraying such a conflict?

A good place to begin is with the opinion of a contemporary, the Old Oligarch, who thus analyses the function of comedy as a civic institution:

> And again [as in the assembly and the courts] they [the demos] do not tolerate ridicule (κωμωιδεῖν) or criticism (κακῶς λέγειν) of the demos, lest their reputation suffer, but they encourage this in the case of individuals if there is anyone somebody wants this to happen to. For they well know that the victim is generally not one of the demos or the crowd (τοῦ πλήθους) but a rich, well-born or powerful individual. A few of the poor and the demotic are ridiculed in comedy but only if they are politically active (διὰ πολυπραγμοσύνην) or seek to have more than the demos. Therefore they are not offended if such people are ridiculed.
>
> [Xen.] *Ath.* 2.18.

In this view, the comic theater parallels the assembly and the courts in being an institution of the demos whose function was to maintain the sovereignty of the demos over individuals who had or who aspired to élite status, here defined in terms of wealth, birth and

[1] The plays are *Akh., Knights, Peace, Birds, Lys., Ekkl.*

power. Public ridicule in the theater parallels votes in the assembly or the courts as comedy's distinctive mechanism of demotic sovereignty over the élite. That this was comedy's function is demonstrated, in the Oligarch's view, by the one-sided nature of the ridicule: the demos is never the target, only élite individuals.

Many have questioned this analysis on the grounds that, first, comedy does criticize the demos (e.g., in *Knights*) and, second, that comic criticism could not, and was not designed to, have any real effect on the standing of its victims, as votes in assemblies and courts certainly did. To take the first point first: comedy does criticize the demos; but never for the reason essential to the Old Oligarch's argument: that the demos is unfit to hold sovereignty and ought to surrender power to its élite betters. The standard position is rather that the demos is unhappy and frustrated because it has chosen bad leaders; that it has done so because those leaders have deceived, flattered and bullied the demos; and that the demos has forgotten that they, not the leaders, are sovereign. These assumptions are typified by two passages in *Knights*, a play in which Master Demos initially is controlled by his own slave:

> [Knights to Demos] Demos, you have a fine rulership (ἀρχήν) in that all people fear you like a man with absolute power (ὥσπερ ἄνδρα τύραννον) (1111).
>
> [Demos] I am ashamed of my previous mistakes.
> [Sausage-Seller] Not at all: rest assured, you are not to blame for those mistakes, but rather those who deceived you into making them are responsible (1355-57).

By contrast with these typical comic assumptions, the attitude of élite critics of popular sovereignty — the Old Oligarch as well as all our other sources save for the orators — is fundamentally different: the demos chooses base, selfish and stupid leaders because the demos is itself base, stupid and selfish.

No one who appeared before the demos could afford to take this line: anyone, orator, litigant or comic hero, who for any reason admonished the collectivity of citizens had to persuade its members that he was still somehow in conformity with collective norms and with the democratic notion that collective norms must always control



decision-making. Thus a speaker's own claim to group conformity was typically enhanced by finding some individual on whom the group's problems could be blamed: by democratic logic the group norms cannot be wrong, and so mistakes must be the result of bad advice from an individual who had deceived the group for his own selfish purposes. This claim was easier for a comic hero to make than for élite speakers because the comic hero was always cast as an ordinary citizen with an ordinary citizen's complaints and aspirations, and because his/her competition was unlimited by the constraints of civic deliberation that were in place in assemblies and courts.

And who were the heroes? Always fictitious: no hero portrays any actual contemporary. Always ordinary: no hero represents any category of citizen who could or might be expected to compete for a position of leadership, nor does the hero seek to acquire such a position. And always a respectable type[2]: relatively prosperous, not a member of the younger generation, quiet and (at least initially) law-abiding, civic-minded, hardworking, able and self-sufficient, honest and courageous. In a word, the comic hero embodied aspects of the self-ideal of the democratic collectivity that had little or no scope for expression in assemblies and courts.

