A Mythic Heroine in *Der Rosenkavalier*

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Abstract

This paper explores the *Allomatische*—Strauss and Hofmannsthal's concept of transformation by means of taking risk—through its application to *Der Rosenkavalier*'s Marie-Therese (the Marschallin). The *Allomatische*'s very apparent presence throughout Strauss and Hofmannsthal's collaborations in their “mythic” operas, urges its examination in *Der Rosenkavalier*. This paper explores the Marschallin's risk in context of gender, arguing that her self-acceptance as an ageing woman is an exceedingly brave act, that in-turn transforms her. In this paper, a character study of the Marschallin in Act I before the transformation, and after in Act III is presented and corroborated by interspersed musical examples. A comparison with other characters, both male and female, further establishes the gendered context of the Marschallin's risk. In conclusion, the Marschallin's brave risk of self-acceptance as an aging woman transforms her, and places her in the pantheon of Strauss and Hofmannsthal's mythic heroines.

Keywords

opera, gender, *Der Rosenkavalier*, the Marschallin, Richard Strauss

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Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal were fascinated with the theme of transformation. Two of Strauss's tone poems, *Tod und Verklärung* and *Eine Alpensinfonie*, deal with the subject, and it is central in many of Strauss and Hofmannsthal's collaborative works.¹ Hofmannsthal wrote, "Transformation is the life of life itself, the real mystery of nature as creative force. Permanence is numbness and death. Whoever wants to live must surpass himself, must transform himself."² Their so named 'mythic operas' illustrate what both saw as a truth of life: that real transformation is only possible through surmounting great risk, and that it is through transformation that one ultimately becomes worthy and capable of mature love—a selfless love. In Strauss and Hofmannsthal's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Ariadne is transformed by

¹ Bryan Gilliam, "The Strauss-Hofmannsthal Operas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Strauss*, ed. Charles Youmans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 124.

² Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Ariadne-Brief*. As cited by Bryan Gilliam in "The Strauss-Hofmannsthal Operas," 129.

reaching out and selflessly embracing one who she thought was *death*, but instead is transformed and attains love and healing from him, who turns out to be Bacchus. In *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, the Empress is unable to love because she is trapped between the spiritual realm and mortal world. She must obtain a shadow, an allegory for earthly life, before the “twelfth moon” in order to save the Emperor’s life and become capable of love. The Empress takes a leap of faith and refuses to take away another person’s humanity, and through this risk she earns a shadow of her own along with the ability to participate in mortal love. In *Die ägyptische Helena*, a magic potion causes Helena’s husband to forget her infidelity. Helena chooses to live honestly and risks the fatal wrath of her husband by offering him a potion of remembrance. Her courageous act transforms her, rendering her worthy of her husband’s forgiveness.³ The secondary element of transformation is also demonstrated through these examples where the *transfigured* characters obtain the fundamental power to impact those around them. In *Die ägyptische Helena*, through Helena’s transformation her husband is also changed, as Helena’s blatant honesty urges him to choose forgiveness over jealousy. Through this mutual transformation they both become worthy of each other’s love. In *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, the Empress’s selfless decision not to take away a person’s humanity for her selfish goodwill tangibly impacts the world of mortals. Hofmannsthal referred to this element of mutual transformation, that the transformed have the power to change those around them, as *das Allomatische*.⁴

³ Gilliam, “The Strauss-Hofmannsthal Operas,” 129.

⁴ Beth Hart, “Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s Accidental Heroine: The Psychohistorical Meaning of the Marschallin,” *The Opera Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1999), 431.

There is another Strauss-Hofmannsthal heroine who embodies this concept of transformation through courageous risk: the Marschallin, from *Der Rosenkavalier*. While considering *Allomatische* in *Der Rosenkavalier*, a work which predates the aforementioned operas, the popular impulse is to apply this concept to Octavian's development from immature boy to man, arguing that his transformation constitutes the principle character arch.⁵ This however, is misguided; by the standards of Hofmannsthal and Strauss, the Marschallin is the only character in the opera who takes an action courageous enough to truly change herself. By renouncing her young lover Octavian, she courageously accepts herself as an *ageing woman*, and is thus transformed. Furthermore, this change enables her to impact the lives of those around her. Unlike the previous examples of *Allomatische*, where danger plays out on a mythic scale, the Marschallin takes a risk that is inextricably tied to her gender.

