

Fateful Women in Ferdowsi Shahnameh

Soheila Loveimi¹

¹ Department of Persian language and literature, Ahvaz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran

Correspondence: Soheila Loveimi, Department of Persian language and literature, Ahvaz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran. Postal Code: 61349-37333. Tel: 0098-613-334-8420. E-mail: sloveimi@yahoo.com

Received: February 1, 2016 Accepted: April 3, 2016 Online Published: April 5, 2016

doi: 10.5539/elt.v9n5p46

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v9n5p46>

Abstract

Shahnameh as one of the most important literary works that reflects the pure thoughts of the past Iranians, plays a key role in preserving the Iranian cultural heritage and national identity. Mythology helps us to understand the civilizations included the cultures. For example, the image of the women in the literary works is different from their modern popular image that ignores the real position of the women. Abu 'l-Qasim Ferdowsi, the highly revered Persian poet, is one of the literary figures who considered the role of women in his literary masterpiece in spite of the prevailing attitudes towards the women in his era. Some studies, due to the lack of understanding the Ferdowsi's poems, have claimed that he is a misogynist poet. However, Ferdowsi has equally ranked men and women in his long epic. For example, there are a number of chaste and compassionate mothers in Shahnameh, who play a vital role in shaping the epic character of the heroes. Or, the women who fall in love and relinquish all her possessions for the sake of fruition, such as Manijeh and Katayun who leave the king's court for the sake of love. Ferdowsi's imagery of women is not a descriptive account of their charming superficial beauties, but it reflects the wisdom, bravery, and belligerency of these women.

Keywords: Mythical women, myths, national identity, misogyny, Manijeh

1. Introduction

Those who study Persian language and literature know that Shahnameh is one of the greatest and most famous pieces of Persian literature in the world that reflects the Iranian identity and civilization. Shahnameh still plays an important role in preserving the cultural identity and repudiating the western culture (Bahar, 1997). By collecting and versifying the dispersed manuscripts of Iranian history, Ferdowsi has bequeathed a valuable and eloquent literary depository to us with the stories are passed on in large through oral communications and helps us to understand the past history, culture, beliefs and customs (Khatibi, 2006). Shahnameh, composed by Ferdowsi, is one of the most important literary works that reflects the pure thoughts of the past Iranians and plays a key role in preserving the Iranian cultural heritage and national identity. Ferdowsi sought to revitalize the Persian language throughout his life so that nowadays, we are proud of our Iranian identity by its reading.

History is a great teacher. Undoubtedly, history and literature show the beliefs and customs of all societies. New generations should learn from their antecedents' victories and defeats. Ferdowsi considered all Shahnameh – from mythical to epical poems – as the compiled history of Iran with real stories; therefore, surprisingly, has been faithful in versification. This may be proved by scrutinizing the available Pahlavi manuscript of a number of stories in Shahnameh. This kind of stories have been firstly translated into Arabic and then, versified. These stories are adapted with the original manuscript of Shahnameh, because Iranians have appreciated these narratives as the real accounts of their national history and any manipulation have been regarded as the betrayal. Therefore, stories in Shahnameh are the same in The Shahnameh of Abu-Mansuri or Pahlavi manuscripts that the narrator has heard them from the peasant and Zoroastrian priest (who were faithful narrators) (Mahjoub, 1992).

Shahnameh focuses on the heroism of men and women who made the Iranian history. Ferdowsi was keen on traditional and national narrations of Iran. His enthusiasm is revealed in the couplets on kings and heroes. He tended to compose a great poem that inspires the readers. He even narrates a simple legend so passionately that the readers can visualize the characters. Thus, the art of Persian warriors is influenced by his narration (Bozorg, 1991). Although, Ferdowsi is a Persian Shia poet, there is no religious prejudice in the stories of Shahnameh. Ferdowsi has been patriotic, so that this passion has overcome his religious feelings (Forouzanfar, 1990).

The way Ferdowsi has dealt with the heroines, is less used by other historical literary pieces. In spite of the

narrow-minded claims that Ferdowsi is a misogynist poet, he has equally ranked men and women in his long epic. For example, he shows Gordafarid as the vigorous, prudent and politician woman. However, Ferdowsi, like all other poets and writers, is undoubtedly affected by his contemporary era, too.

