

Corporeality and Subversion in Post-Renaissance Italy: The Inquisition and the Commedia dell'Arte

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Abstract

This article explores the links between the emergence of the commedia dell'arte and the Holy Roman Inquisition, examining the historical and theological context of anti-corporeality within Catholic doctrine. I begin by identifying the philosophical background to Cartesian dualism, establishing it in the pre-Socratic tradition of Orphism and Pythagoreanism and argue that the real impact of body-mind dualism on the common man came not from theological or philosophical enquiry, but from the anti-corporeal doctrine of the Inquisition. I argue that the commedia dell'arte emerged as a reaction against this anti-corporealism and within its form, particularly through the mask, embodied deeply anathematic, fundamentally heretical principles. Its impunity from Inquisitorial persecution lay in exactly that which made it anathema: the mask and the body. Its avoidance of the written word beyond innocuous scenarios, its emphasis on improvisation, physicality and the pantomimic virtuosity of its performers, made censorship almost impossible. I explore the Church's attitudes towards the mask as demonic and identify within the masks the key cardinal vices, particularly Pride and Covetousness which, according to theologian Thomas Aquinas, are the very roots of heresy. I suggest that the commedia dell'arte rendered corporeality the very locus of potential criticality and subversion within pre-Enlightenment Italy.

In writing about the mask, much focus is given to the centrality of the body and as such the mask and corporeality would seem a natural, even obvious, topic. However, the religious and philosophical context is widely neglected as a critical perspective. Interest in the commedia dell'arte tends to be either performative or historical, the latter of which veers towards theatrical genealogy (Nicoll), political interpretation (Tessari; Taviani; Ferrone; amongst

others), or aesthetic and/or documentary (Katritzky, Richards and Richards, Pandolfi, Castagno, etc.). No approaches I am aware of address the religio-philosophical context in which the commedia operated, or whence it emerged. This article seeks not to redress that balance, but rather looks to act as a provocation and to suggest an alternative perspective that may prove highly illuminating when examining the commedia dell'arte as an historico-cultural phenomenon. In this article, I look at the emergence of the Roman Inquisition and the commedia dell'arte as directly related phenomena, focusing on Italy, particularly the Papal States. I explore the theological backdrop to Cartesian dualism, the philosophical proposition that the mind and the body exist as two distinct and exclusive entities – a dualism entrenched in Catholic theology – and argue that the commedia dell'arte emerged as a counter-cultural response to the dominant papal ideology, placing the body, with all its carnal appetites and vices, at the heart of existence. The commedia was born and died along with the Inquisition, which, I contend, is no coincidence and important links between them have yet to be fully explored – I know of no extant literature on this subject. From a historical perspective, corporeality, arguably demonstrated at its most heightened and theatrical form in the mask, represents not a challenge to criticality, but in fact the very opposite. It offers demonstrably valid tools with which to critically, actively and meaningfully engage with the world, even when both criticality and corporeality are considered heretical.

Anti-corporealism (the rejection of the body in favour of the mind or soul) has a long tradition in Western philosophy. Body-soul dualism can be found in ancient Greece even before Socrates; the body as the temporary flesh to a transmigratory daemon can be found in the thought of Pythagoras (see Xenophanes fr.7) and, later, Empedocles (*Purifications* DK115) and the notion of the divine, eternal soul juxtaposed with the profane, mortal body is a central tenet of the Orphic tradition. In Plato's *Phaedo*, we are told that Socrates spoke of 'freeing' the soul 'from the chains of the body' (67d). In fact, according to Socrates, 'the soul of the philosopher greatly despises the body' (65d). Aristotle likewise thought there was a fundamental dualism at the heart of human existence, between substance (body) and form (soul), the latter being the sum total of the being and its capabilities (*De Anima* 2.1).

In Part 1 of this article, I establish the historical and philosophical background and explore the consequences of Greek dualism on Christian theology and the essential anti-corporealism it embodies. I trace the evolution of the Inquisition(s) in order to establish some key aspects of the anti-corporealism of Catholic doctrine and establish Thomas Aquinas as the key theologian in the formation of subsequent Inquisitorial edicts. In Part 2, I move on to the Roman Inquisition and identify some key aspects of this anti-corporeal theology in relation to the *commedia dell'arte* and argue that the *commedia* represents a counter-cultural reaction against this.

