

THE FEMALE ARCHETYPES OF GREEK AESTHETICISM IN THEATER

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ABSTRACT

Aestheticism was a movement that had a significant impact on early 20th-century Greek drama, as elements of it can be discerned in certain plays by some of the most prominent Greek playwrights of the period, such as Nikos Kazantzakis, Petros Nirvanas, and Konstantinos Christomanos. The movement's female archetypes - the fatal, sensual, and dangerous woman who seduces and destroys the man, and the psychologically and physically frail and vulnerable woman - also appear in Greek theatrical works influenced by aestheticism. The present study aims to present and analyze the representation of female figures in some of these plays, as well as their reception by contemporary critics, who were strongly influenced both by feminism, socialism, and Nietzschean philosophy- dominant social and philosophical currents of the time- and by realism and ethnography, which prevailed in literary and theatrical circles.

Keywords: Greek theatre, aestheticism, woman, plays, early 20th century.

GLI ARCHETIPI FEMMINILI DELL'ESTETISMO GRECO NEL TEATRO

L'estetismo fu un movimento che ebbe un impatto significativo sul teatro greco dell'inizio del XX secolo, poiché alcuni suoi elementi sono riscontrabili in alcune opere teatrali di alcuni dei più importanti drammaturghi greci dell'epoca, come Nikos Kazantzakis, Petros Nirvanas e Konstantinos Christomanos. Gli archetipi femminili del movimento - la donna fatale, sensuale e pericolosa che seduce e distrugge l'uomo, e la donna psicologicamente e fisicamente fragile e vulnerabile - compaiono anche nelle opere teatrali greche influenzate dall'estetismo. Il presente studio mira a presentare e analizzare la rappresentazione delle figure femminili in alcune di queste opere teatrali, nonché la loro ricezione da parte dei critici contemporanei, fortemente influenzati sia dal femminismo, dal socialismo e dalla filosofia nietzscheana - correnti sociali e filosofiche dominanti dell'epoca - sia dal realismo e dall'etnografia, che prevalevano nei circoli letterari e teatrali.

Parole chiave: teatro greco, estetismo, donna, spettacoli teatrali, primo Novecento.



In 1908, when the «forbidden» *Salome* by Oscar Wilde was presented on the Greek stage¹, the intellectual world of the country warmly welcomed the masterpiece of the English writer, who was already well known². Since the late 19th century, Greek prose writers and poets such as N. Episkopopoulos and K. P. Kavafis had published works influenced by the Aestheticism movement³, which gradually gained more admirers within Greek intellectual circles⁴. According to St. Xefloudas, Aestheticism emerged as a reaction to the dominance of ethnographic literature⁵, while for L. Arambatzidou, Greek Aesthetes innovated by combining English and French Aestheticism with Nietzschean philosophy⁶.

Ap. Sachinis defines Greek aestheticism as «the influence of foreign ideas and foreign expressive modes: that of Western European aestheticism»⁷. Nevertheless, this definition is limiting, as it does not take into account the specific characteristics of Greek aestheticism that are connected to the particular conditions of Greek society in the early 20th century. These include the emergence and establishment of psychiatry and forensic science, which placed sexuality and its various manifestations under the spotlight of science in order to delineate and define the «moral» and the «immoral», the «healthy» and the «pathological», the «social» and the «antisocial»;⁸ the rise of socialism, which proposed a different approach to social relations⁹; and the emergence of the feminist issue, which was increasingly gaining ground and support among the middle and upper bourgeois classes¹⁰.

The modern Greek dramatic literature of the early 20th century was primarily focused on realism and ethnographic writing, often featuring a clear intent to critique societal institutions and traditions - especially regarding family relationships, marriage, and the role of women¹¹. At the same time, the expectation of annexing regions with Greek populations following the anticipated collapse of the Ottoman Empire fostered a surge in national and nationalist rhetoric. Combined with Nietzschean philosophy, which had become somewhat of a trend in literary circles at the time, this shaped the image of the robust Greek warrior - an image that starkly contrasted with the archetypal hero of 19th - century Aestheticist dramas.

A pivotal figure in the transmission of the movement to Greece was G. D'Annunzio, who became popular in the country early on. He visited Greece in 1895, in 1899 with El. Duse, and again in 1908. Initially recognized for his poetry and later for his novels, D'Annunzio was widely discussed in Greek literary

¹ It was performed on June 7, 1908, by the Fyrst-Nikas theater company, with Rozalia Nikas, Edmondo Fyrst, and Spyros Trichas in the leading roles (K. Petrakou, *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Greek Theater*, *Theater Studies Miscellanea*, Diavlos, Athens 2004, p. 86).

² The trial and conviction of Oscar Wilde had been published in the newspaper *Akropolis* as early as 1895, and there were numerous references in the press to his life and work (Ivi, p. 71).

³ N. Episkopopoulos (1874-1944), particularly influenced by *Salomé*, wrote *The Kiss of Assur* in 1899, while in 1909, G. Kazantzaki published her only Aestheticist work, the short story *Salomé* (L. Arambatzidou, *Aestheticism: The Modern Greek Version of the Movement*, Methexis, Thessaloniki 2012, p. 415).

⁴ In 1910, the magazine *Anemone* was published, focusing mainly on Wilde's work. Shortly thereafter, the magazines *Alki* (1912), *Ormi* (1913), and *Korydallos* (1914) were also published, all influenced by the Aestheticist movement (ivi, p. 80).

⁵ St. Xefloudas, *Nirvanas, Christomanos, Rodokanakis, and Others*, Zacharopoulos, Athens 1957, p. 8.

⁶ L. Arambatzidou, *Aestheticism: The Modern Greek Version of the Movement*, cit., p. 11.

⁷ A. Sachinis, *The Prose of Aestheticism*, Estia, Athens 1981, p. 194.

⁸ See D. Tzanaki, *Gender and Sexuality (1801–1925): Uprooting the Human*, Asini, Athens 2018; G. Christodoulou, D. Ploumpidis, A. Karavatos (ed.by), *Anthology of Greek Psychiatric Texts*, transl. by A. Apostolaki, World Psychiatric Association, Athens, 2011.