The comic hero's paradoxical ordinariness is the key to his (or her) power to express the collective self-image and thus to help maintain and enforce the ideal of popular sovereignty. As a fifth-century icon the comic hero was unique, for only at the comic festivals could the mass of ordinary citizens see one of their own in the limelight, speaking their own language and voicing their own complaints and desires. On all other occasions the limelight was reserved for the citizen élite or their tragic counterparts: that small number of men whose wealth, status and expertise entitled them to compete for leadership of the collectivity of ordinary citizens, who only voted. Athenian public life was a confrontation between extraordinary individuals (the élite) and an ordinary collectivity (the demos) that had power to grant or deny them the power they appealed for. In assemblies and courts this confrontation was

[2] The Sausage-Seller in *Knights* is the exception that proves the rule.

restricted to citizen males: at the comic festivals it was enacted before an audience that included everyone else as well[3], and for once an ordinary person, in the form of a fictional character, could confront the élite. The comic hero was solidary with an audience that outnumbered and surrounded the leaders and the voters who on all other public occasions exclusively governed the polis.

The comic hero's heroism is the achievement of something that ordinary people would have liked to achieve but could not. In each case the achievement is political: the hero or heroine solves or bypasses some fundamental problem in the polis that anyone else, ordinary or not, would have thought intractable. Usually the hero's achievement rescues the whole polis, but even when it rescues only the hero (as in *Akharnians*), the spectators are encouraged to feel admiration and envy rather than alienation and resentment. And that is because the hero always begins as an ordinary citizen and his wish-come-true is a wish shared by the spectators generally; a fantastic but plausible wish, the kind of wish that might often be heard expressed in the marketplace or at home but that could not be voiced in assemblies and courts. Thus the hero never stands against the collectivity as such; he or she is solidary with it. Rather, by argument and example, the hero seeks to show that the collectivity has given its votes or its hearts to leaders who are undeserving, who harm the collectivity; and the hero's ascendancy, which comes only at the expense of the undeserving leaders, shows a better way.

And who were the hero's opponents? Actual contemporaries, often named, always impersonated, who currently enjoyed or were aiming for some kind of ascendancy. As the Old Oligarch says, most were of the class whose wealth or birth traditionally impelled them to a political career, but those without such advantages who were nevertheless politically active were fair game for ridicule and criticism. Note that, for comic purposes, the simple possession of élite attributes — wealth, birth, breeding — was not in itself grounds for ridicule. Aristophanes no more criticizes quiet members of the advantaged class than he criticizes quiet members of the ordinary classes. In Old Comedy, class conflict appears as a theme only when the poets are charging certain leaders with fomenting it. Poets and their sympathetic heroes always favor the ideal of collective solidarity. The comic hero confronts only those whose power, ultimately won by the consent of the demos, can be portrayed as undeserved and harmful to the ordinary mass of citizens. For comic purposes, then, «élite» means «politically powerful» or «politically ambitious» without regard to social background. The same spirit of ridicule in the name of collective well-being that was applied to people like Perikles continued after 429, when civic leaders began to come mostly from «lower» social strata.

But, to return to the second objection raised against the Old Oligarch's analysis, were comic complaints and criticisms entirely unconstrained? If so, they could hardly have had any effect on civic realities outside the festival. But that was not the case, to judge from the occasional decrees limiting the scope of comic criticism, the lawsuits brought against comic poets, the attitude of Sokrates in 399, or the civic crown awarded to Aristophanes for the advice he gave in the parabasis of *Frogs*, not to mention the consistent claim by comic poets and heroes that they intended to have a salubrious civic impact. Relevant also is Aristophanes' boast that he alone had the courage to attack Kleon at the height of his power, and relevant too his avoidance of ὀνομαστὶ κωμῳδεῖν in prosecuting that attack in *Knights*.

