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Varieties of Supernatural Depictions

Classics in Contemporary Media

Abstract This article proposes several conceptual frameworks for examining the widespread use of classical intertexts depicting the supernatural in popular media. Whether the supernatural is viewed as reality or simply a trope, it represents the human capacity and desire to explore worlds and meanings beyond the obvious and mundane. Representations of classical gods, heroes, and monsters evoke the power of mythic stories to probe and explain human psychology, social concerns, philosophical questions, and religious beliefs, including belief about the paranormal and supernatural. The entertainment value of popular media allows creators and audiences to engage with larger issues in non-dogmatic and playful ways that help them negotiate tensions among various beliefs and identities. This paper also gives an overview of the other articles in this journal issue, showing overlapping themes and patterns that connect with these tensions. By combining knowledge of classical myths in their original contexts with knowledge about contemporary culture, classical scholars contribute unique perspectives about why classical intertexts dominate in popular media today.

Keywords Myth Theory, Classical Mythology, Supernatural, Paranormal, Afterlife

INTRODUCTION

This essay explores four questions: Why do narratives, images, and characters from the classical world continue to infiltrate popular media's representations of the supernatural to such a large extent? How are these depictions related to popular beliefs about the supernatural today? What types of supernatural realms and experiences are highlighted in contemporary media that reflect the ancient classical world? And what can classical scholars add to discussions about the presence and meaning of the supernatural in popular media?

I will argue that classical intertexts in popular media provide important ways for audiences and creators to negotiate tensions they feel about the supernatural – between belief and disbelief, between mixed goals and intentions, between private and public identities, and between the past and the present. My engagement with the other articles in this journal issue will further demonstrate the importance of the intersection between classical texts and the supernatural.¹ While many people tend to think of popular media mostly as a vehicle for providing entertainment and escapism, scholars like Suzanne Keen in her 2007 *Empathy and the Novel* have asserted the importance of fictional narratives for promoting thoughtful understanding of the self and the other that works toward better social and personal relationships.² Though more work has been done on the value of literary fiction over other genres and media such as comics or video games, Keen and others believe it is a mistake to limit the kinds of fictional narratives that serve this important societal function only to those with high literary value.³ This debate intersects with arguments about how to define 'popular culture', which in turn overlap with discussions about the genres and nature of

1 My paper is influenced by all the participants at the Classics and Supernatural Conference that took place at the Isle of Wight in July, 2022: Dan Curley, Frances Foster, Lynn Fotheringham, Hunter Gardner, Javier Martínez Jiménez, Helen Lovatt, Lisa Maurice, Maxwell Teitel Paulie, Amanda Potter, Stacie Raucci, Janice Siegel, Connie Skibinski, Emma Stafford, Anise Strong, Chiara Sulprizio, Guendalina Taietti, and Rocki Wentzel. Thank you to each of them for their thoughtful papers and fruitful discussions, along with the extended papers in this volume.

2 Keen (2007) ix–xi. For an argument why the fantasy genre should be taken seriously, see Stephan (2016) 11–4.

3 As each new medium/genre has come to the attention of scholars since World War II, the importance of popular media for understanding societal patterns and interests is evident: in film and TV, see Brady/Cohen (2016); for comics, Hatfield/Beaty (2020); for ani-

‘popular media’.⁴ While postmodern critics have broken down the categories between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art in the last several decades, Marxist theorists still dominate discussions about mass and popular culture, focusing on issues of hegemony and class structure, which ignore to a large extent why the supernatural appeals to mass audiences, though this question is crucial for understanding the prevalence of this phenomenon.⁵ Six dominant functions emerge for the use of the supernatural in popular media in both the texts discussed in this journal issue, as well as in other current favorites: (1) providing entertainment; (2) probing the human psyche – our fears, desires, etc.; (3) examining social concerns and problems; (4) explaining philosophical or religious truths; (5) putting forth and also questioning popular beliefs about the paranormal and supernatural; and (6) exploring other possible constructs of reality and the mystery of the unknown.

MYTH, RELIGION, AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Surveying and organizing the functions of the supernatural in popular media for this project makes apparent how these categories overlap with the ways myth functions, especially in connection with the classical myths and mythical figures explored in this journal. My interest in classifying supernatural depictions in popular media relates to my long-time fascination with theories about myths, their origins, forms, functions, contexts, and content. In ‘Medusa and Perseus, and the Relationship between Myth and Science’, I briefly outline a history of myth theories and definitions as background for exploring why science cannot replace mythmaking, even in a secular world.⁶ In this paper, I look at the other

mation studies, Dobson et al. (2018); for video games, Wolf/Perron (2003). For popular genres such as science fiction and fantasy, James and Mendlesohn have Cambridge handbooks for both (2003, 2012); and other speculative fiction genres are important for highlighting ecological, Latino, and African narratives (Wolf-Meyer (2019)).

4 For an overview of definitions and interpretive theories of popular culture, see the 9th ed. of Storey’s seminal textbook (2021).

5 For an exploration of why most discussions of popular culture are inadequate since they come from narrow ideological and historical perspectives, see Parker (2011).

6 Toscano (2016).

side of perennial questions raised about myths' origins and purposes, exploring how stories containing supernatural elements highlight questions about the intersection of myth and religion to show how recent retellings of classical myths provide mechanisms for addressing contemporary religious questions outside of traditional frameworks and institutions.⁷ Richard Buxton, in his 2004 *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, states the cultural importance of myth succinctly: 'A myth is a socially powerful traditional story.'⁸ Importantly, the most influential new 'literary' myths with a potential for a lasting influence, such as *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, or *Twilight* are permeated by the supernatural, whose functions in these contemporary stories overlap with the functions of traditional myths in significant ways.