⁹ See P. Noutsos, *Socialist Thought in Greece from 1875 to 1974*, vol. I: *The Socialist Intellectuals and the Political Function of Early Social Criticism (1875–1907)*, Gnosis, Athens 1990.

¹⁰ See E. Avdela, An. Psarra, *Feminism in Interwar Greece – An Anthology*, Gnosis, Athens 1985; El. Varika, *The Ladies' Revolt: The Birth of a Feminist Consciousness in Greece, 1833–1907*, Katarti, Athens 1996.

¹¹ See W. Puchner, *Anthology of Modern Greek Dramaturgy*, vol. II, b. 2, Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece, Athens 2006, p. 615; Th. Chatzipantazis, *Outline of the History of the Modern Greek State*, University of Crete Press, Heraklion 2014, pp. 369–414; Th. Grammatas, *Greek Theatre in the 20th Century*, Papazisis, Athens 2017, pp. 96–110.

circles¹². Dozens of articles in the Greek press discuss both his works and his life, while many well-known Greek poets and writers, such as K. Palamas¹³, write about him with admiration. Therefore, Italian Aestheticism, as presented through the works of D'Annunzio, influenced Greek Aestheticism because his works integrated Nietzschean philosophical thought, portraying the dominant male figure as an embodiment of the Übermensch.¹⁴

Another important consideration is that in Greek drama of the time, Aestheticism - along with other modernist trends such as Neo-Romanticism, Symbolism, and Decadent Theater - appeared in various «combinations and fusions»¹⁵ with realism and ethnographic elements, which, as mentioned, were the dominant trends in the theater of that period. Simultaneously, Nietzschean philosophy, socialist ideology, Freudian psychoanalysis, sociological determinism, and other philosophical, social, ideological, and aesthetic currents of the time contributed to an «ideological and aesthetic confusion»¹⁶ that influenced Greek playwrights of the era.

Researchers identify several key elements of Aestheticism in early 20th-century Greek literature. Firstly, there is an underlying morbidity on both intellectual and psychological levels¹⁷, with characters exhibiting obsessions and neuroses that often lead to perversion, murder, or suicide. Disease - whether physical or mental - constantly lurks, undermining their thoughts and their actions¹⁸. Secondly, there is a pervasive sensuality and eroticism, often bordering on fetishism, emphasizing the intense experience of fleeting moments and the activation of all senses. Lastly, unlike their European counterparts, Greek Aesthetes did not reject nature; instead, «they reformed it by projecting archetypes of corporeality and pleasure onto it»¹⁹.

The female figure - a woman of fatal beauty who surrenders to pleasure and pushes boundaries in pursuit of erotic fulfillment - becomes the archetype of the movement.²⁰ Salomé embodies all these characteristics: beautiful, sensual, and simultaneously morbid and obsessive, she seeks to lure her victims into an existence of oblivion and inertia, where love reigns supreme but outside and beyond the real world- a love devoid of movement and action, leading to isolation.

Consequently, we could categorize Greek theatrical plays that are influenced by aestheticism into: 1. Plays that fully align with Aestheticism, displaying all its characteristics. These include dramas by key representatives of the movement in Greece: K. Christomanos (*The Ashen Woman* and *The Three Kisses*, as well as his novel *Wax Doll*, which was adapted for the theater in 1915), Pl. Rodokanakis (*Saint Demetrius*), N. Poriotis (*Rodopi*). 2. Works heavily influenced by Aestheticism but also incorporating elements from other movements (such as Expressionism, Realism, and Symbolism). This category includes early plays by N. Kazantzakis (*It Dawns*, *Phasga*, and *The Master Builder*), plays by P. Nirvanas (*The Architect of Martha*, *The Swallow*, and *Maria Pentagiotissa*), *Ioni* by Ch. Daralexis, early plays by G. Kazantzaki (*More Noble*, *The Arrival*). 3. Realistic or symbolic dramas that contain Aestheticist elements like *The Red Shirt* by Sp. Melas, *Rachel* by Gr. Xenopoulos and *Invaluable* by P. Horn.

¹² El. Daraklitsa, *The Reception of 20th Century Italian Drama in Greece (1900-1940)*, Polytron, Athens 2016, pp. 52-53.

¹³ *Ivi*, pp. 56-58.

¹⁴ L. Arambatzoglou, *Aestheticism: The Modern Greek Version of the Movement*, cit., p. 45.

¹⁵ W. Puchner, *Anthology of Modern Greek Drama*, cit., p. 707.

¹⁶ G. P. Pefanis, *The Endless Autumn of a Baron-Clown: The Symbolist Movement and Konstantinos Christomanos*, in *Landscapes of Dramatic Writing: Fifteen Studies on Greek Theater*, Kostas and Eleni Ourani Foundation, Athens 2003, p. 285.

¹⁷ A. Symons, *The decadence movement in Literature*, in M. Brandbury, D. Palmer (ed. by), *Decadence in the 1890's*, Edward Arnold, London 1979, p.24.

¹⁸ L. Arambatzoglou, *Aestheticism: The Modern Greek Version of the Movement*, cit., p. 55.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 59-60.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 59.

THE FATAL FEMALE SEXUALITY

Erotic desire leading a man to destruction appears to be a recurring theme in Nikos Kazantzakis' early works²¹. His novella *Serpent and Lily* (1905) revolves around the love affair between a painter and a woman who becomes both his muse and his lover. According to L. Arambatzidou: «The romantic bond that develops between them follows the patterns of the peculiar loves of Aestheticism: it is depicted exclusively through the sensual language of the man, while the woman is denied a voice throughout the work»²².

In the end, the artist, feeling consumed by his passion for this woman, regains control over his life only through her death and his own suicide. A similar sense of loss is felt by Orestes, the protagonist of the short story *Broken Souls* (1906), after spending a night of passion in Nora's bed. The pleasure of the experience drains his strength, leaving him in self-loathing. As he leaves her room, where Gustave Moreau's painting of *Salomé* dominates the scene, Orestes feels so disconnected from civilization that he needs to visit museums to remind himself what culture means²³.