All this seems to show that, on their side, the politically ambitious and the politically accountable could take comic criticism seriously, and that the demos, on its side, could be sensitive to criticism that might undermine its collective self-image as justly sovereign: the sort of criticism, for example, that motivated Kleon's charges against Aristophanes in 426, as summarized in the parabasis of *Akharnians*:

> [Koryphaios of the poet] But having been attacked by his enemies before Athenians quick to make up their minds, as one

[3] Cf. Pl. *Grg.* 502d, «Isn't poetry [esp. tragedy] a kind of public persuasion (δημηγορία)?... Mustn't it be rhetorical, and don't the poets seem to you to be rhetorical in the theatres?... Then we've discovered a form of rhetoric aimed at a demos composed alike of children, women and men, both slave and free, a form that we can't much admire, for we classify it as a kind of flattery ... Very well. Now what about the rhetoric addressed to the demos of Athenians and other demoi of free men in other cities?...

> who ridicules (χωμωιδεῖ) our city and insults (καθυβρίζει) the demos, he now seeks to make his reply before Athenians equally quick to change their minds. (630-32)

In his reply to these charges Aristophanes claims that he had merely exposed the flattery and chicanery of the demos' élite leaders and so had benefited, not harmed, the demos. What we know of the demos' actual readiness to punish its leaders in this period encourages us to believe that in rejecting Kleon's lawsuit the demos had ultimately agreed with Aristophanes. Indeed, comic reproof of the demos was always tempered, and ultimately redeemed, by reassurance: the good demos is misled by bad leaders and needs advice from one of its own. The comic hero's ability to represent the collectivity is enhanced by his/her being unpartisan: the hero never sides with any given leader on an issue of current concern but instead presents the view of the crowd.

Criticism of élite leaders thus appealed to and was itself an expression of faith in the intelligence and integrity of ordinary people and in the rightness of popular sovereignty. Its avowed purpose was to restrain what it saw as the danger of élite tyranny, so that members of the élite are painted as self-seeking opportunists whose advice always turned out to benefit themselves at the expense of the ordinary citizens. The attitude of the inhabitants of Peisetairos' utopia in *Birds* typifies the ideal comic city: «We unanimously think it right (ὁμοθυμαδὸν ... δοκεῖ) to crush all the charlatans (ἀλαζόνας)»[4]. Just so the career of Dikaiopolis typifies the stance of the comic hero who restores the ideal, that is the *alazon*-free, city.

That comic heroes were expected to take this line explains why members of the élite are never praised in comedy even when in actuality they might have taken the comic hero's line: in *Peace*, for example, Nikias, the main architect of the peace-treaty credited to the comic hero Trygaios, is never mentioned, and Lamakhos, a signatory to the treaty, is portrayed as an obstacle to peace. It is true that dead leaders are sometimes praised, but (like the dead in funeral orations) only so that living leaders may be unfavorably compared. This is also

[4] *Birds* 1015-16 (Peisetairos to Meton, about Nephelokokkygia).



why comic heroes are never assimilated to élite figures: they must be ordinary people and their triumph must be gained in ways other than those available to élite men.

The attitude is standard populism: ordinary people like Dikaiopolis do all the work, endure all the hardships, spend all the money and make all the sacrifices, while the reward of power goes only to the élite: politicians and generals with their barbaric allies; war-provisioners and the like. In the comic polis initially confronted by the comic hero, élite tyranny is the reality, popular sovereignty an illusion. The career of Dikaiopolis (Just City) typifies the restoration of the ideal, popular sovereignty. Dikaiopolis tries first to work within the system and strikes a separate peace only after he finds that the system has been coopted by the political élite (as represented by Kleon, Lamakhos and the officers of Assembly and Council). His ambition — to resume the peaceful and normal pleasures of farming, trading and festivals — was one surely shared by the collectivity of Athenians, as was his attitude that the money wasted on self-seeking leaders should be used to keep ordinary people like himself in well-earned luxury. In order to enhance their populist line, comic poets consistently promoted a sentimental unity of social classes — rich and poor, rowers and hoplites, knights and traders, men and women — to enhance their portrayal of the élite as the enemy, outsiders, and to buttress their view that the demos should be more skeptical and aggressive collectively.