Gender, Age, and Isolation

In the case of the Marschallin, the risk she takes is one of self-acceptance, due to all its consequences. Given her cultural position as an aristocratic woman in 18th century Vienna, accepting herself as an aging woman is not just a matter of vanity. Here, it *does* constitute a significant risk since self-acceptance as a woman who is no longer young, carries with it a multitude of implications that weigh heavily on her psyche. Loss of youth becomes synonymous with ugliness, implicating the older Marschallin as

⁵ Gilliam, "The Strauss-Hofmannsthal Operas," 123.

undesirable, unwanted, and worthless.⁶ The ultimate result entails being isolated and ostracized on personal and societal levels. As her Act I monologue demonstrates, she is all too aware of what happens to women who age; her vision of herself being mocked as an old woman vividly depicts this cruel future. Later, she admits to Octavian that she occasionally gets up in the middle of the night to stop all the clocks. The profundity of her fear of time passing, and its effects on women cause her to act irrationally. On some level, even young Sophie is aware of these effects, substantiating a gendered social norm within *Der Rosenkavalier's* Vienna. To quote musicologist Alan Jefferson, "The harmony gives Sophie, in Acts II and III, words whose seriousness links her with the Marschallin, while their intention—she wants the moment to last forever—leads to sad thoughts about the future."⁷

In contrast to the Marschallin's temporal preoccupation, epitomized by her Act I monologue (*'heut oder morgen...'*), Och's outlook gives the male perspective on time.⁸ Jefferson states, "Man is not subject to the seasons as animals are, nor is Ochs concerned with the silent passing of endless time... he rejects all that... he celebrates the moments in which this peasant girl or that comes alive in her fashion and gratifies him."⁹ As Jefferson helpfully points out, *man* is not subjected to time in the same fashion as woman. The lack of care for time's passing in men correlates directly to their value and dignity not being conditional to the

⁶ Alexandra Krawetz (2016) "Performing Feminine Aging: The Marschallin's Body in *Der Rosenkavalier*," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 9: Iss. 1 (2016). 4.

⁷ Alan Jefferson, *Richard Strauss, Der Rosenkavalier*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 116.

⁸ "Today or Tomorrow."

⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

ephemeral qualities of beauty and youth. Octavian's behavior can be read in a similar vein, as Jefferson also highlights, "Octavian has more Ochs in him than he could afford to admit... trusting like Ochs that his ingenuity will somehow see him through the unforeseen difficulties."¹⁰ In fact, this "ingenuity" is a misattribution of the benefits of male privilege, a future without fear, to their own merit. The women of the opera can place no such faith on the future being kind to them. That the Marschallin and Sophie share anxieties about time and future while neither Ochs nor Octavian do, leaves no doubt that this fear is uniquely female, and intimately tied to misogyny. Thus, we see that the Marschallin's leap of faith to accept and love herself as she is, regardless of what that may entail, does constitute a significant act worthy of transformation.

Given that the Marschallin's character development centers on her struggle with self-loathing stemming from misogyny, it is unsurprising that her character resonates so strongly with female opera-goers. In a letter to Strauss, Hofmannsthal described how a Czech noblewoman responded to the Marschallin's character at a reading of the libretto, "Princess Lichnowsky[']s response] will show you how strongly women feel about this, how they, who make up such an important section of our public, look upon the whole vivid unfolding of the action from the point of view of the Marschallin."¹¹ Scholar Beth Hart suggests that this was not unintentional on Hofmannsthal's part, noting that "[m]ore than any other writer of his time, Hofmannsthal sought to

¹⁰ Jefferson, *Richard Strauss*, Der Rosenkavalier, 118.