A comparable theme emerges in *The Master Builder* (1908)²⁴, a theatrical adaptation of the well-known Greek folk ballad *The Bridge of Arta*. Smaragdo, the daughter of a nobleman and the lover of the Master Builder, becomes the reason he cannot fully dedicate himself to his work. Their passionate nights consume him, and as an old blind gypsy woman reveals, the only way for the bridge to stand is for the woman he loves to be sacrificed. Smaragdo steps forward, openly declaring her love and confessing that the Master Builder had enjoyed her body all night²⁵. She then walks consciously and with dignity toward her sacrifice. The play presents, through a symbolic–existential lens with strong Nietzschean elements, for the first time the *desperado*, the enduring archetype of the Kazantzakian theatrical hero²⁶. On the other hand, the influence of aestheticism is primarily evident in the portrayal of Smaragda, who, while retaining the fatal sensuality typical of the heroines of aestheticism, does not sacrifice others but is herself sacrificed. An. Glytzouris identifies in her figure the unified duality of Decadence: «the femme fatale, to the extent that she is held responsible for seducing the male, and at the same time her idealization»²⁷.

According to G. Pefanis, this act distances Smaragdo from her community and brings her closer to the Master Builder, ultimately marginalizing her and transforming her into a scapegoat, making her the ideal

²¹ Beyond his extensive and globally renowned literary and philosophical work, Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957) also contributed notable theatrical works. For studies on his early dramaturgy, see: Th. Grammatas, *A Critical Perspective: A Study on the Work of Nikos Kazantzakis*, Athens 1992; Th. Papachatzaki-Katsaraki, *The Theatrical Works of Nikos Kazantzakis*, Dodoni, Athens 1985; W. Puchner, *The Early Theatrical Work of Nikos Kazantzakis*, in *Tracing Theatrical Tradition: Ten Studies*, Odysseas, Athens 1995, pp. 318-433; W. Puchner, *Dramatic Models in the Early Theatrical Work of Nikos Kazantzakis*, in *Philological and Theatrical Miscellanea: Five Studies*, Kastaniotis, Athens, 1995, pp. 375-420; K. Petrakou, *Kazantzakis and the Theater*, Militos, Athens, 2005; L. Marangou, *The Timeless Philosophical Dimension of Kazantzakis' Early Theatrical Work and Its Relation to Innovations in 20th Century French Theater*, PhD dissertation, Department of Foreign Languages and Translation, Ionian University, 2007; An. Glytzouris, *Eagle Desires and Butterfly Wings. The Early Theatrical Works of Nikos Kazantzakis and the European Avant-Garde of His Time*, University of Crete Press, Heraklion 2009; P. Bein, *Kazantzakis' Unsuccessful Attempt to Modernize Greek Theater in the First Decade of the 20th Century*, in *Tradition and Modernization in Modern Greek Theater from Its Beginnings to the Postwar Era*, proceedings of the 3rd Panhellenic Theater Studies Conference, dedicated to Th. Chatzipantazis, Ant. Glytzouris-K. Georgiadis (ed. by), University of Crete Press, Heraklion, 2010, pp. 61-69.

²² L. Arambatzidou, *Aestheticism: The Modern Greek Version of the Movement*, cit., p. 265.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 279.

²⁴ The work was awarded in the Lassanis Theatrical Competition (K. Petrakou, *Theatrical Competitions (1870-1925)*, Hellenic Letters, Athens 2000, pp. 228-233) and was later set to music by M. Kalomiris (P. Bein, *Kazantzakis: "The Master Builder", with an Additional Note on "Capodistrias"*, in "The Literary Review" XVIII, 1975, p. 405).

²⁵ K. Petrakou, *Kazantzakis and the Theater*, cit., pp. 187-196.

²⁶ W. Puchner, *Anthology of Modern Greek Dramaturgy*, cit., p. 667.

²⁷ An. Glytzouris, *Eagle's Desires and Butterfly Wings [...]*, cit., pp. 267-268.

candidate for sacrifice²⁸. At the same time, her actions are particularly provocative, as the daughter of a nobleman in a provincial setting publicly declares that she has had a sexual relationship with a man outside of marriage. This revelation enrages her father, but in the end, her death purifies her from any sin. According to G. Ladogianni, her fate resembles the public shaming of a sinful woman²⁹.

Destructive to the men who fall in love with her is *Maria Pentagiotissa* (1908)³⁰ by P. Nirvanas³¹, a play inspired by Greek folk tradition. Nirvanas was significantly influenced by aestheticism in his prose works up until 1903³², yet his later theatrical and literary output also retains strong traces of this influence, expressed through what critics and scholars of the time described as a «calm love of beauty and beautifying language»³³. It is a fact, however, that Nirvanas was a passionate advocate of the philosophy that the ultimate aim of art in all its forms is «beauty»³⁴.

Maria Pentagiotissa is described as «an explosive beauty who captivates all who meet her -young, old, married, or single»³⁵. However, her character is not consistently portrayed throughout the play. Initially, she embodies the stereotype of the *femme fatale* who enjoys male attention, but by the end, she transforms into a woman suffering for love without having actively provoked anything herself.

Nikos Kazantzakis, comparing her to the Maria of the folk song - who is the ultimate embodiment of beauty, «above life, duty, and everything» - finds her merely «a very beautiful woman», but one who is «unforgivably vain» and «shameless»³⁶. A critic from *Neon Asty* provocatively calls her a «peasant courtesan»³⁷, while Grigorios Xenopoulos argues that the play failed because Maria's character remains vague and symbolic³⁸. According to M. Mavrogeni, «Maria will ultimately conform to the desires of Pothitos, transforming from an exotic woman into a domesticated one». In this way, the mysterious *femme fatale* becomes recognizable, manageable, and therefore no longer dangerous³⁹. Nirvanas attempts to place the Aestheticist *femme fatale* in a realistic setting - not only humanizing her but also stripping away the mystery surrounding her, turning her into a woman completely dependent on the man she loves. So much so that when he dies, she commits suicide.

²⁸ G. Pefanis, *The Song of the "Bridge of Arta" as a Bridge Between Folk Poetry and Drama* (H. Voutieridis, P. Horn, N. Kazantzakis, G. Theotokas, et al.), in "Parousia", XIII- XIV, 1998-2000, p. 276.