It is important to remember that an ideal of civic unity and solidarity, however sentimental and however untrue to actual life it may be, is nevertheless essential to the maintenance of any democratic system, as is the existence of public fora in which that ideal can be promoted. When we evaluate the comic festival we must keep in mind that we are dealing with the expression of notional and subjective attitudes. By its very nature democracy maintains itself by voluntary submission to the objective — to the law equally applied — while at the same time encouraging the growth of the subjective — individual and collective self-images and behavior often at variance with the objectivity of the official culture. Thus what is legally valid or politically desirable may often be perceived publicly as unjust or unfair. For in a democracy, the rule of law not men, any act, however

shameless or subjectively unfair, is permissible unless legally or politically actionable. At the comic festivals, objective law and politics were held up to the uncompromising and idealizing light of popular subjectivity and found wanting. The function of the comic poet was to crystallize and deploy the voices and thoughts of the unofficial polis in a festive, but at the same time official, setting.

In taking this populist line the comic poets did more than indulge themselves and their spectators in harmless griping. They systematically and vehemently involved themselves in the most important issues of the day. Since attacks on the élite necessarily involved attacks on the majority opinions of the voting demos, comic involvement took the form of championing the minority views of that demos or views held by those excluded from the official polis (women and children, metics, foreigners). People otherwise without power or without a public voice could be sympathetically represented on the comic stage. Comic plays were thus a kind of safeguard against monopoly of official discourse not only by the élite but also of the majority that had made them élite. Comedy thus emphasized the actual vulnerability of the political élite vis-à-vis the sovereign demos and of the sovereign demos vis-à-vis the community at large.

Every time a political leader appeared before the demos he underwent a kind of *dokimasia*: he had to prove that his superior skills and judgment would benefit the demos and that his ambition was not potentially tyrannical. The attitude is typified (if in atypically blunt fashion) by a speech of Alkibiades to the Assembly:

> And my magnificent style in the polis in such activities as *khoregiai* naturally inspires envy among fellow citizens and for outsiders is evidence of strength. Indeed this is a kind of folly that is hardly useless, when one spends his own money not only to benefit himself but the polis as well. Nor is it fair for a man with big ideas to be made equal with everyone else, since an unsuccessful man finds no one wanting to be made equal with himself.
>
> (Th. 6.16)

Beneath the surface of such appeals to the demos was the assumption that leadership by the élite was unavoidable, since ordinary citizens lacked the expertise necessary for self-governance.



Comic poets countered this assumption, and thus enhanced their attacks on the motives of élite leaders, by undermining their claim to superiority. Each comic hero demonstrates that his or her skills — the skills of the ordinary person — are in fact superior to those of the leaders. In confronting the leaders the hero(ine) always turns out to be better at speaking, debating, forming sensible judgments, interpreting oracles, managing money, fighting a battle, honoring the gods, making sacrifice, running the city. In addition, the comic hero transforms conventionally élite attributes like those covered by the terms *kalos kagathos* and *khrestos* into attributes available to all Athenians, principally by giving them primarily moral and patriotic (that is to say subjective) meanings, and by portraying them as collective attributes of ordinary citizens. Conversely, the objectively élite are consistently aligned with outsiders: prostitutes, slaves, foreigners, criminals. Thus even the initially lowly Sausage Seller is inherently superior to the barbaric slave, Paphlagon.

