

Parallelizing Rostam and Sohrab with Achilles and Hector in

Matthew Arnold's Poem "*Sohrab and Rustum*"

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Abstract

In translating "Rostam and Sohrab", one of the most delightful stories in Shahnameh, Matthew Arnold did not stay true to Ferdowsi's version. Instead, he opted to veer more into Homer's *The Iliad*. The Homeric atmosphere hovering over the poem is exactly one of the factors that made Arnold's poem universally famous. One of the scenes that Arnold intentionally, and most cleverly, copied in his rendition of Rostam and Sohrab was the battle between the Greek hero Achilles and the Trojan hero Hector, which he depicted under the heavy influence of Homer's *The Iliad*. The present article is an attempt to demonstrate this parallelization which can be found in the overall framework of Arnold's poem, especially in the battles between Rustum and Sohrab with that of Achilles and Hector.

Keywords: Rostam and Sohrab, Matthew Arnold, Shahnameh, *The Iliad*.

1. Introduction

One of the most fascinating stories in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh is the tragic tale of Rostam and Sohrab, wherein the son (Sohrab) is anonymously killed by his father (Rostam). This motif, as depicted in Shahnameh, is a universally common element among literature of many other nations; William Butler Yeats' *Cuchulain* is a good example. But Ferdowsi's account of Rostam and Sohrab has deservedly enjoyed more popularity among similar tales of filicide, being recurrently translated and rendered into many languages in both prose and verse. Among the many translations throughout history, there is an exceedingly celebrated versed English version which was composed by the British poet Matthew Arnold and published in 1853. In a letter to his friend John Duke Coleridge, Arnold dedicated "Rustum and Sohrab", his best poem, to the Baron, stating that: "I have grown fond of this poem, not for the beauty of my own rendition, but for the grandeur of its plot and the beauty of the emotions expressed in it." (Amiri, 1975, Introduction, xiv and xviii).

Arnold's primary source and motivation in composing "Sohrab and Rustum" was an article written by the celebrated French critic Sainte-Beuve on Julius on Mohl's translation of Shahnameh. Upon reading Mohl's translation of "Rostam and Sohrab", Arnold wrote to one of his friends: "I have recently come to the acquisition of a most delightful thing, a masterpiece among the best. What a wonderful thing! You can find everything in it." (Amiri, 1975, p. 14).

Arnold chose Sainte-Beuve's critical review of Mohl's translation of Shahnameh as his source of inspiration, which contained a detailed account of the original tale of Rostam and Sohrab, and which the reviewer had recognized as one of the best tales in the epic. In the second edition of his poem, Arnold cited Sainte-Beuve and Sir John Malcolm, the writer of Iran's history, as his sources of reference. After composing "Sohrab and Rustum", Arnold sent it to Sainte-Beuve, appending:

While reading a note concerning Iran's history as chronicled by Sir John Malcolm, I came across a passing mention of the tale [of Sohrab and Rostam], and was determined to versify it, but was ultimately discouraged of the task as a complete version of the tale was not available to me, and which I could not acquire for a long time until I read your article (Amiri, 1975, p. XIV).

Arnold also voiced his regret for not having seen a complete translation of Ferdowsi's epic:

I feel deeply unfortunate for having failed to find a complete translation of Ferdowsi's epic, by which I mean a prose translation since a verse rendition would not provide a proper peek into the literary originality of a work. If I had a prose translation, I would of course put it to the greatest use." (Amiri, 1975, p.19).

Arnold related almost everything Sainte-Beuve had cited from *Shahnameh*, which made his work at times extremely close to the Persian original. Notwithstanding, Arnold's epic poem can at best be described as a very liberal adaptation of the original tale, during the composition of which the author excluded a considerable portion of the elements and plot twists otherwise present in the original version, at times even distorting some parts based on personal taste. The translation was so freely carried out that a number of critics accused Arnold of plagiarism. In the preface to the second edition of his poem, Arnold attempted to respond to those accusations. Hassan Javadi remarks upon this issue:

Matthew Arnold's verse epic *Sohrab and Rustum* is not a verse by verse translation of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, but rather a liberal rendition inspired by that tale. Yet, Arnold's skill at developing an absorbing and impressive epic verse is undeniable, although, the charge of plagiarism still looms over Arnold's epic to this day!(Javadi, 2005, p.9).