²⁹ G. Ladogianni, *Ibsenian Influences in Greek Theater I: The Sacrificed Women*, in *The Place of Drama: Studies on Modern Greek Dramaturgy of the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Papazisis, Athens 2011, p. 176.

³⁰ It was performed by the Kotopouli troupe on August 13, 1908, with M. Kotopouli, L. Louis, M. Myrat, and Sap. Alkaiou in the main roles (M. Panagiotopoulou, *The Theatrical Works of Pavlos Nirvanas*, PhD dissertation, Department of Theater Studies, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens 2014, p. 237).

³¹ P. Nirvanas (1866-1937) was one of the most prolific Greek writers of the early 20th century, having written novels, poetry, short stories, plays, and numerous journalistic pieces, studies, and theatrical critiques. For his theatrical works, see: G. Sideris, *History of Modern Greek Theater, 1794-1944*, Volume B, Part A, Kastaniotis, Athens 1999, pp. 30-36. I. Vibliakakis, *The Theatrical Temptation of Nirvanas*, in *On the Sacred and Drama: Theatrical Approaches*, Armos, Athens 2004, pp. 297-328. M. Panagiotopoulou, *The Theatrical Works of Pavlos Nirvanas*, cit.

³² *Ivi*, p.97.

³³ L. Porphyras, *Collected Works*, G. Valetas (ed. by), Vasileiou Editions, Athens, 1964, p. 231; M. G. Petridis, *Brief Characterizations of Our Contemporary Writers*, Athena Society, Athens 1927, p. 42; P. Haris, *Nirvanas as a Prose Writer*, in "Nea Estia", 23, 1938, p. 386; Ch. G. Sakellariadis, *Forgotten Texts by Nirvanas*, in "Nea Estia", 1074, 1972, p. 675.

³⁴ P. N., *Speech and Silence*, in "Estia", October 10, 1910 p.1; P. N., *From Life: Questions of Aesthetics*, in "Estia", 69599, March 16, 1913, p.1; P. N., *From Day to Day: A Display of Ugliness*, in "Neon Asty", October 8, 1909, p.1; P. N., *Faces and Things: Questions of Aesthetics*, in "Athinaï", May 26, 1911, p. 1; P. N., *From Life: Public Aesthetic Sensibility*, in "Estia", September 19, 1913, p.1.

³⁵ M. Panagiotopoulou, *The Theatrical Works of Pavlos Nirvanas*, cit, p. 212.

³⁶ P. Psiloreitis, *Pavlos Nirvanas, "Maria Pentagiotissa"*, in "Nea Zoi", 1, 1909, pp. 51-54.

³⁷ M., *The Premiere Today: Nirvanas' "Pentagiotissa"*, in "Neon Asty", August 13, 1908, p.1.

³⁸ Gr. Xenopoulos, *Theater: New Stage: "Maria Pentagiotissa", a Drama in Three Parts by Pavlos Nirvanas*, in "Panathenaia", 189-190, 1908, p. 267.

³⁹ M. Mavrogeni, *Cases of Honor in Early 20th Century Greek Drama*, in *Identities in the Greek World (from 1204 to the Present)*, Proceedings of the 4th European Congress of Modern Greek Studies (Granada, September 9-12, 2010), vol. A, K. A. Dimadis (ed.by), European Society of Modern Greek Studies, Athens 2011, p. 580.

N. Poriotis⁴⁰ offers a less sensual but harsher version of the *femme fatale* in his tragedy *Rodopi* (1912)⁴¹, based on the folk poem *Lord Mavrianos and His Sister*. In this work, which blends «aestheticism with folk song and ancient tragedy, the sweetened atmosphere is charged and heavy, [influenced by] the decadence of Art Nouveau»⁴². When Rodopi learns that King Demochares has made a bet with her brother, Haemus, that he will succeed in seducing her, she deceives him by sending her maid, Krino, in her place. However, when Demochares discovers the truth, he chooses to marry Krino, having fallen in love with her. Rodopi cannot bear the idea that Krino, through love, will attain the power she herself desires. She kills her with her brooch and throws her body into the cistern. Rodopi rejects love in favor of power—and ultimately loses everything.

According to W. Puchner, Krinó acts as a bright alter ego of Rodopi, and with her murder, Rodopi feels a profound deprivation of love, which she had only experienced indirectly through her substitute⁴³. For K. Petrakou, Rodopi's defeat serves as a warning: in a patriarchal world, a woman who does not seek power through love but rather through her personal abilities or political maneuvering is destined to fail⁴⁴. According to G. Pefanis, the author skillfully creates a spectrum of three female characters: Rodopi: A very beautiful, proud princess, yet harsh and abrupt. Krinó: A simple, pure, and kind-hearted woman. Mantó: A woman of loose morals but also reflective, capable of sensing hidden signs and understanding people's secrets⁴⁵. Mantó embodies free love but also functions as a Shakespearean fool⁴⁶.

Eroticism and sexuality are pervasive here as well, both through the passionate night shared by Demochares and Krino under Rodopi's «gaze», and, most notably, through the manipulative Rodopi, who seduces and directs both Krino and Laertes - her stable master, who is in love with her - and ultimately, consumed by suppressed desire, kills Krino out of jealousy, seeking a hollow victory as he leaves her “desolate, loveless, miserable, sterile»⁴⁷.

The only purely *Salomé*-like heroine in Greek drama of this period is undoubtedly Euniki from Pl. Rodokanakis'⁴⁸ *Saint Demetrius* (1917)⁴⁹. In this drama, set in Thessaloniki at the beginning of the fourth

⁴⁰ N. Poriotis (1870-1945) was one of the first important Greek translators closely associated with the Aestheticist movement. He introduced D'Annunzio to Greece (E. Daraklitsa, *The Reception of 20th Century Italian Drama in Greece (1900-1940)*, cit., p. 71) and was also the first to translate Wilde's *Salomé* into Greek (Chr. Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou, *Greek Bibliography of Theatrical Works, Dialogues, and Monologues (1900-1940)*, V. A. Ouranis Foundation, Athens 2020, p. 313).

