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Is truth more interesting than fiction? The conflict between veracity and dramatic impact in historical fiction

Abstract:

For those writers who use lives within fiction there is a constant tension between portraying the truth about a person, as closely as that truth can be known, and the creation of the dramatic narrative. This tension is highlighted when recent historical research reveals that accepted knowledge about certain characters is questioned and may be erroneous. I wish to examine two such instances that impact significantly on the way I portray both Heloise and Hildegard of Bingen, who are two of the main characters in my thesis novel.

Biographical note:

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Her thesis is based on the lives of Heloise, Hildegard of Bingen and Eleanor of Aquitaine. She has published three novels, short stories and nonfiction.

A reconstruction of an historical figure and of the world of his time written in the first person borders on the domain of fiction, and sometimes poetry; it can therefore dispense with formal statement of evidence for the historical facts concerned. Its human significance, however, is greatly enriched by close adherence to those facts. (Yourcenar 1986: 251)

Writers of fiction who choose to rely heavily on historical characters or events have certain advantages over those who write purely from their imagination. Because historical persons are notable in some way they are intrinsically interesting. Their characters and the main events in their lives have already been established, and there is often a degree of reader prior-recognition. These advantages come with constraints, which act as impediments to a writer's creativity. The writer must conform, to a large degree, to what is already known about the characters or the historical events. Imagination comes into play in filling in the gaps, or ascribing motivation to the characters. For example I may suggest reasons why Joan of Arc fought the English army, but I cannot insist that she was, rather than a soldier, a pacifist who stayed on the farm tending her geese. That would have had to be another Joan.

History and literature are closely allied. As Russel B Nye points out when describing the relationship between them:

... was assumed that history and literature were not only branches of the same tree, but that they both stemmed closely together from the main trunk of human knowledge. (1996: 123)

Ann Curthoys and John Docker in their study of the relationship between history and fiction do agree that historians are seeking truth, although 'the temptation to declare that the historian can objectively establish the truth about the past is to be resisted' (2006: 5). Even so, as Nye points out, there are different expectations placed upon historians and writers.

While we require from both the historian and the literary artist this creative act of imagination, we demand of the historian additional tests of the validity of his view of what things mean. (1996: 156)

I do not wish to enlist, on either side, in the battle between historians and novelists. What I would like is to suggest a foray which may at first glance seem a minor skirmish, but which may significantly affect the way in which a writer portrays people who once lived, particularly famous people. An identity or event may become embedded in general knowledge and be the basis of depictions in films, novels and drama so that it enters folklore. When historical research contradicts this image the writer faces a choice – to continue the generally accepted view of the person or event, or to use the latest discoveries as a foundation for a different portrayal.

The earlier reference to Joan of Arc as a soldier conforms to our known and accepted understanding of her identity. What if a new understanding of her character or her life based on impeccable research emerges, one that is far less exciting, dramatic or spectacular than the one built up and accepted over centuries? Must writers base their historical fiction on a creativity that continues to respect truth (as far as this may be

ascertained) as do historians in their accounts? The answer to this question refers us back to the ‘branches of the same tree’ that grow from a single trunk.

Writers who are not trained as historians can still equip themselves sufficiently to make an informed judgement about the conclusions which historians draw from their research. In choosing a person or era as the focus of a novel, writers must do their homework to gain familiarity with the subject. From that basic platform they may consult more detailed work by reputable historians. While writers cannot claim to undertake the work of historians unless they have also undertaken training in that discipline, they may make reasoned and informed judgements on the evidence offered by them. In the context of their creative writing the final responsibility as to acceptance or rejection of various theories and statements by historians lies with the writers. It is, after all, their creation. Historians who disagree may object, and often do. Leopold van Ranke took exception to the novels of Walter Scott, on the grounds that they were historically inaccurate, although, as Curthoys and Docker remind us, he did grudgingly appreciate Scott’s novels:

In his ‘Autobiographical Dictation’ (November 1885), a year before he died, Ranke noted that the ‘romantic-historical works’ of Sir Walter Scott, which found a reception in all languages and all nations, contributed principally toward awakening a participation in the deeds and achievements of the past’. Scott was important for inspiring a nineteenth-century interest in history, and his novels were, Ranke admits, ‘attraction enough for me, and I read these works with lively interest ...’ [But] he found himself ‘offended’ by the way Scott had knowingly created historical portraits that ‘seemed even in particular details, to be completely contradictory to the historical evidence’. (2006:61)

The comments by Ranke on Scott’s work reflect on the focus of this paper. How does a writer access and assess relevant information, and to what extent is a writer then compelled to adhere to the historical evidence when writing fiction? History writing makes different demands. Are writers justified in ‘creating portraits contradictory to historical evidence’ if, by this choice, they achieve other effects which pertain more directly to their craft.