Arnold was an accomplished literary critic. He published his most significant essays on literary criticism in a collection named *Essays on Criticism*. It included many discussions on Homer and the translation of his poems under the title of "On Translating Homer". He must have realized that in order to appeal to his audience, he needed to stay true to a Homeric style of epic in his translation, given that westerners' epic taste had been shaped by the works of the Greek poet. This explains why Joseph Champion, who published in Kolkata parts of *Shahnameh* under the title of "The Poems of Ferdowsi", failed to gain much recognition as he had followed the writing style of Alexander Pope, not Homer (Amiri, 1975, p.14). Sir William Jones, an English philologist of the eighteenth century, also attempted a verse translation of "Rostam and Sohrab" following the style of Greek tragedies (Amiri, 1975, p.14).

Hassan Javadi in his essay "Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum* and Its Original Spring", maintains that Arnold attempted to impart to his work a local color by selecting similes and other literary elements with an Eastern touch and tone, because otherwise the work would appear odd and incomprehensible in translation (Javadi, 2005, p.70). He points to a letter in which Arnold had seemingly referred to this issue. In this paper, however, our purpose is to demonstrate that Arnold had made an attempt to accomplish quite the opposite; he composed this poem with a deliberately western feel and color, avoiding the original setting and atmosphere, because it needed to appeal to the taste of western audience. It goes without saying that if Arnold had remained too close to the Persian text in the process of translation, he would have kept the setting and local elements intact. His translation of the tale testifies that he has made extreme efforts to incorporate as much Homeric similes and other Greek literary traditions into the poem. And yet, naturally, he had to keep many proper names as they appear in *Shahnameh*.

However, Arnold's persistence in imitating Homer while translating the poem, most notably his use of epic simile, has given the poem its grand style, veering it closer to lyric poetry. Therefore, upon reading Arnold's "*Sohrab and Rustum*", a Persian reader unacquainted with this literary style will be confused, and might even come to the wrong assumption that portions of another text have mistakenly found their way into this poem. This is because these similes are peculiar to Greek epics, especially *The Iliad*, whose beauty would appeal to western readers who are familiar with the style.

2. Discussion

In general, Arnold has been greatly influenced by *The Iliad* in his rendition and recomposing of Ferdowsi's "Rostam and Sohrab", which can be traced in various aspects. One of the most notable instances of such influence can be seen in Arnold's utmost persistence in parallelizing *Rustum* and *Sohrab* with *Achilles* and *Hector*.

One of the most beautiful and tragic parts of *The Iliad* is doubtless the single combat between the Greek and Trojan heroes, *Achilles* and *Hector*, in the narration of which Homer spent much time and paid extra attention. The battle leads to the death of *Hector*, and *Achilles* emerges victorious. Likewise, the tragic tale of *Rostam* and *Sohrab* is one of the most popular parts of *Shahnameh*, which also ends up in the death of *Sohrab* and the victory of *Rostam*. Having the original text of *Shahnameh* at his disposal and also having certainly read the battle of *Achilles* and *Hector* again and again, Arnold, wittingly or otherwise, attributed all of *Hector*'s traits to *Sohrab* while assigning the characteristics of *Achilles* to *Rustum*, all this done without taking into consideration the original account of *Rostam* and *Sohrab* in *Shahnameh*. As a result, many of the elements that Arnold attributed to *Sohrab* and *Rustum* were absolutely nonexistent in Ferdowsi's poem. Arnold retains this manipulation for as long as the basic framework of the original tale is not distorted, at times even completely changing the direction of the story to make it more similar to *The Iliad*. In the following sections we will concentrate on examining such cases.

2.1 The Overall Setting

The setting of the battle, as described by Arnold, closely resembles the style of Homer when he relates the return of *Achilles* into the battlefield following the death of his cousin *Patroclus*. It is related in Song 21:

Whereupon Trojan people came to the ford of a full-flowing river, Xanthus begotten of immortal Jove, Achilles cut their forces in two (Homer,2014, p.407).