⁴¹ It was published in 1913 in the newspaper *Estia* (Ivi, p. 247) but was never performed on stage. The playwright drew inspiration from ancient Greek tragedy, though influences from Shakespeare, Wilde's *Salomé*, D'Annunzio's *Francesca da Rimini*, and Maeterlinck's *Monna Vanna* are evident (M. Lygizos, *Modern Greek Theater Alongside World Theater*, Vols. A & B, Dodoni, Athens 1980, p. 260; Th. Grammatas, *Greek Theater in the 20th Century: A Contribution to the History of Modern Greek Theater*, cit., p. 204). Poriotis himself cited K. Palamas' *Trisevgeni* as his source of inspiration (N. Poriotis, *Rodopi*, in “The Thymeli”, 3-4, 1933, p. 115).

⁴² W. Puchner, *Anthology of Modern Greek Dramaturgy*, cit., p. 685.

⁴³ W. Puchner, “The *Rodopi*” of Nikolaos Poriotis: Aestheticism, Ancient Tragedy, and Folk Song in Greek Drama of the Early 20th Century, in *Trapdoor and Prompt Box: Ten Theater Studies*, Ergo, Athens 2002, p. 212.

⁴⁴ K. Petrakou, *The Image of Women in Modern Greek Theater: From Cretan Theater to the Present*, Aigokeros, Athens 2022, p. 238.

⁴⁵ G. P. Pefanis, *The Dramatization of Ballads, Part II: “The Tale of Mavrianos and His Sister”- Four Cases: K.G. Xenos, N. Poriotis, G. Kazantzakis, G. Theotokas*, in “Porphyra”, 88, 1998, p. 262.

⁴⁶ W. Puchner, “The *Rodopi*” of Nikolaos Poriotis: Aestheticism, Ancient Tragedy, and Folk Song in Greek Drama of the Early 20th Century”, cit., pp. 689-690.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 696.

⁴⁸ Pl. Rodokanakis (1883-1919) was the most consciously Aestheticist writer in Greece (L. Arambatzoglou, *Aestheticism: The Modern Greek Version of the Movement*, cit., p. 355). In 1908, he published *De Profundis*, a title that directly references Oscar Wilde, followed by *The Flaming Robe*, written in the form of a personal diary.

⁴⁹ It was performed in August 1917 by the Kotopouli troupe, with Rozan in the role of Saint Demetrius and Kotopouli as Euniki (*Theatrical Review*, in “Pinakothiki”, 199, 1917, p. 83). It was published in 1922 after the author's death (W. Puchner, *Anthology of Modern Greek Drama*, cit., p. 728).

century, we follow the efforts of Demetrios, the governor of Thessaly, to prevent the massacres of Christians. He is imprisoned by Emperor Galerius, while Eunike, Galerius's lover who secretly harbors feelings for Demetrios, fiercely defends him and visits him in prison in an attempt to persuade him to repent and save himself. Ultimately, Demetrios is publicly humiliated through the streets of Thessaloniki and executed. This play closely parallels Wilde's *Salomé*, merging religious themes with Aestheticism.⁵⁰ Just as Salomé desires John the Baptist, Eunike is erotically drawn to Saint Demetrios. In one striking scene, she visits Demetrios in prison, wearing only a red robe with nothing underneath—an image reminiscent of Maeterlinck's *Monna Vanna*⁵¹. Eunike tries to seduce Demetrios, reaching a state of erotic frenzy with masochistic elements:

Eunike: (*inflamed by a hysterical fever; shouting with wild joy*) [...] Shout! I want my lover cruel, wild, I want him vulgar! Never have I seen you as beautiful as in this moment! Grab me by the hair and throw me down, give me headbutts, curse me, hit me, like a pomegranate bursting with sweetness⁵².

Like Salomé, she fails in her attempt to seduce him, but instead of demanding his head, she collapses at his feet, begging him to kill her⁵³. Demetrios, however, rejects her and proceeds to his martyrdom, having triumphed over his final temptation.

A common feature of all the aforementioned heroines is that they do not appear in a modern, realistic urban setting. They are protagonists of works that belong to the realm of myth and fairy tale, as they are linked to Greek folk or religious tradition and folk poetry. In this way, they acquire a symbolic character, an archetypal form of the temptress woman who, in contrast to Wilde's *Salome*, is ultimately defeated and crushed or sacrificed.

THE ALLURE OF ILLNESS AND SENSITIVITY

Alongside the *femme fatale*, another archetypal female figure emerges—the innocent, fragile woman, emotionally and spiritually vulnerable. A woman who requires care, who needs a knight, a man to guide and protect her. P. Nirvanas describes her as a delicate greenhouse flower⁵⁴. Physically or psychologically suffering women appear frequently in Aestheticist drama abroad as well. In plays by G. D'Annunzio, which were staged in Greece, we see Silvia in *La Gioconda* (1898)⁵⁵, who loses her hands, Isabella in *The Dream of a Spring Morning* (1896)⁵⁶, who goes mad and Anna in *The Dead City* (1898)⁵⁷, who is blind. The common thread among these heroines is that they are victims. Silvia loses her husband to the *femme fatale* Gioconda, Anna's husband, Alessandro, is in love with another woman, and Isabella goes insane when her husband kills her lover in her arms.

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 728.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 729.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 739.

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 743.

⁵⁴ P. N., *Arguments and Counterarguments: The Female Issue*, in "Panathenaia", VIII, 1907, p. 25.

⁵⁵ *Joconda* was first staged in Greece on June 27, 1908, by the Kyveli troupe (El. Daraklitsa, *The Reception of 20th Century Italian Drama in Greece (1900-1940)*, cit., p. 165).

⁵⁶ *Dream of a Spring Morning* premiered in Greece in 1899 with Eleonora Duse and was performed in Greek in 1901 by the New Stage troupe, starring Theoni Drakopoulou (*Ivi*, pp. 181-183).

⁵⁷ *The Dead City* was first performed in Greece in 1913 by Kyveli (*Ivi*, pp. 214-215).