In a concise and thought-provoking 2005 book, *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong situates the origin of mythology at Neanderthal gravesites that 'suggest some kind of belief in a future world that was similar to their own.'⁹ From this evidence, Armstrong extrapolates 'five important things about myth': (1) it is 'rooted in the experience of death and the fear of extinction'; (2) it is accompanied by ritual and sacrifice; (3) it is about the limits of human experience; (4) it 'puts us in the correct spiritual or psychological posture for right action'; and (5) it speaks of 'another plane' or 'invisible' realm of the gods or the supernatural.¹⁰

It is helpful for this analysis to compare Armstrong's list of myth's characteristics with Rollo May's list of myth's contributions set forth much earlier in his 1991 *The Cry for Myth*. There he outlines how myths (1) give us 'our sense of personal identity', helping form our sense of self; (2) 'make possible our sense of community'; (3) 'undergird our moral values'; and (4) deal with the 'inscrutable mystery of creation'.¹¹ While there are several overlapping features in these assessments of myth and its functions, the idea that mythic stories deal with the 'limits of human experience' and 'the mystery of creation' is striking. It may be the presence of the supernatural in imaginative works that leads to the edge of

7 See Segal (2004) for another overview of the history and nature of myth theories.

8 Buxton (2004) 18. Cf. Burkert's classic definition of myth (1979) 23: 'a traditional story with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance.'

9 Armstrong (2005) 1.

10 Armstrong (2005) 3-4.

11 May (1991) 30-1.

the metaphysical abyss, the boundary of the underworld, of the subconscious, of the psyche, urging the contemplation of existential questions. It does not matter whether the supernatural is viewed as reality or simply a metaphorical trope; in either case, it represents the human capacity and desire to explore worlds and meanings beyond the obvious and mundane. While Sarah Iles Johnston, in her 2018 *The Story of Myth*, resists the scholarly tendency ‘to define ‘myth’ in any absolute and final way’, still she is willing to assert that ‘stories’ in general ‘can coax us to look beyond the witnesses of our five senses and imagine that another reality exists, in addition to the reality that we experience every day.’¹² She goes on to argue that only stories ‘can produce the *effect* of reality whether what the stories say is real or not.’¹³

Both Armstrong’s and May’s books are directed toward a popular, if educated, audience with the purpose of persuading people how myths are still vital for today’s world, and not just false stories. This may be the reason why both writers want to explain what myths contribute to the general populace on both personal and societal levels, focusing more on the functions of myths than their interpretations. In contrast, scholars dealing with theories about myths focus more on contexts and approaches for interpretation. Though Robert A. Segal’s 2004 *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, which is part of the extensive Oxford Short Introduction series, also could be described as more popular, still he focuses on the intersection between myth and other disciplines, showing the ways myths have been interpreted.¹⁴ There is also a significant overlap between Segal’s approach to myth and John Storey’s approach to examining popular culture. After an introduction showing the difficulty of defining ‘popular culture’, Storey’s remaining chapters deal with theories of interpretation, such as Marxism, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Race Studies, Material Culture, etc.¹⁵ All these theories obviously can be helpful in analyzing the supernatural in popular media as well. However, for this study my purpose is to look at the functions of classics and the supernatural as outlined above, because these thematic categories seem more helpful in explaining why the supernatural

12 Johnston (2018) 6, 10.

13 Johnston (2018) 10.

14 Segal’s chapter headings show his approach: Myth and Science, Philosophy, Religion, Ritual, Literature, Psychology, and Structure. For other scholarly approaches, see Csapo (2005) and Lincoln (1999), who both focus on myths as ideologies of dominant cultures.

15 Storey (2021).

is so dominant in popular media today and why classical tropes and stories remain at the forefront.

In their 'Introduction' to their 2015 *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts*, editors Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Irene Berti explore the intersections of magic, religion, myth, and the supernatural in the reception of ancient texts. While Christian and Enlightenment thinkers have wanted to create a strong barrier between 'primitive' magic and 'rational' religion and philosophy, Carlà-Uhink and Berti show how this dichotomy is slippery and ignores the complex history of Greek and Roman traditions where magic is embedded in religious beliefs and practices. They argue that the modern 'reception of ancient magic and the supernatural is quite independent from the ancient concepts connected to them, and is a product of the visions of the receiving culture.'¹⁶ Carlà-Uhink and Berti further argue that myths are also embedded in ancient Greek and Roman religions as 'experienced' phenomena that 'were therefore an important part of the collective consciousness of the supernatural.'¹⁷

THE SUPERNATURAL VS. THE PARANORMAL

To explicate the varieties of supernatural depictions in contemporary media, the supernatural should be differentiated from the paranormal, which is a commonly employed term in media studies. While the terms 'supernatural' and 'paranormal' are sometimes used interchangeably, they arise with different histories and contexts. 'Supernatural' is a word medieval in origin, appearing around 1425; whereas 'paranormal' first appears in 1905, according to the OED, which defines supernatural as: 'Belonging to a realm or system that transcends nature, as that of divine, magical, or ghostly beings; attributed to or thought to reveal some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature; occult, paranormal'. In Christian contexts, the OED states that 'supernatural' is used 'with reference to the divine', while 'paranormal' is defined as: 'Designating supposed psychical events and phenomena such as clairvoyance or telekinesis whose operation is outside the scope of the known laws of nature or of normal scientific understanding; of or relating to such phenomena'. Accordingly, the supernatu-

¹⁶ Carlà-Uhink and Berti (2015) 7.

¹⁷ Carlà-Uhink and Berti (2015) 11.

ral encompasses the paranormal, while the paranormal extends the meaning of supernatural to render it more compatible to many in the contemporary world, whose imaginations are influenced, and sometimes limited by, the reigning paradigm of scientific materialism. For these reasons, supernatural phenomena are more often linked with ‘fantasy’, whereas paranormal experiences are seen as possible, even if unlikely.

Before explaining why the term ‘supernatural’ is better suited than ‘paranormal’ to examine classical intertexts, it is helpful to see how scholars are dealing with the upsurge in contemporary paranormal depictions. In her 2011 book, *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture*, Annette Hill asserts that scholars should take the paranormal seriously, to see it as more than a current fad. She observes that the ‘paranormal has gone mainstream’ and explores how it is not simply a fringe phenomenon. People over a wide range of ages and educational backgrounds participate variously in ways that overlap with paranormal beliefs and practices: astrology, tarot readings, hauntings, psychic healings, and shamanism, to name just a few. Hill argues: ‘What is different today is that paranormal beliefs, ideas and practices are less associated with religious thinking and more about lifestyle trends.’¹⁸ Hill’s study expands the frame of reference from the mere psychological to the sociological/cultural by looking at popular media in broader contexts. Her focus on audiences shows the interplay between consumers and producers because market demands create revenue streams for content creators in various media, encouraging an ever-increasing number of depictions and products that borrow from paranormal phenomena.¹⁹ The attractiveness of both supernatural and paranormal depictions in popular media marks the topic as socially significant.