¹¹ Richard Strauss and Hugo Von Hofmannsthal. *A Working Friendship: The Correspondence between Richard Strauss and Hugo Von Hoffmannsthal*. Translated by Hanns Hammelmann and Ewald Osers. (New York: Random House, 1961), 49.

escape misogynist tendencies by creating a new image of woman and marriage.... It was no coincidence that Hofmannsthal's Marschallin appeared at the dawn of the women's movement, when men were inventing evidence of women's inferiority on biological, moral, and intellectual grounds."¹² Hart continues to describe the Marschallin's, "combined strength, steadfastness, and commitment to others with intuitions about life that were needed to transcend humanity's darker side." To illustrate the Marschallin's transformation, what follows are some examples from Acts I and III. These serve to contrast her character before and after her courageous leap, as well as to contextualize her actions in the liminal space between.

The Marschallin in Act I

The opera opens with an orchestral *Einleitung* which provides the audience with an impression of the Marschallin even before the curtain rises. The first theme associated with the Marschallin is a chromatic line of "weaving contour" played by the violins, Ex. 1a.¹³ Strauss's use of indirect chromatic contour in association with the femininity of a high strings timbre signify and emphasize the Marschallin's gender. The theme also presents several essential musical elements which will be associated with her, and represents her relationship with Octavian.¹⁴ Her theme is heard closely on the heels of Octavian's, but remains subordinate to his, while the two contrast each other in instrumentation and

¹² Hart, "Strauss and Hofmannsthal's Accidental Heroine," 420.

¹³ Krawetz, "Performing Feminine Aging," 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

character.¹⁵ His theme is tonally unambiguous and direct, played by a chorus of French horns in a high tessitura—a masculine allusion to “the hunt” [Ex. 1b]— while the Marschallin’s theme takes an indirect approach, through chromatic motion in the violins.¹⁶ A large part of the audience’s understanding of the Marschallin and her femininity is thus in contrast to Octavian’s masculinity. At this stage, the Marschallin is not presented as an *independent* entity.

Example 1a. The Marschallin’s first theme.

Example 1b. Octavian’s theme.

¹⁵ Krawetz, "Performing Feminine Aging," 9.

¹⁶ Norman Del Mar, "Synopsis and Analysis" in *Richard Strauss, Der Rosenkavalier*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 21.

Later in the *Einleitung*, a second theme [Ex. 2] is introduced, which becomes extremely important to the Marschallin's character. This theme is associated with her renunciation of Octavian, along with the past he represents.¹⁷

Example 2. The Renunciation Theme.

Through this motif, the acerbically chromatic music of Act I hints that the Marschallin may be subconsciously aware of what will eventually happen to her but does not yet have the courage to face the truth directly. Del Mar notes that when the older Marschallin counsels Octavian to take the rose to the younger Sophie, there is sadness to her melody, potentially indicating that she is aware of the danger and insecurity of sending Octavian to Sophie.¹⁸

Later in the opera, the Marschallin is depicted as unable to face the uncomfortable reality of her age yet again. Strauss orchestrates the scene where she has her hair done as a parodic minuet, employing a florid flute solo which alludes to an early 18th

¹⁷ Del Mar, "Synopsis and Analysis," 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

century “period-tableau”.¹⁹ Significantly, the moment where the audience most explicitly sees the Marschallin engaging in beautification rituals is during this scene. By placing her beauty rituals within a period piece—a static, lifeless thing that fails to capture present reality—the Marschallin's beautiful, young self is also symbolically placed in her past. When the new coiffure is revealed to her through a reflection, she complains to the hairdresser that he has made her into an old woman (“*Heut haben Sie ein altes Weib aus mir gemacht*”).²⁰ In this, she demonstrates her disapproval not just of what she sees in the mirror, but also of her discomfort with who she is—the source of her anger is much deeper than a mere bad hair day. Soprano Lotte Lehmann's thoughts on the passage give insight into the Marschallin's true feelings, “These words must vibrate her whole helpless resignation disguised as wounded pride. She plays the injured one...but in her heart she has realized that it is through no fault of the *friseur* that... she has changed into a tired old woman. Her irritation is an escape, nothing more.”²¹ At this moment, despite her frustrations and feelings of helplessness against time and age, she has yet to do anything about it. After the Marschallin dismisses the gathered crowd, she is left alone on stage, and only the audience is made privy to her transition from her public to private self. The music becomes more intimate. In anticipation of the upcoming monologue, Strauss pares the orchestra down to a chamber ensemble.²² The Marschallin's exasperation with the male ego of Ochs, and the patriarchal world which allows mediocre men to

¹⁹ Del Mar, “Synopsis and Analysis,” 37.