2. Discussion

2.1 *Women in Shahnameh*

Persian literature and Iranian culture are mainly male-dominated and women are usually shown as the imprudent creatures for serving the men. Therefore, men have been recommended to pity and tolerate the women and avoid the consultation with their wives (Nasihatolmoolok, 1982). Nezami is one of the great literary figures in Iran who acknowledges the prudence of the women in *Leyli o Majnun* poem, too:

“There are thousands of imprudent women in the world who break their promises.”

Although, history of Iran indicates that women have been literate in the ancient times, or had been commanders or admirals, for example, Artemis was the admiral of Xerxes the Great (Khashayar) in the war with the Greeks and defeated them, and Gordieh, Bahram Choubin's sister who became a brave mythical commander after her brother. There is no trace of burying girls alive in the history of Iran. They even could select their spouses. Most of those who have read *Shahnameh* are familiar with few heroes such as Rostam and Sohrab, Zahhak, Feridoun, Seyavash, and Esfandiyar and Sudabeh (as one of the female characters) in *Shahnameh* because of the way she treated Seyavash. Moreover, Ferdowsi describes Gordafarid as a mythical woman in history of Iran. Therefore, *Shahnameh* is a historical document that takes the important historical or pre-historical realities as well as formation of past social life of Iranians into account with this appears quite suddenly; you were discussing heroism, let us know you are done with that issue, before introducing Iranian women burying of women/girls alive; very good arguments here though no regard to the imaginations and thoughts. Economic and social studies show that *Shahnameh* is a historical resource for identification of the Iranian societies in the past (Ripka, 2004). Ferdowsi's view of the role of the women should be studied with respect to the Ferdowsi's era and Ferdowsi cannot be considered misogynist for blaming Sudabeh for her unethical behavior only with respect to few couplets or stories of *Shahnameh*. Ferdowsi's is not a misogynistic view, but he focuses on the personal features. Some men are blamed in *Shahnameh*, too, for example, Zahhak and Goshtasp. In addition, the women in old societies should be compared with the modern women, too, because these women have fostered the mythical heroes.

Ferdowsi depicts a wonderful image of Katayoun, Esfandiyar's mother, when he consults with his mother on a critical military issue or he ranks Rudabeh with Zavareh, Faramarz and Sam's hands. A high number of *Shahnameh* stories are attractive because of the women who play an important role in tragic scenes, for example, the role of Tahmineh in the story of Sohrab's death, or the role of Jarireh in Froud's death. The tragic image of chaste women in *Shahnameh* is shown as the mothers not sweethearts (Eslami Nadooshan, 1991). Most of the women in *Shahnameh* were characterized by wisdom, devotion, and bravery as well as beauty, for example, Sindokht, Rudabeh, Tahmineh, Farangis, Manizheh, and Gordafarid. All of the women in *Shahnameh* are characterized by virtues and high moral values except Sudabeh who is from Hamaveran, and not Iran. *Shahnameh* has been versified one thousand years before. It is a universal poem on humanity and adores women as the sympathetic and congenial partner for men.

Ferdowsi as a rationalist poet has described the women as wise creatures. For example, Roshanak, Dara's daughter, and Kid's daughter are admired for their wisdom in *Shahnameh* (Eslami, 1971).

Women were depicted in *Shahnameh* differently from other literary pieces. They were respected as the perfect creatures that were not affected by the desires or passions of the men in spite of their role in romantic poems by other poets (Hariri, 1987). Ferdowsi has addressed women with the good words such as kind idol, moon-faced, beautiful, wise, fairy and so on. Therefore, Ferdowsi is not misogynist but he has stated the views of the people of his era.

2.2 *Fateful women in Shahnameh*

Shahnameh is one of the Persian repositories and epics, that depicts the bravery, patriotism and devotion of the heroes and heroines. Women in *Shahnameh* have changed the fate of the heroes. They played a critical role in shaping the civilizations and cultures. Whenever, the men were stuck up, women helped them. There is no such a magnificent account of women in other old literary pieces.

Therefore, reading poems is the good way for identifying the cultural values of the societies. The poets are greatly affected by their era due to their sensibility. Ferdowsi ignored the prevailing culture of his era and misogynist views on the women and ranked the women with the men, so that they play a vital role in changing

the fate of the mythical heroes and this implies their courage and bravery. Thus, this study aims to deal with these fateful women.