In *The Ashen Woman*⁵⁸ by K. Christomanos⁵⁹, the heroine Aglaia - an eccentric and nearly «neurasthenic»⁶⁰ woman treated like a child by her husband even after becoming a mother - loses both her husband and child to another woman (who, according to the author, symbolizes fate). She ultimately departs in madness, delivering a monologue reminiscent of Ophelia: «And now I am a flower that has been crushed, its heart torn apart...»⁶¹.

However, the wronged heroines in Christomanos' next two works, *The Three Kisses* (1907)⁶² and *Wax Doll* (1907/8)⁶³, differ significantly from this archetype. First and foremost, physical illness plays a central role—specifically tuberculosis, a disease that tormented Christomanos himself and ultimately claimed his life a few months after completing *Wax Doll*. Both Dora in *The Three Kisses* and Virginia in *Wax Doll* are petite, sickly, pale, and almost translucent. Dora, however, exhibits characteristics of the *femme fatale* in Aestheticist drama. She falls in love with Phaidēs, essentially stealing him from her friend Liana, whom she torments throughout the play—especially when she discovers that Phaidēs is, deep down, truly in love with Liana. In the end, she commits suicide, permanently separating the couple.

In *The Three Kisses*, Christomanos employs the boulevard technique, immersing the narrative in a sweetened, beauty-worshipping atmosphere with extensive descriptions of the appearances of the three youths as well as their emotional fluctuations. He draws on, among other elements, music and painting to create the aestheticist mood⁶⁴. Accordingly, a subtitle defines the work as «a tragic sonata in three movements: prelude, appassionato, finale», while within the drama there is a clear reference to Klimt's painting *The Kiss* (1895)⁶⁵, which also adorns the cover of the first 1909 edition.

Throughout the play, sexuality is centered on the mouth and the kiss, with an obsession that W. Puchner attributes to Christomanos' personality and his fixation on the «oral phase» of sexuality. The eroticism in his works contains a sense of childlike innocence, even when it masquerades as sensuality.⁶⁶ Dora is affectionate and outwardly expressive of her emotions - at least superficially - compared to Liana, who is reserved and constantly tries to hide her love. Flowers, especially roses, dominate this work as well, with

⁵⁸ The play was written while Christomanos was still in Vienna and has never been staged. It tells the story of a mysterious woman, *The Ashen Woman*, who has killed her child and arrives as a governess at the home of a young couple, Lysandros and Aglaia. In the end, she kills their child as well, and Lysandros abandons his wife to leave with her (see W. Puchner, *Konstantinos Christomanos as a Playwright*, Kastaniotis, Athens 1997, pp. 49-129).

⁵⁹ Konstantinos Christomanos (1867-1911) was one of the most significant figures in early 20th-century Greek theater. As one of the foremost representatives of Aestheticism in Greek prose (Ap. Sachinis, *The Prose of Aestheticism*, cit., pp. 350-404), he also founded the *Nea Skini* (*New Stage*) theater company in the early 20th century, revitalizing and reshaping Greek theater. For more on his work, see: W. Puchner, *Konstantinos Christomanos as a Playwright*, cit, pp. 131-186; G. P. Pefanis, «The Endless Autumn of a Baron-Clown: The Symbolist Movement and Konstantinos Christomanos», cit., pp. 277-306; V. Papanikolaou, *The Contribution of the Nea Skini to the Evolution of Modern Greek Theater*, PhD dissertation, Department of Philology, Section of Theater and Musicology, School of Philosophy, University of Crete, Rethymno, 2011; D. Spathis, «Konstantinos Christomanos and the Establishment of Directing in Modern Greek Theater», in *From Chortatsis to Koun: Studies on Modern Greek Theater*, National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation, Athens 2015, pp. 589-609.

⁶⁰ W. Puchner, *Konstantinos Christomanos as a Playwright*, cit., p. 57.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 103.

⁶² *The Three Kisses* was performed in August 1907 by the Kotopouli - Sagior troupe, with M. Kotopouli in the role of Dora, L. Louis, and F. Louis (Gr. Xenopoulos, *The Theaters: "The Three Kisses"*, in «Neon Asty», September 2, 1908, p.1).

⁶³ Christomanos' novel was published in 1911, a few months after his death. It was written in three stylistic modes: realism, symbolism, and aestheticism (L. Arambatzidou, *Aestheticism: The Modern Greek Version of the Movement*, cit., p. 209). It was adapted for the stage in 1915 by Horn and performed by Kyveli, with N. Rozan and V. Dimopoulou also in the cast. However, the adaptation has not survived, and the production was unsuccessful (E. Vafeiadi, *Introduction to the Dramaturgy of Pantelis Horn*, PhD dissertation, Department of Modern Greek and Medieval Studies, Department of Philology, School of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 1994, p. 195).

⁶⁴ W. Puchner, *Anthology of Modern Greek Dramaturgy*, cit., p. 712.

⁶⁵ K. Christomanos, *The Three Kisses: A Tragic Sonata in Three Movements*, Panos Editions, Athens 1909, p. 28.

⁶⁶ W. Puchner, *Konstantinos Christomanos as a Playwright*, cit., p. 199.

Dora weaving two wreaths - one with red roses for Liana and one with white roses for herself. Throughout the play, she manipulates Phaidēs and Liana like «puppets»⁶⁷, leaving it unclear whether her actions are driven by spontaneity or jealousy and malice. It remains an open question whether her «sacrifice» is intended to separate them or to unite them. At first glance, one might say that her intention is to separate them. However, some years earlier (in 1894), Gr. Xenopoulos, in *The Third One*, had the husband commit suicide to allow his wife to live with her lover⁶⁸. Nirvanas follows a similar logic in *The Swallow*, taking inspiration from Xenopoulos. Perhaps Christomanos, who had staged *O Tritos* in his theater, also chose a similar ending with a corresponding intention.

The theme of female infidelity is central to *It Dawns* (1906), Nikos Kazantzakis' first theatrical work. The protagonist, Lalo, a married woman of the upper class with a child, falls in love with her brother-in-law, Philippos. She becomes physically ill in her effort to suppress her desire and resist her lover. In the end, she takes her own life. *It Dawns* is the only one of Kazantzakis' plays centered around a female character. The author's clear intent is to criticize the social institutions that trap individuals in conventional marriages, repress their nature, and lead them to physical and psychological decline.