The statistics on the acceptance of paranormal beliefs show that it is ‘on the rise’ over the last two decades with ‘almost half of the British population, and two-thirds of Americans, claiming to believe in extrasensory perceptions and hauntings’, as well as in witchcraft, according to Hill.²⁰ This accords with the conclusions of more recent studies such as the Chapman University Survey of Americans’ ‘fears’ that traced the rise of American beliefs between 2016

¹⁸ Hill (2011) 12.

¹⁹ Whether it is the forces of capitalism that are creating the interest in popular media or whether it comes from the grass roots, the argument is circular in nature, according to Parker (2011) 153–8.

²⁰ Hill (2011) 1.

and 2018, as well as the British ‘Statista’ study of 2021.²¹ Both these polls reinforce an earlier Gallup survey that documented the four dominant paranormal beliefs: haunted houses, ghosts, communication with the dead, and witches. The Chapman 2018 study also shows a rise in the belief that aliens have come to earth in both ancient and modern times; more people now believe in creatures like Bigfoot and werewolves. The recent British study also shows that the age group between 18–34 is more likely to believe in the paranormal than the group of 55+.²² Hill notes that gender plays a part in which types of beliefs are more common. ‘Women reported more beliefs in astrology, extrasensory perception, new age practices, psychic healing, and superstitions. Men reported more beliefs in UFOs, extraterrestrial aliens, and extraordinary life forms’.²³ All of this is happening while traditional religion and traditional science are being questioned.

Hill explains that right along with a rising belief in the paranormal is an upsurge in skepticism. This has been true for a long time in what I refer to as the Scooby Doo effect. *Scooby Doo* is the title of an animated cartoon series that originated in 1969 and ended in 1976 with later spin-offs, movies, and reboots that are still running. The basic premise of each episode was always a variation on a single theme; namely, that for every conjectured, havoc-causing, supernatural phenomenon (e.g., a ghost, a haunting, a monster, a witch, etc.), the canine hero, Scooby Doo, comes to the rescue to reveal that it is not supernatural at all, but a rationally explainable hoax.²⁴ A similar pattern can be found in the popular British who-done-it television series, *Midsommer Murders*, with its 20 seasons. This

21 Watt & Wiseman note that surveys around the world reveal similar statistics: ‘about fifty per cent of people hold one or more paranormal beliefs’ and about half of these people claim they have had a ‘genuinely paranormal experience’ (2009) 12.

22 Chapman (2023), Statista Report (2022), and Gallup (2023) (accessed January 16, 2023).

23 Hill (2011) 41. A longer list of paranormal beliefs discussed in Hill is helpful for the larger issues in this study: telepathy, angels, aliens, clairvoyance, remote viewing, psychokinesis, psychic healing, precognition, altered states, extrasensory perception, divinatory arts (astrology), esoteric systems of magic and magical spells, new age therapies like crystals, spirit communication, reincarnation and other Eastern ‘mystico-religious’ beliefs, angel communication, legendary monsters, time-travel, deus ex machina, the uncanny, monsters, hybrid creatures, devils, occult, horoscopes, astrology, faith healing, gods, ghosts, afterlife, underworld: Hill (2011) 38–44.

24 Though the 2023 animated series *Velma* is based on the character from the original Scooby Doo franchise, it eliminates the famous dog and the typical plot. It has received bad reviews from critics and audiences alike.

show sometimes presents villains who stage deaths as if caused by the occult but that are later exposed by inspector Barnaby and his constable as common murders committed by natural means resulting from malignant human motives. Of course, it would not be a murder mystery if the crime committed could not be detected and solved rationally. Nevertheless, these episodes present the persistent question that haunts the contemporary imagination about whether the supernatural or paranormal constitutes a genuine element of reality.

Hill documents the concurrent rise in skepticism alongside the rise in paranormal belief. Many important scientists, psychologists, journalists, and stage magicians have made public critiques of paranormal beliefs and their dangers.²⁵ Hill argues, in reply, that if scholars simply dismiss belief as a sign of gullibility, delusion, and ignorance, they will fail to see how belief engenders new systems of understanding the world.²⁶ Hill explains: ‘new forms of cultural practices emerge which emphasise personal experience as proof of the paranormal. And in the cycle of culture, new products, services and events connect with a never-ending search for unique experiences.’²⁷ Hill’s focus on audience shifts the argument to what the paranormal in popular media allows audiences to do and how it gives them permission to explore and play with beliefs. Some studies show that people do not want to be perceived either as an ‘extreme believer’ or as an ‘extreme sceptic’, which are dual and often rival identities for many people today. Through popular culture, ‘people learn how to play with paranormal concepts as related to, but also separate from, paranormal beliefs in society.’²⁸

As rational academics, we may feel uneasy about the rise in paranormal beliefs as a sign of the rise of irrational forces in society that have the potential to increase chaos and mayhem. But paranormal and supernatural interests may also indicate a contemporary desire to find new paradigms for creating existen-

25 Hill lists the following critics: the late American professional skeptic James Randi, psychology professor Richard Wiseman, journalists Ben Goldacre and Jon Ronson, psychology professor Chris French, and illusionist Derren Brown (2011) 10.

26 Wiseman (2017) is skeptical and sees the danger, but he is also involved in the scholarly study of paranormal claims. Academic researchers at the University of Virginia argue that it is non-scientific to ignore the thousands of paranormal reports and that some objectivity about the reality of such claims must be retained by scholars. See Kelly & Kelly (2007) xvii–xxi, 1–46.

27 Hill (2011) 64.

28 Hill (2011) 43

tial and religious meaning in a world that feels unmoored from the past and from traditional religious structures.²⁹ As the poet W. B. Yeats predicted 100 years ago, ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; ... And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?’³⁰ Depictions of the paranormal and supernatural in popular culture explore what that “rough beast” may be that is challenging traditional belief structures.