My methodology is to identify key historical, theological, and philosophical shifts in order to provide an overview of the epistemic conditions that gave birth to these two phenomena and then to examine some key ways in which they interrelate. As a result, I focus exclusively on extra-theatrical factors. It should be noted that what is presented represents an overview of a much larger area of research, which is impossible to explore in full detail here. As such, there is inevitably a wealth of material that has not been marshalled and alternative perspectives that have not been addressed. It is with these not insignificant limitations in mind that the reader is advised to proceed.

Part 1: The Historico-Theological Background to the Roman Inquisition

The Inquisition is generally split into three waves. The first wave (medieval, twelfth century) was aimed at rooting out Albigenses, Cathars, Waldensians and other such Christian variations. The second wave (Spanish, established 1478) was directed against converted Jews and Muslims (*conversos*) in the Spanish territories who were suspected of reverting to their former heretical practices. Spain was the most powerful empire of the times; in 1519, Charles I of the Spanish Empire became Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, rendering him by far the most powerful man in Europe. Italy was divided into various states and ruled by various rulers. At the time of the Lutheran Reformation, the devoutly Catholic Charles V ruled over Sicily and Naples in the south of Italy and Milan in the north. The third wave was the Holy Roman Inquisition, established in 1542, and aimed at Catholics suspected of Protestantism.

The Background: Theology, Heresy and Body-Mind Dualism

Article two of the twelve key articles of faith in the Apostle's Creed includes belief in 'the resurrection of the flesh, [and] eternal life' (Kelly 399). The belief is that the dead will rise, body and soul, on Judgement Day. Central to this doctrine is the distinction between body and soul, such as is found in the thinking of Platonic Socrates and Aristotle. Anyone who did not accord with Roman Catholic doctrine was considered a heretic and in 1252 Pope Innocent IV, in the bull *Ad Extirpanda*, declared the extirpation of heresy to be the chief duty of the State. This bull formally introduced torture into the proceedings (violence, or *hupōpiazō*, is sanctioned in 1 Corinthians 9:27) and prescribed burning at the stake as the ultimate punishment for relapsed heretics (Burman 41), a punishment that would become the *modus operandi* of subsequent Inquisitorial executions. The Church's stance against the body was perhaps nowhere more gruesomely – or theatrically – apparent than in these public executions. The key reason behind this method of execution, apart from the power of spectacle, was theological and in full accordance with article two of the Apostles' Creed: by burning the body, it is entirely annihilated, leaving the soul with nothing to embody, thus condemning it to an eternity without the possibility of redemption (Bethencourt 286). Even the dead were exhumed and burned in order to inflict this punishment (Burman 48; Thomsett 177). In 1264, the Italian Dominican priest and theologian, Thomas Aquinas, stated in *Summa Theologica** (hereafter *ST*) that a heretic is 'one who devises or follows false or new opinions' and who deserves the death penalty (II:II 11). However, the Church could not officially execute someone; it must be seen to show mercy. Instead, in a manner perversely reminiscent of the priests handing Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion, the Church, after excommunicating a heretic, 'delivers him to the secular tribunal to be exterminated thereby from the world by death' (*ST* II:II 11), thereby keeping the Pope's hands 'clean', allowing the later defence that the Holy Church has never executed anyone (Bethencourt 281). Nevertheless, for the common man, the reality was terrifyingly clear.

* Perhaps the most important theological text in Roman Catholic doctrine after the Bible, and became a key reference for Inquisitor's manuals.

Aquinas, following the medieval scholastic tradition of aligning Aristotelian philosophy with Catholic doctrine, was to interpret Aristotle's *On the Soul* by identifying the intellect as something not tied to the body in the way, say, hunger was, but as something separate, a quality of the soul rather than the body (ST I.76). He states: 'the human soul, *which is called the intellect or the mind*, is something incorporeal and subsistent' (I.75, my emphasis). This is an important theological point: body-soul dualism at this point is the same as body-mind dualism. This duality is present in the Bible, which states explicitly that body and soul are not only distinct, but *opposed* to one another (Galatians 5:17); it speaks of the original divinity of the soul as the breath of God (Genesis 2:7) versus the corruptibility of the flesh (Romans 8: 7-8). Anti-corporealism was woven into the fabric of Western European thinking.