The river of Xanthus plays various roles later in the epic story. Achilles reposes the body of *Lycaon* to this river (632). His

monologue with this river and its deity occupies several pages in *The Iliad* (636). Achilles' battle with Asteropaios, a grandson of the river god Axios, is another example:

Then Achilles set his foot on his chest and spoiled him of his armour, vaunting over him and saying, "Lie there- begotten of a river though you be... Therefore as Jove is mightier than any river that flows into the sea, so are his children stronger than those of any river whatsoever. Moreover you have a great river hard by if he can be of any use to you, but there is no fighting against Jove the son of Saturn (Homer, 2014, p.12).

After the fashion of Homer, Arnold too opens "Sohrab and Rustum" with a portrayal of Amu Darya River:

And the first grey of morning fill'd the east, And the fog rose out of the Oxus stream.

But all the Tartar camp along the stream, Was hush'd, and still the men were plunged in sleep (Arnold, 1916, p.1-4).

Even though the depiction of this river served little to advance the plot of "Sohrab and Rustum", it seems that Arnold intended to portray, through depicting this river, a world which was completely oblivious to the bloodshed ensuing on its banks. Arnold also devoted the ending of his poem to the portrayal of the same river in night-time as a cold cloud passes over Amu Darya:

With night, Crept from the Oxus... Rejoicing, through the hush'd Chorasman waste, Under the solitary moon;—he flow'd Right for the polar star, past Orgunjè... And split his currents; that for many a league/The shorn and parcell'd Oxus strains along/Through beds of sand and matted rushy isles (Arnold, 1916, p. 887-895).

However, in the original text of Rostam and Sohrab there is no river playing a role in the plot. And the battle between the two heroes takes place in a flat plain with no depiction of the setting or surroundings (Ferdowsi, 2002, vol.2, verses 640-645, p. 170).

2.2 *The Riverside*

Achilles' battles before his showdown with Hector take place mainly on the riverside, and many times Homer speaks of heroes falling on the banks of the river. For instance, Achilles spills the blood of two Trojan heroes on the sands of the riverside. The first one is Lycaon, one of Priam's sons:

Whereon Lycaon's forehead touched the ground, with the dark blood welling from his chest till the sands were soaked (Homer, 1914, p.410). And the second is Asteropaios, son of Pelagon: with this he drew his bronze spear out of the bank, and now that he had killed Asteropaeus, he let him lie where he was with the dark water flowing over him and the eels and fishes nibbling and gnawing the fat that was about his kidneys (Homer, 1916, p.412).

Likewise, Arnold in his poem speaks many a time of heroes falling dead on the sands. It seems he especially intended that Sohrab's death take place on the bank of river; when Rostam brings down his mace upon Sohrab, the poet describes the effect of the strike as follows:

And Rustum follow'd his own blow, and fell To his knees and with his fingers clutch'd the sand (Arnold, 1916, p. 420). While the battle is going on, the setting is described in the following words:

And a wind rose under their feet, and moaning swept the plain,
And in a sandy whirlwind wrapp'd the pair (Arnold, 1916, p.483).

And elsewhere in the poem Arnold writes:

And Sohrab, wounded, on the bloody sand (Arnold, 1916, p. 527).

The following excerpts from the poem are other cases in point:

And he saw that Youth,
Of age and looks to be his own dear son,
Piteous and lovely, lying on the sand (Arnold, 1916, p.631).

And from his dark, compassionate eyes,

The big warm tears roll'd down, and caked the sand" (Arnold, 1916, p. 735).

However, in Ferdowsi's account, Sohrab falls dead on a plain, and not on a bank of river. And Rostam likewise pours the soil of that plain on his head in the mourning that follows the tragedy (Ferdowsi, 2002, p.193). Rostam and his steed Rakhsh are also covered with dust from the plains (Ferdowsi, 2002, p.182). The scene where Sohrab knocks Rostam down and sits on his chest is described as follows:

On that monstrous chest, the youth did pause,
Co'ered in dust his face, fingers and mouth (Ferdowsi, 2002, p. 182).

In the same way, the scene where Rostam finds that he had killed his own son is described in the following manner:

Blood-floods he shod, locks of hair he raked, His dusty head and tearful heart ached. (Ferdowsi, 2002, p. 187).
Soaked in sweat, dust filled his throat, His scorched tongue did parch and bloat (Ferdowsi, 2002, p. 171).