CLASSICS AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Hill’s study is a good framework for exploring how classics and the supernatural function in popular culture. Art in general, and storytelling in particular, allow people to explore beliefs and to play with identities in a way that is non-dogmatic, fluid, and evolving. The term ‘supernatural’ seems better suited for defining and examining the use of classical myths and tropes in contemporary media than does the term ‘paranormal’, because it encompasses the paranormal and also includes gods and divine figures that dominate classical myths and extend the meaning of the supernatural.

Classical culture as revealed in popular intertexts is a natural bedrock for reimagining the supernatural for four reasons: (1) It contains ready-made and often recognizable images and stories that are multivalent and thus ripe for new interpretations. (2) It avoids strictly Christian religious materials with their attendant baggage. But importantly, classical and Christian references often intertwine in popular culture (as seen in this journal issue) with the result that the presence of the classical recontextualizes Christian images to expand toward broader contexts and meanings. (3) With its inherent polytheism, classical culture lends itself to an eclectic, syncretic mixture of mythologies from many cultures that is so appealing to contemporary audiences: Classical, Celtic, Egyptian, Finnish, Norse, Native American, Asian, etc. (4) It provides a framework for exploring the inter-relationship of the natural and supernatural realms in a broader way than the paranormal. Even for those who do not literally believe in the supernatural,

²⁹ Statistics show the rise of the ‘nones’, both non-believers but also those who may see themselves as spiritual on some level but do not connect with any institution. See Pew (2021) (accessed January 16, 2023).

³⁰ Yeats (1994) 158–9.

it remains the perfect trope for exploring possible new worlds and new ways of thinking. It also interrogates whether the tension between metaphor vs. reality is a helpful construct. Where does the supernatural or the paranormal take place? Can either be psychological states that possess some species of mental reality? And, in either case, how do they relate to the uncanny?³¹

The next section of this essay explores how the supernatural, mythic, and paranormal function in classical intertexts by explicating the plots, themes, and characters that appear in the texts examined in this journal issue (with some additions from popular media not discussed). These examples can be categorized thematically in the following ways: (1) the afterlife, including the classical underworld, ghosts, and katabatic journeys; (2) the eclectic interplay of Christian, classical, and other mythological characters and tropes from various cultures; (3) ancient gods and figures in mythic fantasies; (4) monstrous females, superhuman and otherwise, with feminist critiques; (5) and clearly modern paranormal representations, including belief in extraordinary and hybrid creatures. The fact that all the texts in this journal issue involve more than one of these categories illustrates intertwined themes that show present beliefs and concerns about the supernatural.³²

THE AFTERLIFE, THE CLASSICAL UNDERWORLD, GHOSTS, AND KATABATIC JOURNEYS

Because the most common beliefs today about the supernatural or paranormal involve haunted houses, ghosts, and communication with the dead, it should be no surprise that depictions and connections to the underworld or afterlife head the list of topics explored in this journal issue, and perhaps in a wider survey of classical intertexts too. Armstrong's assertion that myth is 'rooted in the experience of death and the fear of extinction' reinforces the prevalence and centrality of this concern.³³ Whether a person believes in the afterlife or not, underworld images explore the fear of death and connections between other

³¹ For a scholarly overview of theories about *The Uncanny*, see Royle (2003).

³² While I focus on thematic topics, the genre and medium of each text discussed also shape the nature of the reception.

³³ Armstrong (2005) 3.

worlds, past and present, the inner and outer realms. The underworld can represent the unconscious, the inner self, and the exploration of the dark side of existence, including the alter ego and the human shadow. It is no accident that the term ‘underworld’ can refer to criminal cabals that stand opposed to lawful society. In a comic book like *Aquila*, which is an historical horror fantasy, the underworld can also represent a world of torment where the dead gladiator Aquila collects souls for the Devourer goddess.³⁴

The dominant presence of dark heroes or anti-heroes in popular media today also draws on underworld imagery from the classical corpus that complicates the dichotomy of good and evil. The recent and growing interest in Hades as a dark hero in popular romance (like Scarlett St. Clair’s *A Touch of Darkness*), in musicals (like Anaïs Mitchell’s *Hadestown*), and in video games (like *Hades* and *God of War*) indicates the complexity of underworld meanings. It is significant that all the papers in this issue evoke some aspect of the underworld, showing its symbolic dominance: e.g., Eugenides in the Thief series must enter into a ‘mysterious underwater temple’ to complete his quest,³⁵ and the ship Argo must be resurrected by divers plunging into a frozen lake, ‘an underwater hell-scape’.³⁶

Anise Strong’s paper, ‘The Persistence of Memory: Classical Underworlds, *Damatio Memoriae* and the Ghosts of Loved Ones’, focuses on the underworld as a way of both remembering and forgetting our dead. One of the reasons for the journey to the underworld in classical myths is to communicate with or rescue a loved one, as seen in the katabatic stories of Orpheus, Psyche, Odysseus, and Aeneas. By focusing on the immigrant experience and subsequent ‘familial traumas of separation, cultural shock, and loss of ancestral memories’, Strong explores why people might want to erase the past and ignore the ghosts of dead ancestors in her six main examples: the 2017 Pixar film *Encanto*, the 2021 Disney film *Coco*, the video game *Hades*, the 2022 film *Turning Red*, the Oscar award-winning 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, and the 2022 TV series *Ms. Marvel*.³⁷ By comparing these texts to the multi-cultural, imperial world of the first centuries of the Roman Empire, Strong highlights both the pros and

³⁴ Thank you to Lynn Fotheringham for bringing the richness of *Aquila* to my attention at the 2022 Isle of Wight conference.

³⁵ Foster (2023) 12.

³⁶ Lovatt (2023) 15.

³⁷ Strong (2023) 2.

cons of cultural assimilation, concluding that we do not necessarily have to forgive the past, but we should not forget it: ‘Intergenerational harmony can only be achieved through the preservation of both painful memories, tolerance of new ideas, and maintaining cultural traditions.’³⁸ Confronting ancestral ghosts and taking katabatic journeys, imagined and real, are necessary to negotiate these conflicts between the living and the dead, between the past and the present.

The papers of both Lisa Maurice, ‘From Olympian to Christ Figure: *Lucifer* (2016–2021)’, and Janice Siegel, ‘del Toro’s *Hellboy*: a kinder, more human Hercules’, show how the TV series and the film draw from both the classical underworld and from the extensive imagery of the traditional Christian hell. It should be no surprise, then, that the eponymous characters in both *Lucifer* and *Hellboy* mix Christian and classical imagery to interrogate the values of each worldview and the nature of heroism itself. The intersection of the old and the new acts as a crucial site for interrogating religion, constructing new meanings, and reconfiguring value systems in a contemporary context.