The actual number of heretics burned at the stake is subject to much dispute, but Bethencourt offers a conservative estimate of around 16,000 burned by the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions alone (444). However, the theatricality of the whole public ceremony, known as the *auto-da-fé*, or 'act of faith', culminating in the burning of heretics, renders the actual number of victims less important than the inevitable impact of these *autos-da-fé* on the public psyche (Johnson 87). Furthermore, if we combine the terror evoked by the Inquisition with that of the witch-hunts, which were effectively an extension of the Inquisition, we may begin to understand the climate of religious fear that prevailed in Europe at that time. In 1484, six years after the inception of the Spanish Inquisition, and almost sixty years prior to its Roman counterpart, Pope Innocent VIII issued the papal bull *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus* (Desiring with Supreme Ardour) in response to a request by Inquisitor and Dominican friar Heinrich Kramer, which officially recognised the existence of witches and authorised the Inquisition to persecute them, threatening non-compliant authorities with excommunication. Witch-hunting manuals, like the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) written by Kramer, were modelled on Inquisitor's handbooks and the means of torture and execution were often remarkably similar. There are surviving records of hundreds of witch trials from Venice, Milan, Naples and

Udine in the first half of the sixteenth century (Martin 88-89).^{*} The theatricality of such persecutions set the stage for the Roman Inquisition; the reputation had been burned so deeply into the collective psyche over the past three and a half centuries that the very word 'Inquisition' struck terror into the hearts of the people and it is to this that we now turn.

Part 2: The Holy Roman Inquisition and the Commedia dell'Arte

The Roman Inquisition was established by Pope Paul III in 1542. Its great innovation was the shift from persecuting heretical *deeds*, such as the performance of non-Catholic rituals and worship as was the case with its Spanish counterpart, to persecuting heretical *thoughts*: the mind, after all, is equivalent with the soul. The targets of the Roman Inquisition were reformers, especially Lutherans, though more generally anyone who dared question the doctrine of the Papal Church, directly or indirectly. As a direct result of this, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries became known as the 'age of dissimulation' and led the Venetian friar and outspoken critic of the papacy, Paolo Sarpi (1552-1623), to write: 'In other centuries, hypocrisy was not uncommon, but in this one it pervades everything' (qtd. in Johnson 87); 'I am compelled to wear a mask. Perhaps there is no one in Italy who can survive without one' (87). Thus a dissimulative duality of self became a necessity, a matter of survival that reified the division between the internal (mind) and the external (body). It is from this theological landscape that the commedia dell'arte emerged, not as somehow disconnected from its vehemently anti-corporeal surroundings, but as a direct result of and in demonstrable opposition to them.

The first known professional troupe of *comici* was registered in Padua, which was under Venetian rule, in 1545, three years after the establishment of the Holy Roman Inquisition and in the same year that the Council of Trent, established by Paul III at the behest of Charles V, established the tenets of the Counter Reformation (Tracy 204). In order to identify the commedia's

^{*} See Christopher S. Mackay's introduction to his translation of the *Malleus Maleficarum* for a scholarly account of the witch hunts, which, unlike the Inquisition, were not exclusive to the Catholic Church. Cf. Robert Thurston's *The Witch Hunts*.

position *contra* the Inquisition, we cannot examine its content textually, it being a largely improvised form. Moreover, from the *canovacci* (basic scenarios or plot-outlines) that have survived,* the topic of religion would seem to be avoided entirely, at least in written form, and for good reason; in 1559, the Inquisition published its *Index Autorum et Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Prohibited Books and Authors), highlighting the grave dangers of the written word. In 1600, under Pope Clement VIII, the eminent Italian philosopher and Dominican Friar, Giordano Bruno, was burned at the stake in Rome for his pantheistic beliefs.