²⁰ “Today you have made an old woman out of me”

²¹ Lotte Lehmann, *My Many Lives*. Cited by Norman Del Mar in “Synopsis and Analysis” in *Richard Strauss, Der Rosenkavalier*.

²² Del Mar, “Synopsis and Analysis,” 40.

woo young women and then discard them, overwhelms her. In her disempowered state, she resigns herself and sings, "*Ist doch der Lauf der Welt.*"²³ Here, she feels that there is nothing she can do and remains passive in the face of frustrating injustices.

The monologue that follows is the most crucial moment in the Marschallin's character development. During this scene she initiates her metamorphosis and changes from a passive woman, ill-at-ease with herself, to a woman of incredible strength and power. Strauss gives the audience a window into the Marschallin's search for thoughts and feelings through musically discontinuous figures in the score, with disjunct phrases emulating the disjunction in the Marschallin's thought.²⁴ Musicologist David B. Greene describes the passage as "having the shape of ruminations. The music is a metaphor not so much for the Marschallin's thoughts as for her searching for a thought... A mood is occurring to her and the music lets it happen to the listener as well."²⁵ The audience continues to follow the Marschallin as she initiates the transformative process by daring to verbalize her deepest fears for the first time in the opera. She sees herself in Sophie.²⁶ She reflects on her younger self and wonders how 'little Resi' could have become the same person as the present, old Marschallin. She then has a vision of herself, old and ugly, being looked at and jeered by a crowd, as represented by heavy, thudding basses alternating with mocking fragments from the violins. It is telling that the Marschallin has such profound anxiety about being seen in a state

²³ "It is just the way of the world."

²⁴ David B. Greene, "Der Rosenkavalier," in *Listening to Strauss Operas: The Listener's Multiple Standpoints*, (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1991), 76-77.

²⁵ Greene, "Der Rosenkavalier" in *Listening to Strauss Operas*, 78.

²⁶ Hart, "Strauss and Hofmannsthal's Accidental Heroine," 422.

of ugliness. She finally confronts the reason for her discomfort with herself; since she will inevitably age and be seen as ugly, she will be cast out from society and end up isolated and alone. The Marschallin realizes that accepting her aging self also means accepting the risk of a solitary future. It is here, following a moment of clarity, that the true transformation begins. An oboe plays her renunciation theme [Ex. 2] as she sings, “*Und man ist dazu da, dass man's erträgt. Und in dem "Wie"... da liegt der ganze Unterschied.*”²⁷ The word ‘*wie*,’ which is already distinguished with quotation marks, is accompanied by an octave B $\flat$ in the harp, underscoring her realization and acting as the quotation marks in the soundscape of the scene (Example 3).²⁸

Example 3. Harp octave.

I. Harfe.

(seufzend)

282

Marschallin.

daß man's er - tragt.

Und in dem „Wie“

Having confronted her deepest anxiety as an aging woman, she weighs this fear against her new understanding: in order to move forward she must accept what is out of her control and take hold of what she can. She thus resolves to take control of her ‘grace’ as she terms it, her actions, and her personhood. Her interaction with Octavian upon his return to the stage already indicates beginnings of change. He repeats his love theme from earlier, but it fails to shake her from her meditations as her renunciation theme [Ex. 2]

²⁷ “And one is here to endure it. And in the “how” ... there lies the whole difference.”

²⁸ Del Mar, “Synopsis and Analysis,” 41.

continues to echo in the orchestra.²⁹ Octavian tries to recapture their former mood of lighthearted romance, but it is too late since the transformation has begun. The Marschallin is between selves, having become a liminal figure, she is neither the woman to whom he made love the night before, nor the one who will gracefully nudge him towards Sophie in the final act.