Régine Pernoud, in discussing history and fantasy, continues the attack on writers:

Someone will raise in objection the great successes of historical literature; but precisely when someone like Shakespeare recreates Henry V, he does so by respecting the truth of that person, so that history is revealed to us. Much more debateable is someone like Walter Scott, imposing an image of Louis XI that has nothing in common with the Louis XI of history – even if that image has managed to slip even into scholarly textbooks! (2000:141)

There is no conflict for an historian presenting new evidence in an orderly, reasoned and scholarly presentation. This is what historians do. Writers, following the dictum of ‘show, don’t tell’, have to be imaginative and ingenious in acknowledging that longstanding preconceptions about an historical person are now deemed to be false.

In my thesis novel I draw on the lives of Heloise, Hildegard of Bingen and Eleanor of Aquitaine. In each instance my research has led me to discard certain preconceptions

about their lives; preconceptions that I imagine would be still held by the general public. Here are two examples.

The first pertains to Heloise's age and family circumstances. The story is well known. Heloise was the pupil of Abelard. They met when she was a teenager, in some accounts as young as fourteen, fresh from a monastery, a gifted scholar, but unsophisticated in the ways of the world and of men. Abelard was the most famous teacher in Paris. He was more than twenty years older than Heloise, and he took advantage of her youth and immaturity to seduce, and eventually abandon her. This is how they have been portrayed in history books and in fiction.

Marion Meade describes Heloise as being fourteen (1979: 16). Helen Waddell describes her as seventeen (1954: 10). In a review of a musical program 'based on the most famous lovers of the Middle Ages, Abelard and Heloise', Heloise is described as being seventeen (Ball 2004: 17). Régine Pernoud, while not giving a precise age, refers to Heloise as being '*cette jeune fille*' (this young girl) (1970: 77).

The image of a young Heloise who had been educated in the sheltered environment of a monastery, a naïve and susceptible Heloise, faced with a charismatic, handsome, sophisticated philosopher, famous for his brilliance as well as his songs, which are sung all over Paris, gives the novelist exciting possibilities. The characters are writ larger than life, and dramatic narrative is almost guaranteed. What hope did Heloise have of resisting his seduction? Did she want to resist? Of all of his many qualities, which particular one would she have found irresistible? Or was it a combination of all of them?

In this scenario Abelard can be cast in a very unfavourable light. He failed in his duty of care towards his pupil. He seduced a young girl. Were such a situation to occur today Abelard would find himself before the courts facing a term of imprisonment. If Abelard had requested to marry Heloise, the age difference would not have been considered a problem, nor would her youth. Getting married was acceptable behaviour. Becoming a man's mistress, and bearing him a child out of wedlock most certainly was not.

A certain mindset has been established by presenting Heloise as a young girl through the word 'adolescent'. Abelard refers to Heloise as a young girl. Betty Radice comments in the following footnote:

None of the conjectures about Heloise's birth and parentage can be proved, and as she was a young girl (*adolescentula*), it can only be assumed that she was about seventeen at this time, and born in 1100 or 1101. (1974: 66)

However, Michael Clanchy explains this term differently:

At the time of his seduction of Heloise, Abelard described himself as 'pre-eminent in grace and youth and form' whereas she was an 'adolescent'. The year was probably 1117. He was then in his late thirties and she was younger, though not perhaps much younger. In using the terms 'youth' and 'adolescent' he was evoking the commonplace of the Seven Ages of Man. Beginning as an 'infant', the individual progresses to 'boyhood' or 'girlhood', and then advances through 'adolescence' and 'youth' to the maturity of 'manhood' ... Thus Abelard described himself as an