2.3 Omens

In The Iliad, upon spotting Achilles from afar marching toward Hector, Priam likens the former to an ill omen (Sirius), seeing him as Hector's sworn enemy and ultimate killer, and also seeing in him bad omen for himself:

King Priam was first to note him as he
Scoured the plain, all radiant as the star which men call Orion's,
Hound, and whose beams blaze forth in time of harvest more
Brilliantly than those of any other that shines by night; brightest of
Them all though he be, he yet bodes ill for mortals, for he brings fire
And fever in his train- even so did Achilles' armour gleam on his
Breast as he sped onwards (Homer, 2014, p.428).

Arnold too provides almost the same description of the scene where Rostam faces Sohrab:

But had regain'd his spear,
Whose fiery point now in his mail'd right-hand
Blazed bright and baleful, like that autumn-star,
The baleful sign of fevers (Arnold, 1916, p. 451).

By "the baleful sign of fevers", Arnold meant the Sirius star. In ancient Persia, Sirius was an object of worship and was known as the angel of rain. The Greek, however, deemed Sirius an omen of drought and heat, viewing it as an ill portent.

2.4 Oath

It was a common tradition among the ancient Greek people, heroes in particular, to swear to the knees of the other and kneel down on the ground when pleading for something. This tradition has been depicted in The Iliad and Odyssey numerous times:

Then Minerva said, Dear brother, my father and mother went
Down on their knees and implored me, as did all my comrades, to Remain inside (Homer, 2014, p.434).

In The Iliad Lycaon touches Achilles' knees and begs his pardon:

But Lycaon came up to him dazed
And trying hard to embrace his knees, for he would fain live, no
die. Achilles thrust at him with his spear, meaning to kill him, but
Lycaon ran crouching up to him and caught his knees, whereby the
Spear passed over his back, and stuck in the ground, hunger in
Though it was for blood. With one hand he caught Achlles' knees
as he besought him, and with the other he clutched the spear and
would not let it go. Then he said. "Achilles, have mercy upon me
and spare me, for I am your suppliant (Homer, 2014, p.409).

In another scene, Hector is seen swearing Achilles on his knees:
Then Hector said, as the life ebbed out of him, "I pray you by your
life and knees, and by your parents, let not dogs devour me at the
ships of the Achaeans, but accept the rich treasure of gold and
bronze which my father and mother will offer you, and send my
body home, that the Trojans and their wives may give me my dues
of fire when I am dead (Homer, 2014, p.437).

Glaring at him, Achilles answered in this fashion:

Dog, talk not to me neither of knees nor parents (Homer, 2014, p.437).

After the death of Hector at the hands of Achilles, Priam asks his attendants to let him approach the killer of his son and beg him to return Hector's body. Arnold too, putting his feet on the footpath of Homer, depicts Sohrab as falling on his knees before Rostam, just like Hector did to Achilles, since the poet identified Sohrab and Rostam as Hector and Achilles respectively:

And he ran forward and embraced his knees,
And clasp'd his hand within his own, and said:—

"O, by thy father's head! By thine own soul!

Art thou not Rostum? Speak! Art thou not he? (Arnold, 1916, p. 341)

However, in Shahnameh such scenes do not exist. Instead, Sohrab addresses Rostam in the following words:

Quoth he, "I now a question ask.

Let truth under the sunlight bask.

Think I perchance you are Rostam,

Or from the seeds of famous Neyram (Ferdowsi, 2002, p. 171).

2.5 *Fighting Rituals*

In Shahnameh, a battle between two heroes followed a certain set of rituals. The two combatants would first fight each other with spears, swords, bows, maces, and finally they would engage in a wrestling contest that would end the fight and determine the victor. A battle would extend to the final stage only when the combatants failed to defeat their opponents during the initial phases. Wrestling was a tradition held sacred by the Persians and played a significant role in the outcome of a battle as well as serving as a true touchstone to the prowess of the combatants. Wrestling during battle, however, was not a tradition in Greece or the western world, and thus would not fit well into Arnold's poem, which is why his Sohrab and Rostum fight only with swords and spears (just like Hector and Achilles), and the wrestling or the fight with mace are deliberately absent in the text. Ferdowsi's Sohrab is killed with a dagger after losing the wrestling match to Rostam, while in Arnold's version he is killed during the fight with the spears, with no wrestling involved. This has also been influenced by Homer's *The Iliad*, where Hector's fight with Achilles involves only swords and spears, which ends in Hector's death by Achilles' spear (Homer, 2014, p.493).