Although it is classified as a psychological drama⁶⁹, the influence of aestheticism on Kazantzakis during that period is strongly evident, particularly in the portrayal of erotic passion that leads Lalo to psychological and physical illness, and ultimately to suicide. Eroticism permeates the entire play - both through the underlying passion between Philippos, a handsome, bohemian poet living a carefree life abroad who, in line with aestheticist ideals, adheres to the doctrine of «art for art's sake» and the worship of beauty⁷⁰, and Lalo, as well as through the more earthy sexuality of Fofó, a married bourgeois woman who secretly chooses to follow the dictates of the flesh.

The play left a lasting impression at the Pantelidis Theater Competition, where it was submitted in 1907⁷¹. It was well received but did not win an award because it «lacked moral foundation»⁷². Kazantzakis was condemned as immoral and a promoter of depravity⁷³. However, his portrayal of Lalo's neurasthenia - caused by suppressed emotion - is strikingly accurate⁷⁴. The play also foreshadows the crises that would eventually shatter «respectable» households and «harmonious» marriages⁷⁵. In the new era of psychoanalysis and the evolving role of women, sexuality was beginning to be understood in a radically different way. Lalo bears strong similarities to Chrysoula from *Broken Souls* - a sensitive, tender girl who falls ill upon learning of the infidelity of Orestes, the man she loves⁷⁶. However, unlike Chrysoula, Lalo does not passively endure her suffering. She analyzes it, seeks solutions, and consults her mother, doctor, and friend Fofó. This ability to choose distinguishes her from previous heroines - she is an active agent of the drama but ultimately cannot withstand this role. She chooses death over compromise or rebellion.

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 253.

⁶⁸ Ath. Blesios, *Le «Théâtre d'Idées» en Grèce de 1895 à 1922*, doctoral thesis presented at the University of Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), 1996, pp. 345-346.

⁶⁹ W. Puchner, *Anthology of Modern Greek Dramaturgy*, cit., p. 557.

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, p. 556.

⁷¹ The play was performed in summer 1907 by the Thoma Oikonomou troupe, with Evangelia Paraskevopoulou in the lead role, alongside Evangelos Delenardos and Kostas Moustakas (K. Petrakou, *Kazantzakis and the Theater*, cit., p. 119).

⁷² K. Petrakou, *Theatrical Competitions (1870-1925)*, cit., p. 249.

⁷³ G. Sideris, *History of Modern Greek Theater*, cit., p. 29.

⁷⁴ W. Puchner, *Anthology of Modern Greek Dramaturgy*, cit., p. 559.

⁷⁵ K. Petrakou, *Kazantzakis and the Theater*, cit., p. 100.

⁷⁶ L. Arampatzidou, *Aestheticism: The Modern Greek Version of the Movement*, cit., p. 272.

A similar dilemma of infidelity unfolds in *The Swallow* (1908) by Pavlos Nirvanas⁷⁷. Modeled after Xenopoulos' *The Third One*,⁷⁸ the play follows a physiologist, Andreas Loris, who has married the lively and playful Foula out of love. However, he soon becomes consumed by his work. A young aviator, a relative of a friend, arrives at their home and falls in love with Foula. At first, she resists, but eventually, she gives in. Her husband catches them kissing in the garden and decides to leave, allowing them to be together. In this drama, where action is essentially replaced by philosophical dialogues, the author attempts - according to M. Panagiotopoulou - to experiment «with the Ibsenian style and psychological dead-ends, always through the lens of aestheticism»,⁷⁹ Foula is portrayed almost childlike in how she handles her relationship with her husband - seeking his attention but not understanding or caring about his work. She is tormented by guilt when the third party enters their relationship. Meanwhile, Madame Loudari, an experienced married woman with apparent extramarital affairs, encourages Foula to betray her husband. Critic Hatzopoulos finds these two female characters one-dimensional⁸⁰, while the *Nouma* critic calls Loris insensitive and ridiculous⁸¹. Xenopoulos, however, detects a psychological disorder in Loris that leads him to inaction but considers the ending innovative⁸².

The heroine of P. Nirvanas' play *Architect Martha* (1907)⁸³ is innocent and isolated from the world and society, living within the illusion of a false and future happiness. The central character, Martha, is an architect who desires to bring happiness to his loved ones. He kidnaps his lover, Mina, just before her family faces financial ruin, takes her to his island, and traps her in a world of illusions—telling her stories about his future professional success and an inheritance that will make them rich. When he can no longer hide the truth, he intoxicates her, takes her out to sea with the promise of boarding their new yacht, and they drown together.

Martha, fully aligned with the principles of Aestheticism, is static and obsessive⁸⁴. Mina, on the other hand, is like a helpless flower - protected in a greenhouse, lacking experience and willpower, without responsibility for her actions. She perfectly embodies the feminine ideal that Nirvanas himself described in an article in “Panathenaia”: «Once upon a time, flowers could simply give off their fragrance, spread their colors in the sunlight, take pride in their divine idleness, and claim their celestial title by being useless to the vulgar necessities of life. [...] Today, that is no longer enough. Idleness is now a disgrace»⁸⁵.

K. Parren describes the woman in Nirvanas' play as: «A human wreck, weak and fragile, destined to laugh, sing, drink champagne, and order yachts and dresses»⁸⁶. The same concerns were expressed by Hatzopoulos in his critique, though he approached it from a class perspective rather than a racial one. Hatzopoulos observed that Martha (and, by extension, Nirvanas) represents a socially and morally declining

⁷⁷ First performed on July 2, 1908, by the Kyveli troupe, with Kyveli, Nikos Papageorgiou, N. Zanos, P. Maris, N. Raptopoulos, L. Lori, L. Drakou, among others, in the main roles (M. Panagiotopoulou, cit, pp. 200-201).

⁷⁸ N. Papandreou, *Ibsen in Greece: From the First Acquaintance to Establishment, 1890–1910*, Kedros, Athens 1983, p. 123.