2.2.1 Pourandokht

When Faramin, the son of Ardashir Shiravi from Sasanid Empire, who had no son as the successor, died, Pourandokht ascended to the throne. She concentrated on helping the poor.

“There was a girl who was called Pouran, imprudent like other all women! She succeeded to the throne. She promised to treat with justice with the people and help the poor for the sake of God. She promised to protect her territory against the enemies.” (1: 6-9).

She took the Ardashir’s revenge on his murderer, Piruz.

“A right man informed Pouran of Piruz’s place. Therefore, Pouran ordered a number of her men to capture Piruz. They captured Piruz. Pouran told him that he should be punished as the Ardashir’s revenge on him and murdered him.” (7:9-13).

Pourandokht ruled and served people for six months and suddenly died of the disease and inherited a good name behind her because the people enjoyed the well-being and welfare in their lives during her reign.

“She was a sympathetic governor who died after six months.” (20: 9-23).

2.2.2 Peasant’s Wife

Bahram Gur arrived a village at night and went to a peasant’s house. Peasant’s wife entertained him with delicious foods and wines. Bahram, who addressed the woman as the taciturn, asked her if she is satisfied with the Bahram or not. Woman did not answer, but Bahram repeated his question. Consequently, the woman said that the village is the crossing way of the Bahram’s horse-riders and army; therefore, people do not feel security against them because of their oppression. Bahram was offended and supposed that people do not appreciate his kindness. Therefore, he fell asleep. In the morning, when the peasant’s woman went to milk the cow, there was no milk in its udders.

“The cow’s udders were empty. The young host got annoyed and told his husband that the king of the world was agitated. Her husband asked her the story.” (7:1375-1380).

Woman protests that she does not talk nonsense.

“When the king oppresses his people, the moon does not shine and there will be no milk in the udders of the cow or a pleasant smell for the musk.” (7:1382-1383).

King’s oppression leads to the meagerness so that there is no milk in udders of the cow. When heard this, Bahram repented of his injustice and cruelty and decided to worship God and do justice. Again, the woman milked the cow and found the milk in the udders of the cow. Therefore, she told his husband about it and thanked God. When people found that Bahram the king is in the village, all came to see the king. Bahram dedicated the village charter to the peasant to give up the peasantry in order to appreciate the peasant’s wife.

2.2.3 Wise Woman in the Goshtasp’s Court

There are anonymous fateful women among the mythical women in Shahnameh. When, Goshtasp prisoned the Esfandiyar in Gonbadan Castle and went to Sistan, Turanian attacked Balkh. Lohrasb the king was killed and Goshtasp’s daughters, Homai and Behafarid, were captured. At the same time, a wise woman in the Goshtasp’s court rode a swift horse towards Sistan and informed Goshtasp of Touranian’s attack, slaughter of people, death of Lohrasb, captivity of Homai and Behafarid, and quenching the fire-temples. Goshtasp immediately summoned Iran army by courier and went to Balkh. Courageous attempts of the wise woman save the Goshtasp kingdom and Iranians.

“The Goshtasp’s wife was wise and confident. She rode to Sistan for two days with no rest until she arrived the Goshtasp’s territory and informed him of Turanian’s attack to Balkh. Goshtasp asked the reason. The woman answered that Lohrasb has been killed in Balkh and other girls have been captured, even Behafarid’s daughter”. (6: 90-107).

2.2.4 Sudabeh (Sudaveh)

Sudabeh was the daughter of Hamaveran the king. When Kavus the king attached Hamaveran territory, Hamaveran sent his daughter to Kavus in order not to pay the tribute. Since Hamaveran was unsatisfied with marriage of Kavus and Sudabeh, therefore, he gave a party in order to capture Kavus and his army. Sudabeh informed Kavus about her father’s conspiracy. However, he did not believe until he was captured by Hamaveran.

Hamaveran prisoned Sudabeh in the castle where Kavus and his army were captured. Rostam rescued them and Sudabeh married to Kavus. When Seyavash came to the Kavus's court, Sudabeh fell in love with him and tried to seduce him.

"Now I am ready to sacrifice myself; then she tore her dress and was not ashamed; Seyavash felt contrite." (3:282-285).