Maurice argues that the TV character Lucifer transitions from a trivial, immoral, immortal Olympian to a compassionate divinity, morphing from a Satan figure to a Christ figure in his psychological journey of self-discovery in the series plot arc. Through this dramatized transformation that leads at the end of the series to Lucifer’s return to hell as a healer, the nature of evil and justice is explored, as is the nature of the heroic and the monstrous. Thus, Lucifer reflects and reimagines past texts, like Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*, the lonely figure who, to many readers, is more appealing than God (as also seen in Neil Gaiman’s prototype for this series). Maurice argues that Lucifer in this series is a postmodern devil who refuses to take the blame for sin but transfers the responsibility to humans themselves. The journey of the character Lucifer shifts from a focus on the afterlife and immortality to the mortal world, the place where meaning and purpose can be found, which elevates humans above celestials and challenges traditional religious beliefs. Maurice concludes that the values promoted by the TV series paradoxically promote both self-sacrifice for others and self-acceptance that focuses on the importance of the individual: ‘By exercising their free will for good, and taking personal responsibility for their actions, mortals are elevated into superior and even supreme beings, creatures with the potential for great power.’³⁹

38 Strong (2023) 12.

39 Maurice (2023) 19–20.

Like Lucifer in the TV series, Hellboy is another redeemed devil figure in del Toro's 2004 film, which plays with Christian images of hell while incorporating Jewish apocalyptic monster figures like Samuel and the Behemoth. Siegel shows how Hellboy's appearance, characteristics, and story arc are similar to those of the classical hero Heracles. But in the end, Hellboy's superior motives and ethics, in contrast to Heracles', reveal a more enlightened and admirable character. Siegel recounts the ancient stories about Heracles to show the similarities of the two heroes: they are both sons of two fathers, pulling them between the mortal and immortal worlds; they both have phenomenal strength and power, enabling them to confront and kill supernatural monsters; and they both have powerful enemies working to undermine them. Siegel argues that it is the differences between the two heroes that mold them into very different heroes: 'Heracles' self-interest versus Hellboy's altruism, Heracles' arrogance versus Hellboy's compassion, and Heracles' embrace of his god-given destiny versus Hellboy's difficult decision to pave his own way forward' lead them to different fates, though each receive what they desire. Heracles becomes a god, and Hellboy becomes a man.⁴⁰ Both Siegel and Maurice show how the reworking of classical and Christian images and texts in popular media act as critiques of traditional religious ideas and beliefs, creating new heroes for postmodern, twenty-first century sensibilities.

ECLECTIC INTERPLAY OF CHARACTERS AND TROPES FROM CHRISTIAN, JEWISH, CLASSICAL, CELTIC, FINNISH, EGYPTIAN, NORSE, NATIVE AMERICAN, ASIAN, AND OTHER MYTHOLOGIES

Such critiques of traditional Christian beliefs are also facilitated by the eclectic intertextuality in most of the texts discussed in this volume. Strong's six texts combine Christian, Roman, classical, Native American, Chinese, and Pakistani traditional beliefs about the supernatural and afterlife that broaden frames and meanings for the examination of intergenerational conflict, which also emphasizes the similarities and differences of multiple cultures coming into contact. Lovatt explores the interplay of classical, Arthurian, Finnish, and Celtic tradi-

⁴⁰ Siegel (2023) 19.

tions. The prevalence of such examples illustrates how audiences favor eclectic representations in popular media today. The historical element of the comic book *Aquila* gives a sense of the ancient context for classical and Christian interactions and borrowings, but it also shows the eclectic mixing of Egyptian, Phrygian, and other gods from the ancient world that are so appealing in popular culture today. The interaction of classical, Norse, and Celtic mythological figures in video games like *God of War* and *Final Fantasy* are illustrative of this same trend. Permeable boundaries between realms and traditions are at play in all the examples in this volume. The interconnections among the intertwined layers of various cultures not only favors diversity; it also generates questions about the distinctions between good and evil. Immoral trivial gods from the ancient world create a basis to reject a belief in God and the divine realm here and now. Hierarchies are questioned and diverse traditions are valued, showing the current postcolonial rejection of colonial appropriation.

ANCIENT GODS AND HEROES IN MYTHIC FANTASIES

The fantasy genre uses classical mythology to create magical realms and to explore the relationships and distinctions between gods and heroes and between supernatural and superhuman characters, questioning identities and complicating boundaries between the human and divine, between old and new worlds. The ongoing popularity of Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* novels (2005–2009), along with the film franchise (2010, 2013), have introduced new generations to the appeal of classical mythology (with modern variations); while J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books with their film versions revive classical figures like the centaurs and use the Latin language to evoke a world of magic and the supernatural.⁴¹ Fantasy and the supernatural also facilitate the interrogation of the nature and power of religion, religious individuals, and institutions that can both illuminate and injure.

Frances Foster's paper, 'Gods and Magic in Megan Whalen Turner's *The Thief*', explores how the supernatural and magical elements of the story intertwine with the political, and how the novel incorporates classical elements that are both like and unlike ancient Greek texts. For most of the characters in Turner's

41 For an analysis of the classical beasts in the Harry Potter novels, see Hofmann (2015).

fantasy, religion is merely institutional practice; but for Eugenides, the Thief, the old gods arise from their cult statues to interact with him and dominate the landscape in the real world in transformative ways. In the world of the Thief, the new gods represent everyday religious practices, whereas the old gods are merely visible in obscure traditional myths. It is only when Eugenides enters the underground, underwater temple that he encounters the old gods in person in the otherworldly realm. At this point, ‘the gods bring the supernatural out of mythological legends and into the narrative action.’⁴² It is the ‘supernatural power of the gods’ that ‘transforms the narrative from political adventure to mythical fantasy.’⁴³