After confessing that she sometimes gets up in the night and stops all the clocks to allay her fear of time, she voices her changing perspective to Octavian. The accompanying harp and celesta play a pulsing accompaniment that illustratively slows, with the orchestra finally coming to rest on an ominous *D* minor chord on the word '*stehn*'—to stand. This rearticulates her earlier realization about herself: that which stops moving, ceases to be alive. In order to continue her life as her full self, she cannot stop, and she must move forward with time. Further demonstrating her change in perspective, she continues singing that time is ultimately part of something higher and should not be feared: "*Allein man muss sich auch vor ihr nicht fürchten. Auch sie ist ein Geschöpf des Vaters, der uns alle erschaffen hat.*"³⁰

Octavian, too young and boyish to understand the Marschallin, finds her meditations frustrating. A new musical idea [Ex. 4] emerges as she entreats Octavian not to be like other men; other men, like her husband who leaves her alone and unloved, or like Ochs, who treats women like objects to be discarded when they are no longer young and pretty. She is disgusted by men's short-lived, fatuous love that is entirely dependent on the youth

²⁹ Del Mar, "Synopsis and Analysis," 42.

³⁰ "And yet one should not be afraid of it. Time is a creation of the Father who has created us all."

and beauty of women. Her use of the diminutive 'Taverl' along with Ex. 5 indicates how she finds his nature childish.³¹

Example 4. Music accompanying the Marschallin's rebukes of Octavian.

Though the Marschallin's transformation of self-acceptance has been set in motion, she is still fearful of what lies ahead, as is apparent from her attempt to call Octavian back almost immediately after she dismisses him. Her anxiety about this new phase of life and her new self, manifests in her desire to return to the way things were, even if only briefly. But it is too late, since Octavian is gone and she cannot stop the transformation. The act finishes with an "autumnal coda" that recapitulates Octavian's theme [Ex. 1b] and her monologue music as she allows herself to mourn the loss of Octavian, and her former self.³² Hart notes that "the Marschallin's goodbye to Octavian in Act 1... symbolizes not only what she is losing but what kind of person she is and wants to be."³³ The music revolves around *E* major—Octavian's key, before ultimately settling in *E* $\flat$ major—the key of the Marschallin

³¹ Del Mar, "Synopsis and Analysis," 42.

³² *Ibid.*, 45.

'autumnal' is a rather appropriate description, autumn being the season of transitions and farewells

³³ Hart, Strauss and Hofmannsthal's *Accidental Heroine*," 425.

(not coincidentally Strauss's heroic key).³⁴ The Marschallin finally sees and accepts herself fully the way she is. A solo violin, the instrument earlier associated with her femininity, holds a high *E♭* until the curtain falls, a symbol of her continuing transformation, fully herself, and courageously alone.

The Marschallin in Act III

The Marschallin's re-emergence in Act III as a transformed woman is made more dramatic through Strauss's use of continuity in music, and its strategic rupture.³⁵ The first section of Act III is set as a lively tarantella, played ceaselessly by the orchestra until right before the Marschallin's entrance. It stops abruptly, directly before the Marschallin's reappearance, and creates a musical and dramatic void in the narrative as well as in the audience's musical consciousness. The Marschallin then enters filling the vacuum. Most importantly, she is stepping into a void of her own; Greene notes that "the world in which she lived and thought and felt in Act One has been so changed by the events... that it does not exist any longer."³⁶ Just as her previous world no longer exists, neither does the woman who existed in it. She sweeps on stage accompanied by the full orchestra, her renunciation theme [Ex. 2] now transformed into a lush, grandiose gesture befitting of the new Marschallin.³⁷

³⁴ Krawetz, "Performing Feminine Aging," 11.

³⁵ Greene, "Der Rosenkavalier" in *Listening to Strauss Operas*, 79.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁷ Del Mar, "Synopsis and Analysis," 67-68.