However, Seyavash refused his sexual temptation. Therefore, Sudabeh threatened him:

"If you disobey me, I will disgrace you." (3:325-326).

And accused him of rape:

"Then, Sudabeh stood up and gripped him; then, told him that he tended to disgrace her! Then, she tore her dress and accused Seyavash of the rape" (3:331-334).

When Kavus knew this, ordered to make fire for Seyavash to ride through it and prove his innocence, Sivash passed the fire with no injury and proved his innocence.

"Kavus ordered to find hundreds dromedaries" (3:478).

"They made a colossal mountain of fire" (3: 481).

"And all the people watched" (3:485).

"Seyavash rode swiftly through the fire" (3: 507).

"And disappeared in the flames of the fire" (3: 708).

"However, when he came out of the fire, all people delighted" (3: 510).

Kavus decided to punish Sudabeh but Seyavash who knew that his father loves Sudabeh, asked him to forgive his wife. Then, Kavus announced that he has forgiven Sudabeh for the sake of Seyavash.

"He may repent of murdering his son" (3: 544).

"Seyavash asked the king no to be regretful and forgive the Sudabeh; perhaps she is pious" (3: 548-549).

When Afrasiab attacked Iran, Seyavash was the commander of Iran army. Afrasiab who could not resist against the Seyavash and his army, compromised. However, Kavus insisted on continuity of the war. Seyavash who was offended by Kavus and Sudabeh, alienated the army to Bahram, and joined Afrasiab army and married to Farangis, the daughter of Afrasiab.

"Therefore, this daughter is my successor; the mother called her Farangis" (3: 1484-1485).

"They fastened his hands, and put him on the ground, pulled by the horses and finally he was beheaded" (3: 2373-2377).

Eventually, When Farangis was pregnant, Seyavash was killed by Afrasiab's henchmen, and Rostam who blamed her for her main role in dark fate of Seyavash, killed her.

"The King was killed due to the Sudabeh's fault; however, Kavus took no offense!" (3: 2625-2627).

2.2.5 Shahrenaz and Arnavaz

Shahrenaz and Arnavaz are daughters of Jamshid the king of the Pishdadi dynasty. When Zahhak conquered Jamshid, married his daughters; however, Feridoun could conquer Zahhak by help of these two girls and married them.

"They informed Feridoun of the place of Zahak in India who killed thousands of innocent people" (1: 336-339)

"Eventually Feridoun conquered Zahhak" (1:347).

2.2.6 Katayun

Katayun is one of the three daughters of Rome Caesar.

"Caesar had three well-known chaste daughters; Katayun was the most wise and knowledgeable." (6: 223-225).

According to royal tradition, Caesar invited the noblemen and heroes and asked his daughters to select one of the suitors. However, Katayun liked none of them.

"Caesar invited the noble suitors in the morning; however, Katayun refused to marry them because he liked none of them" (231-235).

Another day, Caesar invited the common people to his palace. Goshtasp, the son of Lohrasb, king of Iran who

had left Iran for his dissatisfaction with his father and taken refuge in Rome with the name of Farokhzad, was one of the guests. Katayun fell in love with him and selected him.

“Caesar again invited the common people maybe Katayun selects of them. A wise man told Goshtasp to go there, maybe Katayun accept him. Goshtasp and the wise man went to the Caesar’s court while felt wistful. Eventually, Katayun selected him and told Caesar.” (6: 238-250).

Because Caesar was dissatisfied with this marriage, he deprived his daughter of his wealth.

“When Caesar heard this, deprived his daughter of his wealth” (6: 262-263).

Katayun bought necessary things by selling her jewelry.

“Katayun had plenty of jewelry; chose one of them and sold it; then, bought what she needed” (6:275-279).

Then, Caesar heard of Goshtasp’s bravery in killing the dragon wolf:

“When the wolf saw him in the forest, howled, but Goshtasp shot and killed it” (6: 387-391).

Caesar found no rival for him in game of polo and shooting. Therefore, he asked Katayun about his name and family. He said that Goshtasp might be from a noble courageous family that was so confident.

“I think that he does not reveal his secret and he is from a noble family because he is strong and brave. He only says that his name is Farokhzad.” (6: 650-651).

Then he welcomed Goshtasp and accepted him. Then, he forced the Iranians to pay tax under the support of Goshtasp.