Helen Lovatt’s paper, ‘Resurrecting the Argo: Supernatural Re-makings in Robert Holdstock’s *Merlin Codex*’, shows how the first novel in this trilogy, *Celtika*, juxtaposes the classical with other mythological traditions (Arthurian, Finnish, and American re-makings by Nathaniel Hawthorne and the filmmakers of the 1963 *Jason and the Argonauts*) to demonstrate the polymorphous nature of mythmaking. In *Celtika*, the immortal Merlin recalls sailing with Jason when he hears of a sunken ship in a northern lake, where he then goes to resurrect the ship and the hero Jason. Holdstock uses the ship Argo ‘as a metapoetic image for the challenges and complexities of adapting a well-known story’ and bringing multiple traditions together.⁴⁴ Drawing on ancient sources, Holdstock depicts the Argo as a female divine figure who is key to the narrative arc of the novel in mediating between the characters, divinity, and liminal spaces. ‘The supernatural Argo in her union with the Finnish goddess Mietikki symbolizes the renewal of myth by hybridization.’⁴⁵ Since the character Medea is also linked with the ship, she too is a site of supernatural re-making. Holdstock reimagines Medea not as the traditional child-killer but as a clever enchantress who created the illusion of her sons’ deaths to take them away from their father. When Merlin and Jason encounter Medea at the end of the novel, Jason feels betrayed, and Merlin is left alone to contemplate the failure of their quest and heroism itself.

42 Foster (2023) 12.

43 Foster (2023) 17.

44 Lovatt (2023) 1.

45 Lovatt (2023) 37.

MONSTROUS FEMALES, SUPERHUMAN AND OTHERWISE, WITH FEMINIST CRITIQUES

The fear of women like Medea, as reflected in their monstrous and witch-like incarnations, is an ancient theme that never seems to grow old. Writings with feminist leanings by such notable authors as Mary Shelley, Christa Wolf, Margaret Atwood, and Anne Sexton, to name a few, have been re-presenting Greek myths for generations. But the recent proliferation of similar works by lesser-known authors shows a desire to retell Greek myths from the point of view of female characters, both making them central and redeeming those who have been seen as weak or monstrous. Jennifer Saint's 2021 *Ariadne* has a growing fanbase, while Madeline Miller's 2018 *Circe* is an international blockbuster.⁴⁶ It should be no surprise that Medusa has become a central focus for contemporary women and authors for re-making this female 'monster' from antiquity, as in the current 2023 bestselling and critically acclaimed novel, *Stone Blind*, by Natalie Haynes. Supernatural realms and divine females from the classical world provide ample characters for rethinking gender and gender roles in today's world.

Amanda Potter explores the complexity of female monsters in more obscure texts in her paper, 'Classical Monsters and Hero(ines) in *InSEXts*, *Eros/Psyche* and *Porcelain*'. She shows how three lesbian comic books by two women authors/artists refigure male-centered myths, examine erotic love between women, and explore the question of female monstrosity and heroism. The intersection of myth, gender, and the supernatural is a pivotal site for the breakdown of traditional categories. Using both monster theory and queer theory, Potter shows how 'comic writers can explore the blurring of boundaries between hero(ine) and monster, overturning patriarchal cultural norms as represented in classical mythology.'⁴⁷ Set in nineteenth-century London and Paris, Marguerite Bennett's 'horror' comic *InSEXts* (2016–2017) tells the stories of Brahmin-heritage Lady Lalita Bertram, who has the power to turn into a winged, butterfly-like creature that is both beautiful and monstrous, and Mariah, her Irish maid and lover, who has the power of witchcraft to defeat enemies. In both volumes of Bennett's

⁴⁶ Tartar analyzes and explores retellings of mythic and fairytale heroines in her feminist critique of Joseph Campbell. She notes the ongoing interest in classical heroines and the explosion of new tellings in the last few years, (2021) 59–78.

⁴⁷ Potter (2023) 3.

comic, brothel women in London and female artists in Paris defeat their male oppressors through graphic violence and magic to define their own lives and tell their own stories, refusing the barriers of class, race, and gender. In Marie Llovet's comic *Eros/Psyche*, the author relates the story of two schoolgirls who fall in love at a strange boarding school where they are left in a paradise world of deceit. As their tale unfolds, the girls re-enact the story of Cupid and Psyche, not knowing where or how their story will end. In contrast, Llovet's other comic, *Porcelain*, describes how the heroine Beryl breaks through a monstrous deception to become her own person as an artist. Potter concludes that these comic book retellings of classical myths and female figures blur the line between monstrosity and heroism: 'the monster is becoming the hero (or the hero is becoming the monster).'⁴⁸

In her article, "Crazy Man-Killing Monsters": the Inimical Portrayal of the Amazons in *Supernatural*'s "Slice Girls", Connie Skibinski revisits the ongoing dual identities of the Amazons, which moderns – as did the ancient Greeks themselves – love and hate, or at least fear and admire, for their power and their sexuality. In contrast to the dominant scholarly focus on positive representations of the Amazons in figures like Wonder Woman and Xena, Skibinski examines the often overlooked, monstrous depictions of Amazons as hostile women, especially as they appear in the episode 'Slice Girls' in the very popular TV series *Supernatural*. Skibinski argues that the Amazons in 'Slice Girls' are pictured as 'brutal, blood-thirsty warriors operating within a male-dominated narrative' to challenge and subvert 'the dominant contemporary trend in which Amazons are role models and aspirational figures.'⁴⁹ While the Amazon figures in 'Slice Girls' overlap with ancient Greek representations that show them as subverting patriarchal norms with their all-female societies, *Supernatural*'s Amazons are man-haters and man-killers who use their superhuman and supernatural power to destroy all men. They move from ancient female warriors to supernatural monsters (involved in occult worship and cannibalism) that the Winchester brothers must destroy to save both themselves and humanity. The 'Slice Girls' episode ends with Sam killing Emma, Dean's biological daughter from his unsuspecting union with another Amazon, before Emma can kill her own father in a bloody rite of passage. In focusing only on negative images of Amazons from

48 Potter (2023) 23.

49 Skibinski (2023) 5.

antiquity, this *Supernatural* episode reinforces a pattern that critics have observed in this popular series: women as polarized between ‘damsels in distress’ and ‘dangerous seductresses’.⁵⁰