In the final trio, her renunciation theme [Ex. 2] is heard combined with itself repeatedly. This symbolic polyphony underscores the actual moment when she must renounce Octavian. Significantly, this music is also set alongside the motif which underscored her rebuke of Octavian as “childish” [Ex. 4], representing her rejection of immature, selfish love. She promises to love Octavian “in the right way”, in a selfless way, even if it would ultimately cause her pain, as it necessitates her to relinquish her young lover. Thus, the Marschallin shows herself to be capable of true, mature love, characterized by its selflessness. Far beyond simply romance, this type of love could only be given by someone fully transformed, in contrast to the immature, ‘childish’ love of Octavian, which is self-interested. Furthermore, while Octavian continues to be unaware of anything besides his new love interest, Sophie is in awe of the Marschallin and can hardly believe her kindness. *Der Rosenkavalier* is full of parallels between Sophie and the Marschallin's younger self, encouraging the audience to read Sophie as a young Marschallin. Here, this narrative device is exploited: ‘little Resi’, embodied by Sophie, is so in awe of the ‘venerable Marschallin.’ The implication is that the Marschallin’s younger self would hardly recognize the changed woman before her. The disconnect in the two selves is not a physical one, but rather an emotional transformation stemming from her self-acceptance. With her last words in the trio (“*In Gottes Namen*”) sung to Ex. 2, the Marschallin fully renounces Octavian, and her former self.

In the final act, the Marschallin demonstrates that her transformed sense of self informs and controls how she views matters around her. Drawing on her courage and grace, she accepts Sophie and Octavian in a grand gesture of nobility and love. Her

transformation in the first act has strengthened her, and it is that strength that allows her to make the sacrifice of renouncing Octavian for the young couple's sake. Her kindness and love for them is facilitated by her decision to bravely move forward into an uncertain future where she has accepted both age and solitude. As a result, the Marschallin upholds the secondary element of *Straussian* transformation (Hofmannsthal's *Allomatische*), in which she, the transfigured, impacts those around her by neatly pulling strings and sorting a pleasant *fin* for all characters in the opera. Hart describes her effect on the scene, "Having crossed the threshold into the higher life and discovered her connection to the whole, the Marschallin is richer for knowing the depth and power of her love. With it she changes the destiny of Sophie and Octavian and, by extension, the social fabric."³⁸ Octavian and Sophie's love duet provides the audience with yet another moment that further highlights the Marschallin's mature nobility. The duet is musically simple, and here Strauss uses close-voiced thirds, associating them with childish love, as they express their feelings in equally simple words [Ex. 5].^{39, 40}

³⁸ Hart, "Strauss and Hofmannsthal's Accidental Heroine," 431.

³⁹ Heather Hadlock. "The Career of Cherubino, or the Trouser Role Grows Up." In *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, ed. Mary Ann Smart, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 90.

⁴⁰ Del Mar, "Synopsis and Analysis," 77.

Example 5. Octavian and Sophie's final duet.

In contrast to the noble, mature love of the Marschallin, Octavian and Sophie's love is two-dimensional. Will either Sophie or Octavian ever become capable of the kind of noble love that the Marschallin has shown them? The music suggests it is unlikely, as elements from the passionate overture reappear in this duet, adding a sexual undertone to the otherwise innocent exchange. Similar musical evidence throughout the opera implies that Octavian may never achieve such transformation, and instead point to him becoming another Ochs.⁴¹ With time, it seems possible that Sophie will undergo a transformation of her own, given the parallels drawn between her and the Marschallin.

In examining the Marschallin in Acts I and III, it is clear that she is truly transformed, and through this process greatly affects the lives of others. Hofmannsthal described Empress Maria Theresia as a powerful woman in touch with her whole self, writing, "She cannot arbitrarily leave aside her heart and conscience, the whole woman was in everything she did."⁴² Like her namesake, the transformed Marschallin's strength and power

⁴¹ Michael Kennedy, *Richard Strauss: Man, Musician, Enigma*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 169.

⁴² Brian Coghlan. *Hofmannsthal's Festival Dramas*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 310.

comes from the wholeness of self-acceptance. She cannot access that power while in a fractured state, her heart and mind in the past and her body in the present. The Marschallin, in risking loneliness by accepting herself as an aging woman, rises above the constraints of time and misogyny, which places her alongside Ariadne and Helena as a transformed mythic heroine. A powerful man? Everyday. A powerful woman? Mythical.

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