“Caesar received a letter that warned him about Goshtasp who will take all of his possessions, one day.” (662-665).

Lohrasb recognized that Farokhzad is the assumed name of Lohrasb. Therefore, he sent a courier to Caesar and asked him to be allied. When Caesar found that he is an Iranian prince, send Goshtasp and Katayun respectfully to Iran. Esfandyar and Pashutan are the sons of Goshtasp and Katayoun. Katayun is one of the fateful women in Shahnameh who played an important role in Goshtasp’s being ascended the throne.

2.2.7 Gordafarid

Gordafarid is the daughter of Gazhdaham porter of white castle. She as a courageous woman dressed herself in a knight’s armor and fought against Sohrab to compensate Hajir’s failure:

“But one of those within the fortress was a woman, daughter of the warrior Gazhdaham, named Gordafarid. When she learned that their leader had allowed himself to be taken, she found his behavior so shameful that her rosy cheeks became as black as pitch with rage. With not a moment’s delay, she dressed herself in a knight’s armor, gathered her hair beneath a Rumi helmet,” (2: 197-202).

While fighting, her helmet dropped and Sohrab found the truth.

“Sohrab found that his rival is a girl when he took her helmet off and her hair got loose from under the helmet.” (2: 228).

Sohrab was so amazed by the scene:

“He was surprised when he realized that he is from Iran army” (2: 229).

Gordafarid, who was trapped by Sohrab, deceived Sohrab and told if his army knows the fact, they blame him.

“Gordafarid told that oh, lion-hearted valiant, your troops, and the people in the castle are all staring at us. Your soldiers won’t praise you as brave and courageous man to kill a woman when they see my face and hair. Wisdom is of the sage and experienced. Let the castle, treasure and the guards be yours and release me.” (2: 237-239).

And this time, Sohrab was charmed by her beauty, bravery and wisdom:

“when she showed her face to Sohrab, she was like a cypress in the heaven’ her eyes like those of deer with her arched eyebrows.” (2: 243-245).

Gordafarid seized the opportunity and asked him to go behind the castle gate and therefore, because of using this trick, she was admired by the army.

“She laughed so much and looked at the troops; she saw Sohrab and asked him why he was unhappy; then advised him to come back hometown, because Turanian cannot conquer the Iranians. (2: 257-259).

In this way, Gordafarid could inform the Iran king about the Torkan attack and send the army out at night. Therefore, when Sohrab conquered the castle, he encountered the common people.

2.2.8 Golshahr

Golshahr was the Piraneh Viseh's wife, the tactful minister of Afrasiab and one of the Iranian champions whose daughter married Sivash, the Iranian princess.

"When Piran left Seyavash, rode to Glosahr and told her to Seyavash is the grandson of Ghobad and Jarireh should be ready to marry him." (2: 1432-1435).

"Golshahr dressed up he daughter" (2: 1436)

"Then, she sent her towards the king to get married" (2: 1438-1439).

"When Seyavash saw Jarireh, felt cheerful" (2: 1441)

Golshahr helped Farangis and Seyavash marry.

"Therefore, this daughter is my successor; the mother called her Farangis" (3: 1484-1485).

"Piran give the key to Golshahr who was a prudent and wise woman (2: 1521-1522).

"They took gifts for Farangis while they admired her; Afrasiab and the elders, rode to congratulate Seyavash (2: 1535-1536).

"Piran sent the message using the smoke and told Golshahr to send Farangis to the palace of Seyavash, soon. Golshahr went to Farangis's room, gave the message, and adorned her. Then Farangis, the moon-faced, went to the palace of Seyavash, the king." (2: 1440-1445).

When Seyavash was killed, Afrasiab forgave his daughter for the sake of his wife, and Piraneh Vise ordered Golshahr to take care of Farangis who was pregnant. At the same time, Khosro, the son of Farangis was born.