Interpreters of comedy who understand terms like *kalokagathia* only as they were used by élite writers of themselves have understandably tended to align comic poets with the élite. But this is to misunderstand the ideological struggle in which comedy participated. In the nationalization of aristocratic attributes — a process also visible in Attic oratory — we see the formation of a demotic ideology, the concept of the demos as a corporate élite whose leaders should be public servants, not masters. The comic paradox of the ordinary man as public hero is thus complementary to the democratic paradox of the public hero as servant. The ultimate comic message was that the corporate demos was wiser and better than its élite, whose skills were phony, whose character was bad and whose advice was self-seeking, and who therefore haid no right to be arrogant: indeed the polis would, ideally, be better off without them.

Many would disagree with the view of the Old Oligarch and other élite writers that such a stance actually safeguarded unrestrained popular sovereignty (meaning direct democracy) by arguing that, decrees and lawsuits notwithstanding, comedy was too utopian, even escapist, to be taken seriously; or that comic utopianism must have been intended as ironic or satirical, a way to ridicule the aspirations of the demos, as has been alleged particularly

of *Birds*. But if, as was surely the case, a basic function of comedy (along with all other festivals) was to affirm the shared values of the community, the prominence of utopian idealism shows that one of these shared values was aspiration toward a perhaps unattainable ideal society. Indeed such an aspiration, generated at the collision point of objective/practical group-polity and subjective/ideal individual autonomy, is inherent in all democracies and accounts for their relentless self-criticism and their chronic dissatisfaction with leaders.

After all, idealistic aspirations were not confined to the comic stage. They were also the theme of the ephebic oath, where each citizen promised to leave to his children a fatherland «greater and better» than he had received. Comic heroism typically rests on a version of that ideal, just as comic abuse uses it as a standard against which the shortcomings of élite leaders could be measured. To be sure, the idealism and abuse characteristic of comedy differ from Attic oratory in being more hyperbolic, just as the ideal achievements of comic heroes differ from those promised by élite leaders in being more unrealistic. But we should bear in mind that hyperbolic self-confidence and unrealistic expectations are the characteristics of the demos most emphasized by Thoukydides and other élite writers. When looked at this way the plot of *Birds* does not seem ironic: why should its audience not have seen in Peisetairos the ideal leader, one who turns his initially scattered and apathetic followers, the once-great birds, into a united and powerful demos and who wins a mighty empire?

That said, we return to the question of comic impact on civic realities outside the festival. If we grant that lawsuits, decrees and civic crowns are examples of such an impact, in what sense was it civic instead of merely artistic? Modern difficulty with this question reflects a modern definition of civic life that is too narrowly political and legal-too much equated with the objective society as defined and policed by professional governments and secular institutions. Fifth-century Athens, which had no professional government and where the subjective view of life was pervasively institutionalized (most spectacularly in festivals), requires a different definition of



«civic», a definition in which religion and art are weighed in as the potent ingredients they in fact were.

Here the passage from Plato's *Gorgias* (n. 3, above) is revealing. Sokrates echoes the Old Oligarch by aligning dramatic poets with politicians: as flatterers, that is, deceivers, of the public; as public voices who impede the achievement of ideal forms of governance as represented by an ideal élite, a philosopher king, or for that matter Thoukydides' Perikles. Important is his emphasis on the distinction between the exclusive political and the inclusive theatrical demos.

The discourse of political fora, reserved for the executive demos (citizen males over 18 years old), excluded the wider polis and its divisions: family, friends, slaves, personal, intellectual and religious matters. In these fora the only acceptable allusion to this wider polis was for blame: someone's private behavior threatened the political unity of the polis, that is, of the executive demos. By contrast, the theater was an inclusive forum, open to all. There, in a festive and therefore relatively safe context, the polis could for once be publicly portrayed and analyzed in all its complexity, with all its internal divisions and tensions, and before a representative audience. Important issues of the day could be raised and debated in ways impossible in any other public forum, and before an audience containing not only the executive demos but also that majority of Athenians and residents whose participation in the official polis was confined to festivals. The *notional* audience in the theater remained the executive demos, but for once this demos was surrounded by the politically excluded wards and guests over which it held control: the Assembly accommodated 6000, while the theater accommodated probably three times that many. Here, especially in the comic part of the festival, the executive demos and its leaders were made aware of the concerns and complaints of the polis at large, and they were subject to a kind of accounting from the point of view of that polis. This was the point of view best exemplified by the ordinary hero(in)es of comedy — working farmers, women, the apolitical — in their battles with the political élite. To say that the populist attitudes of comedy were unpolitical is tantamount to taking the élitist line that the attitudes of the masses did not count. That view may for some be defensible in modern representative democracies, but it is