‘adolescent’ ... in c.1102 or c.1103, even though he was least twenty-two or twenty-three. So he was not necessarily being vain in describing himself as a ‘youth’ when he first met Heloise. Indeed, she told him he was ‘adolescent’ at this stage of his life. Many women envied her, she remembered, and she understood this: ‘For what perfection of mind or body did not adorn your adolescence?’ (1999: 173)

And Constant Mews writes:

The tradition that she [Heloise] was born in 1100, and thus was only a teenager when she met Abelard, is a pious fabrication from the seventeenth century, without any firm foundation. In 1115, she is more likely to have been around twenty-one years old, while Abelard was then thirty-six. (2005: 59)

How old, then, was Heloise when she met Abelard in 1115 or 1116? Clanchy gives Heloise’s birth date as 1090 (1999: 173). James Burge gives it as 1095 (2004: xiii). William Levitan lists it as ‘1090 or slightly before’ (2007: xixn7). The discrepancy of ten years in Heloise’s age makes a big difference to how she is to be portrayed. Recent research suggests the 1095 date the most likely, and this makes Heloise in her early twenties when she became Abelard’s pupil, significantly older than she has been depicted in earlier history books, novels, plays and operas.

Of equal importance to her age are the circumstances of Heloise’s parents and family. Social status would rigidly settle her place within the secular and religious hierarchy. One view is that she was an illegitimate ‘poor relation’. In this paper I can give only a summary of the various theories, but as with her age, her social status influences the way she is understood and portrayed, and the way her contemporaries would have regarded her.

Apart from her mother’s name (Hersinde, sometimes written as Hersint or Hersindis), mystery still surrounds the circumstances of Heloise’s birth, and her parentage, although we can safely assume that she was of noble birth. How noble is an important question. Brenda Cook, a genealogist, examines a number of theories concerning Heloise’s birth, in which most agree on the name, if not the identity of her mother. There is a paucity of information concerning her father, except to suggest that because his name is never mentioned Heloise was probably illegitimate. This does not necessarily follow for in those times many men acknowledged their illegitimate children and made provision for them. The fact that her father is not named may mean that he was too ordinary to merit mention.

Mews and Werner Robl, who have both recently published on this subject, agree that Hersinde was connected to the Montmorency family, that she lived in the Loire Valley and that she was the first prioress of Fontevraud, having become a disciple of Robert d’Abrissel, the charismatic and controversial monk who established Fontevraud as an abbey for both men and women. Neither of these scholars makes the claim that Robert d’Abrissel was the father of Heloise, although they admit that it is possible. Is this a proposition to be taken seriously? Were it so, it would add tremendous interest to the story of Heloise, because of the intense interest in him and the fact that he attracted opposition as well as admiration. He could be considered almost as a ‘mirror image’ of Abelard. While Heloise is famous for her relationship

with Abelard, she could be equally famous for being the child of two remarkable people who were the subject of rumour, controversy and admiration.

Robl states that the death of Heloise's mother is recorded in the necrology at the Paraclete, and through this he links her to Hersind (or Hersindis) of Champagne (2003: 53). He suggests three possibilities for Heloise's father. It may have been one of the followers of Robert d'Abrissel, who called themselves the Paupers of Christ, an insignificant nobleman or the lecherous Fulk IV, Duke of Anjou, who forced his attentions on Heloise's mother after she became a widow. Although he makes no specific claim regarding Robert d'Abrissel, Robl does not exclude him as the father of Heloise:

His [Robert's] 'sleeping with women' had aroused public anger, as the censure of Marbodd of Rennes, who was a personal acquaintance from his time in Angers, proves. Robert has to have exerted a certain attraction on Hersindis, otherwise she would not have sought contact with him: Robert on his part had chosen Hersindis out of hundreds of women as his closest confidante. (2003: 55)

[hatte doch sein „Beischlafen unter Frauen“ öffentliches Ärgernis erregt, wie die Rüge Marbods von Rennes, eines persönlichen Bekannten aus der Zeit in Angers, belegt. Robert muss auf Hersindis eine gewisse Attraktion ausgeübt haben, sonst hätte sie nicht Anschluss bei ihm gesucht; Robert hatte seinerseits Hersindis aus Hunderten von Frauen als seine engste Vertraute erwählt.]

Mews takes exception to Robl's conclusion that Heloise was illegitimate. He suggests that Hersinde, may have remarried, and borne a child before becoming a follower of Robert D'Abrissel.