"When Golshahr came to the palace, told that she should be taken care; few days passed and Farangis should give her child" (2: 2421-2423)

2.2.9 Manizheh

Afrasiab's daughter fell in love with Bizhan who tended to fight Gorazan. She took Bizhan to Afrasiab's palace using the sleeping medication. After a while, Afrasiab knew that Bizhan is in his palace and ordered to shackle him, prison him in the pit of Arzahng demon, and cover the pit with Akvan's stones. Manizheh, who loved Bizhan, made a hole in the pit and begged the people for the bread and food to give them to Bizhan at nights. When Khosro informed of imprisonment of Bizhan, ordered Rostam to go to Touran and rescue Bizhan. Rostam obeyed. When Manizheh found this, appealed them, and looked for Rostam and other Iranian champions:

"When it was told unto me that men from Iran were come forth, I sped hither unto you, for I hoped that tidings of Bizhan might come thus unto the mighty warrior."

"Do the men of Iran refuse tidings unto the poor?"

"I am daughter unto Afrasiab, and my father hath cast me forth because of Bizhan." (5: 971-976).

Manizheh, while crying, described the story of imprisonment of Bizhan for Rostam, while she did not know that he was Rostam:

"What news is there abroad in Iran concerning Bizhan, the son of Gew, and does no army come forth to save him? O noble merchant, I entreat of thee when thou goes back to your land, to seek out Gew, and Kai Khosro, and Rostam the mighty, and bring unto them tidings of Bizhan, lest he perish in his chains." (5: 981-984).

Rostam hid his ring in the belly of a grilled chicken and gave it to Manizheh to take for Bizhan. B. when Bizhan found the ring among the feedstuffs that Manizheh gave him found that Rostam was in the caravan and tended to rescue him:

"And when Bizhan came upon it, and felt the ring, and that it bare the name of Rostam, his heart laughed within him, for he knew that the end of his ills was come. And his lips laughed also, and his laughter shook the walls of the pit." (5: 1005-1007).

"Bizhan asked Manizheh to keep the secret and Manizheh again went to see Rostam and gave him the Bizhan message. Finally, Bizhan was rescued by Rostam and his companions. Bizhan appreciated Manizheh for her care".

"Cherish this woman in thy bosom, and suffer not that grief come nigh unto her, neither speak to her cold words, for she has endured much for thee. And may your life beside her be happy." (5: 1059-1064).

Manizheh is the symbol of devotion among the women in Shahnameh.

2.2.10 Homai Chehrzad

She is the artful and wise daughter of Bahman, the son of Esfandyar.

“He had an artful, knowledgeable, and tactful daughter called Homai.” (6: 165).

Bahman appointed Homai as his successor and ordered her to transfer the throne if they had any children.

“I abdicated the throne to him with all the troops and treasures; s/he will be my successor.” (6: 173-175).

Therefore, Sasan, the son of Bahman, left the father’s court.

“When Sassan heard this, annoyed, left his father and rode to Neyshabur where no body recognized him” (6: 176-178).

Homai supported the poor during her reign with justice and mercy.

“She bestowed dinars to the people when she put the crown on his son’s head and made People happy” (3: 5-6).

“All the poor should become rich”

However, when she gave a birth to a son, put him in a golden box, and pushed it into the water because of her interest in kingdom.

“He was thrown in the river by his mother” (6: 32).

“Washer-woman surprised and asked God to take care of the baby.” (6: 54).

A Gazeri Woman whose had recently lost his child milked him and called him Darab. Darab finally was recognized by Rashnavad, the lieutenant-general of Homai’s army using the red bead on Darab’s arm. Hoday was informed that Darab is alive and thanked God for this. Therefore, she ordered to open the gates and give the money to the poor in all over the world.

“Now. God helped me to see my son, therefore, give the poor dinars and drachms” (6: 271-273).

Homai put the crown on Darab’s head and Darab was appointed as the king.

“when Homai succeeded Darab to the throne” (6: 289-290).

3. Conclusion

Some studies claim that Ferdowsi is misogynist because of the lack of understanding the Ferdowsi’s view on women. However, Ferdowsi considers the women as the main characters in his story who play an important role in shaping the fate of epic characters. Women in Shahnameh are considered to be the source of humanity and perfection. Therefore, Ferdowsi is not a misogynist but he admires and respects the women that are scarcely seen on other pieces of literary works. Manizheh as a devoted and faithful woman relinquished the throne for the sake of her love. Alternatively, Gordafarid as a courageous woman who fought against Sohrab are examples of Ferdowsi’s positive view on women. Shahnameh is one of the great literary pieces that rank women with the men in shaping the honorable history of Iran.

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