surely not the view taken by our fifth-century sources. For in fifth-century Athens, the masses were not so massive and their views could and did quickly influence the thinking of the executive demos when it voted on proposals by its leaders.

To be sure, the populist line taken by comic hero(in)es was not strictly speaking political either in context or in ethos; it was rather moral or moralistic, as befits its festive function as a vehicle for the expression of collective subjectivity. Most political artists of any period take this line, satirical ones particularly. Yet it is a fact that in any society, the more repressive the government, the narrower the scope of satirical humor. If moral(istic) satire were not felt to have an impact on political realities, why have leaders and governments gone to such lengths so often throughout history to regulate or ban it? It is surely no coincidence that the era of political comedy in Athens coincided rather exactly with the era of full popular sovereignty.

In this sense it is safe to say that comedy, like tragedy in its own ways, was a vehicle for airing popular attitudes as they related to and impinged on the process of democratic self-governance, and in ways impossible in other institutional settings. Drama did differ from politics primarily in its greater emphasis on matters social, personal, moral and religious, and in its fantastic and didactic thrust. But it always views the social and moral as formants of political life, even when (as in tragedy) its foreground focus is exclusively on the family. In this drama differs from deliberative politics only in degree of emphasis, for even in assembly and court the social and moral were much more prominent factors than is the case in the modern world. The Athenian demos always judged a politician's or a litigant's case at least in part by reference to his character and private background, to his worth as a citizen, just as the demos' *nomoi* set the norm not only for political/legal but also for moral conduct.

All politicians and litigants knew the power of rumor and other forms of social opinion and public concern, and in political fora they did what they could to control them. In the opposite direction the people relied for stability on finding ways to permit and legitimize dissent both within and outside of the context of political deliberation. In fifth-century Athens, élite competition before an exclusive demos provided only one way to air dissent; the



institutionalized comic festivals, held before a more inclusive demo provided another, much as the media and the free press do toda with their reporters, gossip columnists, editorial writers, politic cartoonists, satirical magazines and shows. The main difference he is that the comic festivals were an arm of the polis religion and a inheritance from the sacrosanct ritual past, and so arguably ha greater status, informative power and effect than do modern med and the press.

It seems better to approach the phenomenon of institutionaliz comic heroism more holistically than is nowadays usually the case: a form of social communication within the polis; as a distinct but n detached element in a mosaic of public occasions where the ma confronted its chosen élite; as a contributor to a language who vocabulary consisted of symbols devised in all public arenas ar which constituted the rich and varied discourse of Atheni democracy in its early stages of development.

On this approach, we will gain insight into issues of publ concern and into the social determinants of political discourse th had no other outlet, instead of spending our time trying distinguish them from politics or explaining them away. If Plato ar the Old Oligarch were correct in seeing comedy as a constraint o élite power, we are entitled to explore the possibility that th elements of comic heroism were weapons in the demos' striving f ideological control of the élite; that the comic festivals were structural part of a system that channeled élite competition in patterns of behavior that served the interests of the widest possib mass; and that without comic heroism the delicate balance betwe élite ambition and popular sovereignty might not have be maintained during the formative period of Athenian democracy.

*Cover picture:*
**Paestan bell-crater.** Museo Provinciale, Salerno.

# TRAGEDY, COMEDY AND THE POLIS

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