Another possibility is that Hersende remarried after the death of William [of Monsoreau, her husband], gave birth to Heloise, but then lost her second husband in around 1096, perhaps on the first Crusade ... The silence of the charters of Fontevraud about any subsequent marriage of Hersende ... should not be taken as conclusive ... (2006: 127)

This theory also puts Heloise's date of birth closer to 1095.

The possibility that Robert d'Abrissel may have been Heloise's father rests on a number of possibly unconnected events, and while an historian may not consider any of them conclusive, it is still very tempting to introduce him into my novel in that role. Robert was in Angers in 1093 until 1095 when 'he fled the city to set up a hermitage at La Roë in the forest of Craon' (Mews 2006: 122). Could there be any connection between Robert's withdrawal into a forest as a hermit and the need to do penance for an act of moral failure? Could that failure have been a sexual relationship with Hersinde? Mews cites Baudri as emphasizing that Robert 'never indulged in the lasciviousness of youth but "embraced radiant chastity in as far as he was able".' Could 'as far as he was able' indicate a momentary lapse, which did not negate an overall chaste life? It was after this time that Robert established Fontevraud, and appointed Hersinde as prioress, some time before 1104. Perhaps even more telling is the fact that just before Robert d'Abrissel died in 1116 he asked to be buried at

Fontevraud with ‘my good assistant [Hersinde], who gave counsel and labour in the construction of Fontevraud’ (Venarde 2006: 122).

This conjecture has implications well beyond historical interest for a novelist. If Heloise had a connection with the Montmerency family it gave her social status above that of Abelard. Robl certainly suggests this. He also outlines similarities between Hersinde’s administration of Fontevraud and Heloise’s at the Paraclete. Abelard was acquainted with Robert d’Abrissel and Fontevraud, and Peter the Venerable, also from the Loire Valley, refers to a brilliant scholar by the name of Peter, long before Abelard had become famous. It is plausible to accept this comment as being a reference to Abelard as a very young man.

This all raises the question as to whether Heloise had at least known of Abelard long before she went to Paris. Could the motivation for the move to Paris from Argenteuil have been her desire to study with Abelard? As a woman, she could not have been a formal scholar but she would have been able to attend his lectures when they were held in the open air. As we know, her uncle arranged for her to be tutored by Abelard. Was this his idea, or at her request?

This version of Heloise’s beginnings, based on recent research, differs greatly from earlier theories. Heloise now presents as a young woman of some social status, well connected through, at least, her mother. She is also the daughter of a mother whose later life had been somewhat unconventional, and this, with Heloise’s reputation as a scholar, may have been enough for her to be regarded as exceptional.

Certainly recent research gives new dimensions and potential to the portrayal of Heloise, whether in a biography, or literary fiction. One of the keys to our interpretation of her personality and motivations is the age when she first met Abelard. Another key is her social position. If, as is now suggested, she was of a more noble family than Abelard’s, this would reflect on the nature of their relationship. If she had known of Peter Abelard’s brilliance even when she was a child, how strongly would this have motivated her to wish to have him teach her? This new research allows a writer to present Heloise and Abelard in ways that have not been done before – a different approach to a woman who earned admiration during her lifetime and has continued to be esteemed ever since. My challenge is to portray this ‘new Heloise’ convincingly to readers who are more attuned to the earlier portrait of a young girl with a brilliant mind but a regrettable pedigree.

The question concerning the requirement to draw on new findings by historians, and abandon what has been accepted earlier, is equally compelling in my second example – that of Hildegard’s early childhood. How old was she when she first entered the small stone cell at the abbey, with only Jutta and one other young servant girl as companions? Sabina Flanagan, sets the scene in traditional terms:

A late autumn day, the light fading, people jostling to get a view of the Abbot of Disibodenberg, and the monks carrying smoking torches and conducting a young woman and two others, one a mere child of seven, all three veiled and wearing the nondescript clothing of female religious, to a small building adjacent to the church. Funeral dirges accompany the procession; the four figures disappear through a narrow doorway. A short time later the abbot re-emerges alone; the doorway is

blocked up, the torches are extinguished, the people drift away; darkness and silence. (1996: 2)

This description of Hildegard of Bingen being virtually entombed at the age of eight is a stark one, suggesting threads a novelist may use to weave an enthralling story. How did she feel, leaving her family at such a young age to live in a small stone walled edifice from which there was no escape, no sunshine, no company other than Jutta, an austere holy woman, and another young girl whose task was to do any cleaning, while Hildegard and Jutta spent their days in prayer? How could a child in such circumstances become educated enough to do all that Hildegard did during her long life? However, recent research has shown that it is more likely that Hildegard became a nun at the age of fifteen after she and Jutta had spent some years being educated and prepared for religious life at the home of Uda, a pious widow.