This danger was compounded by the linguistic challenges faced by touring troupes who would play to audiences with whom they did not share a common language. The solution lay in their physicality: their means of performance transcended language barriers by virtue of the bestially caricatured mask and their remarkable pantomimic skills. In the face of Inquisitorial censorship in an age where to dissent or even question Church doctrine could be fatal, the commedia was perhaps alone immune. Interpretation of gesture lies with the interpreter and can be readily denied by the performer (naturally, no one who was seen to enjoy subversive entertainments would testify to seditious content to an Inquisitorial tribunal without fear of implicating themselves). Moreover, no physical script exists beyond the *canovaccio*; the *canovacci* would never implicate the performers. The freedom of this performance style renders the body as the locus of potential criticality. But how do we know it was used in such a way? To answer this, we only need to look at the masks as both objects and characters.** I will begin by examining the mask as object and then proceed to identify in each character the anathematic essence of the cardinal vices.

Corporeality: Demonic Transformation, the Mask and the Cardinal Vices

The mask may be said to have two essential functions. Firstly, as was

* See for example Cotticelli and Heck's *The Commedia dell'Arte* in Naples and Scala's *Scenarios*.

** Masks were prohibited on Christian feast days and in churches (Johnson 50, 106), though the fact that they were tolerated the rest of the time meant that Inquisitors could not use masks alone as damning.

later explored at length by the likes of Meyerhold, Copeau, Strehler and Lecoq, the removal of facial expressions emphasises the performer's physicality: the corporeality of the performer is perhaps never more acutely accentuated than when masked.* The highly physical, often acrobatic nature of the *commedia dell'arte* is testament to this (Henke 12). Secondly, it acts as an agent of transformation; the performer's physical appearance is visually transformed, which, according to neuroanthropologists Laughlin and Laughlin, alters the body image to such an extent that it operates according to different neural pathways, effectively creating a new, or at least neurologically transformed being ('How Masks Work' 74). The stock characters of the *commedia* each have their own specific physicality and strongly bestial appearance,** which in turn drives the performer according to their particular appetitive impulses. Even those practitioners, like Trestle Theatre's John Wright, who deny the more mystical possibilities of the transformative mask (at least in a secular culture), require that a performer removes the mask when receiving instructions on the grounds that *you cannot tell a mask what to do* ('School for Masks'). *Commedia* practitioner and former protégé of both Dario Fo and Ferruccio Soleri,** Antonio Venturino, who likewise takes an anti-mystical view of

* Indeed, this denial of physiognomic expressivity was what led Goldoni to reform the Italian theatre and expel the mask from the stage, claiming 'the soul under a mask is like a fire under ashes' (*Memoirs* 314).

** Descriptions of the masks are widely available; the two standard modern-day works on the subject are Rudlin's *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* and Fava's *The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell'Arte*. Whilst these refer to modern-day interpretations, early pictorial representations (Katritzky, *passim*), as well as the earliest surviving Arlecchino mask from the 17th century (Driesen 172), show strongly bestial features, more so even than today's versions, which are stripped of the thick black hair that used to frame the mask.

*** Soleri was trained by Moretti, and was the second of Giorgio Strehler's two Arlecchinos in the long-running and seminal revival of Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters*.

the mask, states that ‘when the mask is on, it is only the mask; Antonio is no longer here’ (Personal Interview). The maxim ‘you do not wear the mask, the mask wears you’ perfectly articulates the transformative power of the mask.

The long-established demonic associations of the mask are perhaps best illustrated by the Dominican friar, John de Bromyard, who said in 1360 that only criminals and actors wear masks ‘beneath which players are disguised; in the same way demons, whose sport is to destroy souls [...], employ masks’ (qtd. in Tydeman 260). The physical and transformative aspects of the mask were for many a source of grave concern during the time of the Inquisition. The *Malleus Maleficarum* expressly forbids masks on the grounds that any agent of transformation is the agent of Satan (207). In 1605, Tommaso Garzoni, one of the most important commentators of the day, claimed that the ‘first mask ever worn was, without doubt, that of the serpent’s face worn by the dark angel to persuade Eve to commit the first sin’ (Tessari 27, my translation). Even in England, where the mask was less prevalent, playwright and Catholic convert Thomas Lodge, in *Wits, Miserie, and the World’s Madnesse: Discovering the Devils Incarnat of this Age* (1596), identified the brutish *zanni* of the Italian theatre as a particularly pernicious influence:

Let this suffice for babling, for here marcheth forth SCURILITIE, (as untoward a Devill as any of the rest) the first time he lookt out of Italy into England, it was in the habite of a Zani: This is an onely fellow for making faces, shewing lascivious gestures, singing like the Great Organ pipe in Poules, counterfainting any deformitie you can devise, and perfect in the most unchristian abominations of Priapisme. (88)

The phrase ‘most unchristian abominations of Priapisme’ highlights the carnality of these masked characters. Whilst no extant scenarios expressly address the Inquisition or indeed any ecclesiastical matters—it is difficult to imagine that any such scenarios ever existed—it seems highly unlikely that such matters were never alluded to in the improvised performances. Even without this speculation, it is inescapable that the characters themselves

(known as *maschere*, or ‘masks’ rather than ‘characters’) were directly anathema to Catholic doctrine. Whilst the highly physical nature of the performances, combined with their scatological, bawdy and carnal content celebrates the body, the appetitive nature of the masks celebrates its vices, albeit via lampoon.

We are reminded here of Bakhtin’s formulation of the grotesque, which is the underlying aesthetic of the carnivalesque: ‘Two types of imagery reflecting the conception of the world would meet here at a crossroads; one of them ascends to the folk culture of humour, while the other is the bourgeois conception of the atomised being’ (24). We must remember of course that Bakhtin’s paradigm is a political construct. According to David Wiles, the carnivalesque for Bakhtin was derived from Pushkin’s historiographically unsound interpretation of the market square and the fairground booth as public performance spaces (92-95). We may likewise see the ‘crossroads’ as between the somatic and the spiritual. Bakhtin’s grotesque is a world that rejects traditional aesthetics, exaggerates and disfigures as well as unites in a sense of folkloristic magic and the transgression of natural boundaries. Bakhtin says the mask is ‘the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. [...] It reveals the essence of the grotesque’ (39-40). In other words, the transgression of boundaries that the mask (and the grotesque in general) embodies inherently defies the dichotomous approach of body-mind separation in favour of a continual synthesis of becoming. The *commedia dell’arte*, as carnivalesque celebration, dissolves and rejects traditional boundaries and as such exists in opposition to Catholic doctrine. It is worth clarifying this point: what the *commedia* rejects is not the soul *per se*, but the dichotomy; it rejects the anti-corporeal by celebrating the corporeal: the physical, appetitive, and vice-ridden body. The masks’ connections with the seven ‘capital vices’, established by Pope Gregory I, c.590 (Climacus 201), are in many ways, I contend, definitive.* They can be related as follows:

* For a theological exploration of the seven capital vices, see Aquinas *ST*, I-II, 84.4.

Pride:	all, but especially Capitano, Pantalone, Dottore, <i>innamorati</i>
Envy:	Pantalone, Capitano, Brighella; Pulcinella
Anger:	Pantalone, Brighella; Pulcinella
Sloth:	Pulcinella/zanni
Covetousness:	all, but especially Pantalone, Brighella, Pulcinella and Arlecchino
Gluttony:	Dottore, Arlecchino/zanni
Lust:	all, but especially Pantalone, Arlecchino and (arguably) the <i>innamorati</i> .

Aquinas asserts that the vices of Pride and Covetousness are the root of all heresies (*ST II:II*, 11.1) which, along with carnal Lust, are the very essence of Christian anathema. Such links were apparent at the time, as commedia actor Niccolò Barbieri (inventor of the masks of Beltrame and Scapino) wrote in *La Supplica*: ‘God above – as if one could reform a sinful man without identifying his vices or showing his ugliness’ (35, my translation). That Arlecchino should emerge as the appetitive, carnival spirit of the commedia dell’arte, with his infernal associations of carnality, fornication, gender-swapping (Duchartre 56-57), necromancy and magic (Martinelli; Gherardi *passim*) – all explicitly condemned by various Inquisitorial edicts – suggests a demonic force from the annals of European folklore (Driesen *passim*). Interestingly, as many have noted (e.g., Fo 46), a precursor to Arlecchino may well be found in Dante’s *Inferno*, in which we encounter the farcical demon, Alichino (canto 21, line 118). Moreover, both Dario Fo and mask-maker Donato Sartori, son of Amleto (responsible for the reinvention of the leather commedia mask in the 1950s), suggest that the traditional wart on the Arlecchino mask is the broken horn of the Devil (Fo 23; cf Bell 87-88). Napier, on the other hand, suggests a pagan ‘third eye’ (135-87). Either way, it remains anathema. Likewise, Goldoni’s *Servant of Two Masters* (1753), considered at once the pinnacle and the death knell for the commedia, is titled *contra* biblical edict (‘No man can serve two masters [...]. Ye cannot serve God and mammon’ (Matthew 6:24)). The conceptual space occupied by the commedia is consistently and fundamentally contrary to Inquisitorial