MODERN PARANORMAL REPRESENTATIONS, INCLUDING HYBRID CREATURES

The papers in this journal issue dealing directly with typical paranormal phenomena add a significant counterpoint to the more mythical fantasies, illustrating the intersections between the supernatural and the paranormal. Siegel’s paper on *Hellboy* not only presents a figure that comes from the Christian concept of hell, but this character, along with Abe and Liz in the film, are paranormal subjects restrained and studied by government agencies. Strong’s study shows dominant beliefs about the paranormal: conjuring the dead, hauntings, and reconciliations with ghosts. But the connection between the classical world and the paranormal goes beyond the examples examined in this volume, as can be expected. For example, the “Upside Down” dimension in the popular series *Stranger Things* (since 2016) evokes the classical underworld and katabatic journeys.⁵¹

Hybrid creatures can also be categorized as paranormal since werewolves and other mythic monsters show up in lists of objects of current beliefs. But they are connected to motifs in ancient Greek myths as well, especially as depicted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. These stories deal with issues of identity and what it means to be human, as well as what it means to be monstrous and how labels can marginalize and demonize – a theme evident in the retellings of female monsters too. In the animated American cartoon *Danny Phantom* (2004–2007), the eponymous teenage hero meets hybrid monsters like the Minotaur as he struggles to save his town from ghost attacks.⁵²

Javier Martínez Jiménez’s paper, ‘Lycaon and the classical *versipelles* in MTV’s *Teen Wolf*’, shows how classical references both enrich the plots in the

50 Skibinski (2023) 13.

51 Thank you to Rocki Wentzel, whose paper at the Isle of Wight conference made these connections clear.

52 Thank you to my student Aurora Francone for bringing this text to my attention in her paper on classics in animated cartoons.

series and also work toward intertwining the monstrous and the human as they do in classical mythic transformations. He observes that the world of Graeco-Roman myth is more central in this TV series than in other werewolf depictions. Martínez Jiménez argues that while the creators of the *Teen Wolf* series consciously incorporate legends from the ancient world into their series to ‘create a rich mythos as part of their world building’, by doing so the ‘result is surprisingly different from other works of supernatural fiction.’⁵³ Werewolves in the twenty-first century are a mechanism to explore basic human conflicts and identities: what it means to be human, the relationship between wildness and reason, and how an individual can fit into a community successfully. All these tensions also relate to issues of class, race, and minority identities.⁵⁴

THE RELEVANCE OF MYTH AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Why is myth still relevant in a post-enlightenment and postmodern secular world? Why are stories with supernatural elements more than entertainment, imbuing the supernatural with mythic and religious functions? My list of uses of the supernatural in popular media show the wide range of reasons the supernatural still appeals to audiences: as entertainment; as explorations of the human psyche – our fears, desires, and identities; as examinations of social concerns and problems; as explanations of philosophical or religious truths; as presentations of popular beliefs about the paranormal; and as considerations of possible other worlds and the mystery of the unknown. No one of these purposes excludes the others since the more multivalent a text, the more levels of interpretation are relevant. Because the first four categories can also be said to apply to fiction in a realistic mode, this raises the question of what the supernatural adds and how it involves a mythic function. The presence of the supernatural always pushes levels of meaning beyond everyday concerns toward larger existential questions because of its crossovers with magic, myth, and religion. Whether the supernatural is proposed as a possible reality or as a mere trope, it allows for imaginative ways of thinking about the richness of human experiences and dilemmas in multiple ways, thus leading in scope toward the mythic realm.

53 Martínez Jiménez (2023) 22.

54 Martínez Jiménez (2023) 8.

Freudian psychoanalyst Rollo May lamented the loss of common myths in our society in his 1991 book, *The Cry for Myth*, because he saw them as the essential language through which individuals and communities form identities.⁵⁵ May, who died in 1994, was premature in concluding that contemporary society is myth deficient. The problem is not that myth is absent in the contemporary world, but that myth is often considered in too limited a way. There is ample evidence of an ongoing interest in mythic characters, images, and narratives, classical and otherwise, as this journal issue illustrates by providing a look into an enormous catalogue of texts produced since May's book came out over thirty years ago. Films, comics, cartoons, video games, novels, and an abundance of other genres and subgenres show the importance of myth and the supernatural in popular media that serve as mechanisms for the exploration of identities and beliefs. As stated by both May and Armstrong, mythic stories deal with the 'limits of human experience' or 'the mystery of creation' and death. The classical world offers a complex mixture of heroes, gods, monsters, and both earthly and unearthly elements to supply an ongoing treasure trove of supernatural or paranormal material from which to draw the broad landscape of human experience. This is illustrated in the scene on the Greek vase in Figure 1, which depicts Heracles reaching out to entice Cerberus into his chain so this hero can complete his Twelfth Labor. With Athena on the left, Heracles in the middle, and Cerberus on the right, the world of gods on Olympus above, heroes in the earthly realm, and monsters in the underworld represents the full panoply of classical allusions. And the tree and classical column incorporate both nature and culture in a cosmic framework for mythical stories.

55 May (1991) 30–62.



Figure 1 Amphora (515–510 BCE, Red-figure Amphora, Andokides Painter, Musée du Louvre F204, Paris, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/clo10269614>)

TWO CONTRASTING VIEWS OF CLASSICS AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN POPULAR MEDIA

To show how the concern with the big human questions manifests itself in two very popular contemporary novels with classical intertexts, I will contrast the use of gods and the supernatural in Madeline Miller's *Circe* with Megan Whalen Turner's *The Queen of Attolia*, the second novel in her Thief series. Both books deal with the problem of evil or violence and the misuse of power, but their approach is very different, evoking different responses. Both books are set in mythic worlds influenced by Homer, Hesiod, and other Greek writers. Amazon lists Miller's book under literary fiction, but categorizes Turner's book as young adult fantasy, not just affecting rankings, but also showing the tensions involved in how seriously fantasy or the supernatural are taken as literary productions. Both books pull readers into alternative realities – fantasy worlds if you will. At the same time, both books use those fantasy worlds to explore deeper existential questions about how we should live in the real world.