The main sources are Hildegard's biography, written by Gottfried and Theodoric, and Hildegard's own references to her childhood in *Scivias*. It is from these that the image of the young child being strictly confined with an older woman are drawn. This picture of was reappraised when the *Life of Jutta* was published. Mews accepts the authority of this new version.

My understanding of Hildegard's early years, and thus her debt to tradition, deepened when I came across a recently published edition of the Life of Jutta, discovered in a late medieval legendary by Franz Staab, but written in the mid-twelfth century, before Hildegard had become famous. This text, unknown to Barbara Newman and Sabina Flanagan when they produced their monographs of Hildegard in the late 1980s, presented the image of a traditional, world-denying recluse, very different from that given of Hildegard by her twelfth century biographers. It had not been realized that Jutta was only six years older than Hildegard when both were formally enclosed as recluses at Disibodenberg in 1112. (2004: 87)

We need to be aware that there are two separate accounts of Hildegard's childhood, and that our view of her formative years will vary enormously depending on which version we accept. In 1999 Flanagan revisited the question of Hildegard's age when she was first enclosed. In doing so Flanagan acknowledges that:

The actual age at which Hildegard left home and was dedicated to the religious life is vitally important for our understanding of her – indeed, that the question of whether she was around eight years of age or fifteen has profound psychological, if not spiritual, implications for her subsequent career. (1999: 2)

One of the arguments supporting the authenticity of the *Life of Jutta* is that much of the detail matches that found in the Disibodenberg Annals. In examining these two documents, rather than accepting that the *Vitae Juttae* influenced the entries in the *Annals* Flanagan concluded that it was the other way around:

Yet, tempting as it may be to conclude that the *Annals* depend for their information on the *Vita Juttae*, I believe that closer examination of the two texts points in the other direction, namely that the *Vita Juttae* has, when it comes to dating of Jutta's life events, taken a hint from the *Annals* and worked it into the comprehensive account we now have. (1999: 91)

This conclusion is based on the ‘spirit of the text’ as well as similarities between stories and terminology.

My first reaction was one of relief when I read Flanagan’s conclusions after revisiting of the issue, but on careful rereading I found myself unconvinced by some of her arguments. For example, Flanagan quotes from two stories, one in the *Annals* and the other in the *Vita Juttae*, recounting a miracle involving a monk who was suffering from ‘temptations of the flesh’. It is because of the repetition of this term in both stories that Flanagan concludes that one was copied from the other. Flanagan fails to acknowledge that ‘temptations of the flesh’ was common terminology in monastic literature. Just one example among many can be found in Book Two of the *Dialogues: Life of St Benedict*. The title is, ‘How he overcame a great temptation of the flesh’, and then we find the term is subsequently used twice: ‘and forthwith the holy man was assaulted with such a terrible temptation of the flesh, as he never felt the like in all his life’ and ‘it is plain, Peter, that in youth the temptation of the flesh is hot’. The use of such a term in two different stories is no indication that one imitated the other.

To do Flanagan justice this is just one example and she does deal with the *Vita Juttae* in some detail ‘in order to dispel the notion that it provides evidence for rejecting the long-accepted chronology for Hildegard’s life’ (1999: 91).