dogma through its base, appetitive and exclusively corporeal nature. A survey of the extant commedia *canovacci* shows that anything pertaining to the metaphysical is repeatedly shown to be the result of trickery at the expense of the credulous victim.* The theological question of the soul is never directly refuted. Rather, the commedia dell'arte occupies an anathematic space to the anti-corporealism of Catholic doctrine, making the corporeal its sole focus that theatrically, if not doctrinally, negates anything outside the world of the body.

Conclusion

Inquisitorial censorship signalled the end of the Italian Renaissance, leading the English poet John Milton to plead to the English Parliament, after visiting the imprisoned Galileo Galilei in 1638, not to exercise the same powers of censorship as Italy, 'where this kind of inquisition terrorizes [...] and] had damped the glory of Italian wits' (*Areopagitica* 40). Such 'wits', I suggest, were perhaps not so much damped as forced to find another form and another language – the language of the body – driven from the incriminatory page and onto the ephemeral stage of the *commedia all'improvviso*. In terms of body-mind (as soul) dualism, if we view the Inquisition as the monstrous face of human spirituality and its relentless enmity against the body, we can view the commedia as the grotesque face of human corporeality and appetite in direct response to this oppression. Both sides share an inherent theatricality: the *autos-da-fé* of the Inquisition were deliberately theatrical, drawing enormous crowds and exhibiting strikingly carnivalesque attributes. The condemned (of the Spanish Inquisition, at least) wore paper bishop's mitres for their procession as a sign of degradation, a practice with its roots in the medieval Feast of Fools (Bethencourt 267; cf Harris 148-49, 157, 209). The carnivalesque Feast of Fools, and perhaps more so its secular counterparts such as the Kalends (Harris ch.1) and the carnival aspect of the commedia offer tantalising glimpses of the potential common ancestry of both the commedia and the *auto-da-fé*: a bifurcation that led in two contrary ideological directions, namely the celebration and the condemnation/destruction of the body. Nevertheless, beyond such genealogical speculation, the moment

* See the *Scenarios* of both Scala and Cotticelli *et al*, in which such instances are too numerous to list here.

of their birth is unquestionably historically concordant and, as I have argued, ideologically dichotomous.

It is also significant that not only did the commedia dell'arte and the Roman Inquisition share a common birth, but also fell into decline together. Both saw their heyday in the Mannerist and Baroque periods of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and both fell into irrevocable decline in the eighteenth as a direct result of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment's focus on psychologism and a renewed interest in physiognomy were entirely incompatible with the mask (Goldoni, *Memoirs* 200). The increasing empiricism, combined with the acceleration of humanism towards secularism, resulted in a growing suspicion of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and a severe decline in its power (Bethencourt 416-39). The masked commedia was a reaction against the Inquisition and its dogmatic rejection of the body, placing the carnal, with all its vices, at the very heart of human existence. The enthusiastic use of commedia masks by revellers of all statuses at the Venetian Carnivale, including Prince Ferdinand of Bavaria in 1579 (Katritzky 95), is testament to this. The mask's anathematic status is confirmed by the fact that the wearing of masks, even in Venice, was banned during Lent, the ten days before Christmas and on Christian feast days (Johnson 50). The commedia dell'arte grew out of the same theological and epistemic soil as the Roman Inquisition, thus their destinies were inextricably intertwined, both falling victim to the same cultural and epistemological shifts. The mutuality of their decline, just as their birth, was, I contend, inevitable.

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