2.6 *The First Fight*

The first fight between Rostam and Sohrab closely resembles that of Achilles and Hector. Unmoved by Hector's pleas to reconsider the fight, Achilles hurls his spear at his enemy, which misses its target:

He poised his spear as he spoke and hurled it. Hector saw it
coming and avoided it; he watched it and crouched down so that it
flew over his head and stuck in the ground beyond (Homer, 2014, p.435).

Then, Hector hurls his own spear at Achilles:

He poised his spear as he spoke and hurled it. His aim was true for he hit the middle of Achilles' shield, but the spear rebounded from it, and did not pierce it (Homer, 2014, p.436).

Arnold models his version of the battle between Sohrab and Rostum exactly after Homer's fashion, mimicking all its details. When Sohrab's pleas to Rostam fall on deaf ears, the battle starts:

He spoke, and Rostum answer'd not, but hurl'd
His spear; down from the shoulder, down it came,
As on some partridge in the corn a hawk,
That long has tower'd in the airy clouds,
Drops like a plummet; Sohrab saw it come,
And sprang aside, quick as a flash; the spear
Hiss'd, and went quivering down into the sand,
Which it sent flying wide;—then Sohrab threw

In turn, and full struck Rustum's shield; sharp rang,

The iron plates rang sharp, butturn'd the spear (Arnold, 1916, p.398-407)

Negotiations between Hector and Achilles turn sour when the latter hurls his spear at the former, which does not hit its target. This bold action is then answered by Hector in the same manner, whose spear hits his opponent's shield. The same scene is also depicted by Arnold in his rendition of the battle between Sohrab and Rustum. Sohrab's pleas are interrupted by Rustum when he hurls his spear at his enemy, which does not hit its mark. Then Sohrab hurls his own spear at Rustum, which strikes his shield.

2.7 Estrangement

Prior to his showdown with Hector and his reappearance in the field of battle, Achilles finds himself at severe odds with Agamemnon when the latter forcefully takes a war bride named Briseis from the former. It results in a heated dispute between the hero and his king, leading to the estrangement of Achilles and his temporary abandonment of the battlefield. Achilles then sets up his camp at a corner away from the rest of Greek's army, avoiding the battle and leaving his fellow men at the mercy of the Trojan army:

Then Achilles went all alone by the side of the hoar sea, weeping and looking out upon the boundless waste of waters. He raised his hands in prayer to his immortal mother (Homer, 2002, p.15).

Arnold, likewise, made up a similar scene for Rustum:

But Rustum came last night; aloof he sits

And sullen, and has pitch'd his tents apart (Arnold, 178-179)

In Shahnameh, however, Rostam's dispute with Kavus is swiftly resolved by the mediation of Gōdarz, and thus Rostam's estrangement does not escalate into camping separately from his army or abandoning the battlefield.

2.8 Aristotle's Unity

According to Aristotle's triple unities, the plot of a tragedy would not exceed the length of a single day. However, Ferdowsi's account of the battle between Sohrab and Rostam enters a second day.

2.9 Epic Simile

The most distinguished literary device employed by Arnold in his composition of "Sohrab and Rustum" was the epic simile, a special form which unlike common similes was expansive in its range and not limited to the description of the tenet, but the vehicle as well (Shamisa, 2003, p. 125). Following the fashion of European epics, Arnold made copious use of this device in his epic poem. A great portion of Arnold's prolixity can be found in these epic similes, especially those employed in his depiction of the battle between Sohrab and Rustum. A case might be made that, sometimes, these similes reduce the epic's violent scenes into mere aesthetic, lenient displays, virtually omitting the genre's inherent violence from the text. The problem with this method is that these depictions, rare and picturesque as they are, verbally paint scenes which immerse the reader heavily in the depiction itself, making him lose track of the plot. These types of similes were a norm in the culture and epic tradition of the classical Greece and the literature of the western world in general. That is why Arnold made abundant use of them throughout his poem, following Homer's *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*. However, Arnold's overuse of this device, as well as the quality of some of these similes, incited censure even from the western critics who were not alien to these types of similes (Amiri, 1975). Arnold employed the epic simile about twenty times in his poem, and the lengths of such similes, depending on the subject, are sometimes short and sometimes lengthy. A good example is Arnold's depiction of Rustum as he watches Sohrab's corpse on the sands, a scene which, being the most tragic in the entire poem, houses a simile that exceeds twenty lines. There are also instances where Arnold employs his epic similes in exactly the same place and manner that Homer did in his epics. For example, Rostam's grappling with Sohrab has been depicted by Arnold in the exact style that Homer depicted that of Achilles and Hector:

As he spoke he drew the keen blade that hung so great and strong by his side, and gathering himself together he sprang on Achilles like a soaring eagle which swoops down from the clouds on to some lamb or timid hare- even so did Hector brandish his sword and spring upon Achilles (Homer, 2002, p.436).

Arnold, portraying the battle between Sohrab and Rustum, used the same epic simile as depicted in *The Iliad*:

He spoke, and Sohrab kindled at his taunts,

And he too drew his sword; at once they rush'd

Together, as two eagles on one prey

Come rushing down together from the clouds,

One from the east, one from the west; their shields

Dash'd with a clang together, and a din Rose (Arnold, 1916, p.470)

Here, as Hector was the initiator of the tussle, it is likewise Sohrab who starts the scuffle in Arnold's epic. Arnold's influence from Homer sometimes has even exceeded such blatant imitations as shown in his portrayal of the Tartar army. He writes:

From their black tents, long files of horse, they stream'd; As when some grey November morn the files,
In marching order spread, of long-neck'd cranes Stream over Casbin and the southern slopes
Of Elburz, from the Aralian estuaries, Or some fore Caspian reed-bed, southward bound
For the warm Persian sea-board—so they stream'd (Arnold, 1916, p.110-116).

This scene has been portrayed in the manner of Homer, in which Arnold replaced the names to fit those in Shahnameh: They were like great flocks of geese, or cranes, or swans on the plain about the waters of Cayster, that wing their way hither and thither, glorying in the pride of flight, and crying as they settle till the fen is alive with their screaming. Even thus did their tribes pour from ships and tents on to the plain of the Scamander, and the ground rang as brass under the feet of men and horses. They stood as thick upon the flower-bespangled field as leaves that bloom in summer (Homer, 2002, p.38).

Interestingly, here, Arnold's epic similes concerning the Tartar army, whose hero was Sohrab, are much like those depicting the Trojan army, whose hero was Hector. This shows Arnold's dedication in establishing parallels between the two epic poems.

Such similes, however, are extremely rare in Shahnameh, although there can be found a very few instances in the depiction of some heroes, but even then, they barely exceed the length of a single line. One such instance is when Rostam charges towards the Turk army following his first battle with Sohrab:

With Tūrān's horde he clashed to a fray, As a panther wild does spot his prey (Ferdowsi, 2004, p. 173).

Another case in point is Ferdowsi's depiction of Rostam's assault on Esfandiār:

Like a panther he leapt upon his foe, Full raising shrieks and painful woe (Ferdowsi, 2004, p. 337).

3. Conclusion

Matthew Arnold translated Ferdowsi's "Rostam and Sohrab" into English. In so doing, he did not limit himself to the confines of close translation; instead, he employed his excellent literary taste and skills which, having been refined by his acquaintance with Homer's works, helped him apply a number of changes to Ferdowsi's epic to further enrich his translation. Relying on the literary and epic traditions of the west, Arnold made his poem more accessible to western readers. Therefore, while deriving the overall framework of the story from Ferdowsi's epic, the atmosphere, tone, battle custom, epic similes, oath taking, depiction of battle field, the manner of Sohrab's death and the like have all been penned down under the direct influence of Homer's *The Iliad*. This Homeric influence is vividly seen during the confrontation between Rostam and Sohrab and the murder of the latter at the hands of the former; scenes which have been heavily adopted from the duel between Achilles and Hector besides the walls of Troy. Arnold's mimicking of *The Iliad* in describing the duel between Rostam and Sohrab, coupled with his total neglect of the original tale in Shahnameh (which he supposedly stayed close to) is so blatant that a seasoned reader or an expert critic would prefer to consider as a translation of *The Iliad* rather than Shahnameh.

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