There are other scholars who no longer accept that earlier chronology. John Van Engen, writing in 1998, concluded that while Hildegard was offered up by her parents at the age of eight, she entered the monastery, with Jutta at the age of fifteen. He recognises the significance of those years, from the age of eight to fifteen, when Hildegard was living with Jutta at the home of a widow:

This crucial span of six years, often conflated in later reports, has confused historians. Much is at stake here. As a noble girl Hildegard remained connected to her familial household in some way until they could locate a fitting situation ... At adolescence they then found for her a holy refuge and social alliance. They asked that she be joined to the daughter of the ascendant Count Stephen of Sponheim, to become a recluse at St Disibod. These years at home made a difference, even if she was early set apart in some way. Through her fourteenth year Hildegard experienced the life of a court and a village and ever after possessed an uncommon knowledge of court, and family as well as of nature, agriculture and sexuality. (1998: 32)

Van Engen also makes the point that once the young women were received into St. Disibod, although their lives were ‘withdrawn and meditative’ they were exposed to a steady stream of visitors due to Jutta’s fame as a holy woman. The monastery was still being restored throughout that period and there would have been workmen and activity around them. By 1136, because seven more young women had joined them, the area in which they lived and prayed was enlarged. This was the year when Jutta died and Hildegard became Magistra.

The above discussion is also extremely important in deciding how to portray Hildegard. On balance I am inclined to believe that there is more evidence supporting the view that the account in the *Vita Juttae* is the more accurate one, and that

Hildegard was either fifteen or seventeen when she became a recluse at the abbey. In either case she would not have been a young child.

My first drafts of the novel included accounts of Hildegard expressing claustrophobia and extreme fear of being strictly enclosed again. After accepting that this probably never happened I was faced with the question of whether I could persist with this view, given its dramatic narrative potential, or work with what I now accepted was closer to the actual events. The question nagged. If I was writing fiction, did it matter? Because I wanted my novel to be as historically correct as possible, it did. To do otherwise would make a mockery of the years spent researching. This particular problem was solved to my satisfaction when I suddenly realised that the threat of something may be even more traumatic than the event actually occurring. Sometimes our apprehensions are more severe than the thing we dread. Galileo did not need to be tortured, only shown the torture chamber, before he recanted. Jutta, yearning for martyrdom, or to be a pilgrim, or anything that would extravagantly evidence her love for God, may have proposed that both she and Hildegard become anchoresses immediately. Family influence and common sense would have prevailed, but not until Hildegard, knowing of the plan, had spent some time contemplating life in what amounted to a prison cell. As an imaginative child of eight, or ten, she would have been filled with horror at the idea, yet felt helpless to do anything but submit to her parents and the Sponheim family.

To return to the question: to what degree should a writer of historical fiction adhere to the truth? If the writer makes a serious claim to have based the novel on historical research then it is important to be as historically accurate as is possible. To be less is to lack credibility. Integrity and judgement are also required in assessing the strength of any historical evidence presented before accepting or rejecting it.

That I choose, for example, to portray Heloise as older than convention has previously dictated, and from a better family, yet deny myself the narrative power of making her Robert D'Abrissel's daughter may seem a contradiction. Simply, it is a matter of judging the strength of the evidence. If neither Robl nor Mews are prepared to claim that there is even a strong chance that Robert d'Abrissel was Heloise's father I am reluctant to do so on the strength of the evidence so far. The evidence concerning her age and social status is much stronger, and I feel not only justified, but also compelled to use it.

The alternative is to base the novel loosely on historical figures, but make no claims whatsoever to authenticity. Names, places and even countries could be changed, while the dramatic elements of the story could be utilised in the plot. A child anchoress, even one who has visions and writes books and composes music, does not have to be Hildegard of Bingen. A young woman, bedazzled by her popular and exciting teacher, does not have to be Heloise. If, however, the story is using the name, circumstances and reputation of historical characters I believe that it is dishonest not to meld the story around the known facts, including the most recent research.

There may be writers who would disagree with this proposition, and say that if the novel is fiction then there is no need to adhere to any particular fact. The important thing is to create an eminently readable novel. This approach may facilitate others to

an innovative approach to the text, even a postmodernist treatment, and is not to be discounted or condemned. I can sympathise with this view, but in my thesis novel I believe that I have an obligation to not only write as fine a novel as I can, but, in presenting it as an historical literary fiction, to adhere as much as possible to what has been discovered about the main characters, their lives, culture and history.

Yourcenar refers to the reconstruction of an historical figure having human significance that is enriched by adherence to the facts. I agree with this. Stories of real people have a particular validity for readers. This validity springs, to a large extent, from their close reference to reality. Respecting this the writer of literary historical novels cannot afford to deviate significantly from the historical record.

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