While Miller draws upon the world of Homer's *Odyssey* directly, she reworks the characters, themes, and plots in a subversive way to challenge the value system of Greek gods and heroes. Miller critiques the supernatural power of these divinities as dangerous and the status of immortality itself as the basis of their abusive treatment of mortals because the immortals live on and on with few limits or consequences for their selfish desires and actions. As Circe says to Telemachus toward the end of Miller's novel, 'Gods are ugly things.' Telemachus responds with something Circe herself told him: 'We are not our blood'.⁵⁶ In the end, Circe decides to give up her magical power and change her blood to make herself mortal, thus asserting that growing old and dying is better than immortality. She explains, 'I thought once that gods are the opposite of death, but I see now they are more dead than anything, for they are unchanging and can hold nothing in their hands.'⁵⁷ In spite of the rich texture of Miller's compelling book, her gods – except perhaps Hermes and of course Circe – are one-dimensional characters; of course, the story is told from the point of view of Circe, who sees nothing good in the gods at all. Miller presents Circe with an almost modern distaste for divinity, but that depiction is simultaneously reminiscent of Ovid's

⁵⁶ Miller (2018) 375.

⁵⁷ Miller (2018) 385.

critique of power through his cynical depiction of the Greek gods in his *Metamorphoses*.

In contrast, Megan Whalen Turner creates a world in her Thief series that looks at the supernatural and the gods in a complex and nuanced way. Though Turner's fantasy world resembles classical mythology and history in many ways, it also deviates from it significantly. As the narrator of her sixth and most recent book says, 'People are no less mysterious than the gods.'⁵⁸ In the second book of the series, *Eugenides, the Queen's Thief of Eddis*, is in the process of wooing the Queen of Attolia, whom he loves deeply, though she had cut off his hand under pressure because he was a foreigner spying on her country. While most people in Attolia 'did not invest much belief in their religion' but give lip service through sacrifices and festivals, Eugenides has seen the gods in person and felt their presence and favor.⁵⁹ So, when he thinks they have betrayed him, he demands to know why and refuses to accept the goddess Moira's assertion that the gods are not accountable to humans.⁶⁰ When Eugenides persists and asks if he has offended the gods, the answer is 'No'. At this point, all the glass in the temple where he is praying breaks, and he sees the Sacred Mountain explode in a volcanic vision of the future.⁶¹ Another goddess asks him, "what would you give to get back your hand?" "Your eyesight?" "Your freedom?" The Queen?⁶² She then tells Eugenides he has his answer, which may seem like no answer at all to moderns because it hangs enigmatically. But her statement connects with how she frames her answer: 'no god is all powerful, not even the Great Goddess.'⁶³ The convoluted tapestry of fate, choice, and necessity could not give Eugenides both his hand and the queen. He is caught between rival forces (affected by both human and divine wills). Suffering cannot be avoided without the loss of freedom and growth, even by the gods, which reflects the Homeric worldview in which the gods suffer and are not all-powerful. The limitations of Turner's gods make them believable and sympathetic, while the lack of limits for Miller's gods' renders them unsympathetic and unbelievable. Both novels show the power of

58 Turner (2020) 314.

59 Turner (2000) 349.

60 By using the name Moira for the goddess, Turner evokes classical notions of fate.

61 Turner (2000) 352.

62 Turner (2000) 356.

63 Turner (2000) 356.

retelling classical myths for rethinking contemporary issues about power and identity. And they demonstrate the non-dogmatic and fluid ways popular media explore serious questions through entertainment.

CONCLUSIONS

The title of this paper, 'Varieties of Supernatural Depictions: Classics in Contemporary Media', is an homage to the American philosopher William James, who published his groundbreaking book over 120 years ago in 1902, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Often called the 'Father of American psychology', James was one of the first scholars to use a psychological lens to explore the nature of religious experiences, which is apropos for this essay's exploration of the ways the supernatural functions in contemporary culture. A proponent of a pragmatist approach to truth and religion, James felt that truth can be verified to the extent that it corresponds with actual things and with observed results.⁶⁴ As a founding member of the American Society for Psychical Research, James participated in seances and was open to the possibility of paranormal abilities such as telekinesis and telepathy, though he did not feel they had been substantiated. For these reasons, James is re-emerging as an admired figure for his openness to various possible realms of experience beyond the strictly material.

Contemporary philosophers of religion, such as Wesley J. Wildman, also view religious experience from both a pragmatic and philosophical standpoint. In his 2018 book, *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumbblings at the Limits of Language*, Wildman says that 'our species is obsessed with trying to eff the ineffable – to limn the liminal, to conceive the inconceivable, to speak the unspeakable, to say the unsayable.'⁶⁵ Wildman continues James's project of opening possibilities beyond the merely molecular and sees language about the supernatural and divine as essential to this project. Wildman believes that liminal situations often 'drive us to the very limits of language in search of ways to say what ultimately matters to us'.⁶⁶ Other contemporary philosophers of religion, even those who

⁶⁴ See Martin Marty's 'Introduction' to James (1985) vii–xxvii.

⁶⁵ Wildman (2018) 1.

⁶⁶ Wildman (2018) 3–4.

define themselves as atheists, or at least agnostics, decry those labelled ‘new atheists’ for creating a false dichotomy, or at least an oversimplified distinction, between religion and science.⁶⁷ Like Wildman, they see questions of ‘ultimacy’ and the human search for meaning revealed in the traditional language and practices of religions. Likewise, the images and stories of myth and the supernatural provide tools for working through the basic questions of what it means to be human and how to act ethically. Good art and powerful myths are the best ways of wrestling through such questions without dogma or pretension.

What do we classicists have to add to conversations about the supernatural? We can avoid the trap of thinking of myth and the supernatural as either true or false. Rather we can emphasize myth’s symbolic power to deal with vital questions of the contemporary world in complex ways as illustrated in the papers in this journal issue. We can contribute historical perspectives that broaden discussions about the nature of popular media away from a focus on post-industrial technological societies to show the importance of understanding the longer and broader histories of popular culture in pre-industrial societies. Likewise, the wide-spread presence of classical intertexts in popular media today illuminates the multi-level functions of the supernatural in the current world. Classical scholars can bring historical tools into play by examining how mythic and supernatural intertexts have changed over time to reflect both common concerns and ever-changing perspectives. Knowledge of classical myths in their original contexts combined with knowledge about contemporary culture illuminate the ways in which the juxtaposition and interplay between the old and the new can act as a catalyst for rethinking and reimagining current human problems and possible new futures.

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