⁷⁹ M. Panagiotopoulou, cit, pp. 200-201.

⁸⁰ P. Vasilikos, *The Swallow*, in “O Noumas”, 329, 1909, pp. 2-3.

⁸¹ The Critic of *Noumas*, *The Swallow*, in “O Noumas”, 304, 1908, p. 1.

⁸² G. Xenopoulos, *Theater. Kyveli Theater (Panellinion): [...] The Swallow, drama in three acts by Pavlos Nirvanas, Panathenaia*, VIII, 1908, pp. 220-221.

⁸³ First performed on August 6, 1907, by the Kotopouli troupe, with Eftychios Bonaseras, Marika Kotopouli, S. Hanta, Chrysoula Kotopoulou, and Mitsos Myrat in the leading roles (M. Panagiotopoulou, *The Theatrical Works of Pavlos Nirvanas*, cit., p.174).

⁸⁴ *Ibi*, p. 150.

⁸⁵ P. N., *Arguments and Counterarguments. The Female Issue*, cit., p. 25.

⁸⁶ K. Parren, *The Male Issue. The Architect Marthas*, in “Efimeris ton Kyrion”, October 28, 1907, p. 2.

class. In his world, a woman is made for a man, without an independent life or economic autonomy. To him, Mina Varda is the only truly unfortunate character in the play:

This is the role of a woman in life - to be a delicate flower, spreading her feminine fragrance, untouched and untainted. To inspire poets and artists. Nirvanas has told us this elsewhere. [...] «Happiness and... glory!» he cries. What more could a woman desire? A man, the provider of these things, repays her with his joy, the chrysanthemums that fill his office, the flowers that flood his home, the perfume she spreads - she herself a flower. That this light is irony and this joy is tragedy, that it is a disgrace for her to know this truth, and that she must be humiliated if her eyes are opened to reality - no one has ever taught her otherwise. She lives only in the beautiful dream of happiness.⁸⁷

Through this, Hatziopoulos criticizes how Greek Aesthetes of the era depict women - merely as expensive and precious ornaments that decorate men's lives, completely dependent on their choices and decisions. For him, the belief that poverty degrades and disgraces is a view belonging to a social class on the brink of its decline. The old bourgeoisie, unable to compete with the ideals of the rising working class, turns to dream-like illusions and symbolism⁸⁸. Nirvanas, as a true Aestheticist, defends his heroes, responding: «What is death? A mere moment. Until that final moment, Mina lives within her dream. She rushes to die with the laughter of happiness. From one dream, she will pass into another. If only we could all die this way—in a moment of supreme bliss. [...] And is not the love that kills the ultimate love?»⁸⁹.

This statement encapsulates the Aestheticist perspective on love in Greece. Love that kills, as well as love that is sacrificed, is the highest form of devotion. Individualistic and idealistic heroes seek perfection but encounter destruction instead. However, Greek society of the time was more in tune with Hatziopoulos' views. «Art for art's sake» and «beauty for beauty's sake» found little acceptance in an era marked by war, social struggles, and change.

In conclusion, the fatal sexuality of the *femme fatale* associated with aestheticism finds a place in Greek dramaturgy primarily within the realms of myth, fairy tale, and historical past. When it is placed in a more contemporary setting - even if it retains its roots in myth and tradition - such as in Nirvana's *Maria Pentagiotissa*, it is treated as degenerate, diseased, and dangerous to society. In social or psychological dramas influenced by aestheticism, women with an overtly sexual life are approached more through social and class-based criteria rather than aesthetic ones (e.g., Fofu in *It Dawns*, Mrs. Laoudari in *The Swallow*). They are inactive upper-class women, trapped in loveless marriages, who resort to sexuality as a means of alleviating their boredom - a theme also common in many other social dramas of the time.

Even within the realm of myth, sexually «dangerous» female characters - though they may not always intend to harm the male hero - are ultimately isolated and rejected, either by the hero himself, as in the case of Eyniki, or by their social environment, as in the case of Smaragda. Both society- through the efforts of the feminist movement led by K. Parren - and intellectual circles sought to highlight more urgent gendered social issues, such as the murder of young women by their relatives for «reasons of honor», even in cases of rape⁹⁰. Women were thus portrayed primarily as victims of a repressive patriarchal system that treated

⁸⁷ K. Chatzopoulos, *For an Audience and a Drama*, in *Critical Texts*, Kosta & Eleni Ourani Foundation, Athens 1996, pp. 296-297.

⁸⁸ K. Chatzopoulos, *The Psychology of Symbolism*, in *Critical Texts*, cit., pp. 131-132.

⁸⁹ P. Nirvanas, *On a Drama and a Critic*, in «O Noumas», 285, 1908, p.1.

⁹⁰ E. Avdela, *For Reasons of Honor. Violence, Emotions and Values in Post-Civil War Greece*, Nefeli, Athens 2006, pp. 196-229; M. Mavrogeni, *Cases of Honor in Greek Drama of the Early 20th Century*, cit., p. 574.

them as male property while shifting the blame for any sexual transgression onto them⁹¹. The existence of independent women who choose for themselves to whom they will give their bodies and souls remained intolerable to Greek society⁹² - as evidenced in *It Dawns (Ximeronei)*, but also in the backlash provoked by heroines like Maria Pentagiotissa or Trisevgeni from the poetic drama of the same name by Kostis Palamas⁹³.

On the other hand, the excessive sensitivity, passivity, and somatization of emotion experienced by the more vulnerable heroines of Nirvanas, Chryssomanos, Daralexis, and Kazantzakis provoke a certain discomfort among critics. These characters are not seen as creatures of a pure aesthetic universe, but rather as projections of social beings, interpreted primarily through class-based or psychopathological criteria⁹⁴. Critics often read them as manifestations of either «female hysteria» - a term that was just beginning to gain traction in Greek society through psychiatry and forensic medicine - or as signs of the moral and psychological decline of an idle and privileged social class⁹⁵. This class traps women in inactivity and dependence on men at a time when feminism is advocating for women's emergence from the private sphere into public life⁹⁶, promoting instead the ideal of the Greek mother and heroine, capable of giving birth to and raising the future Greek hero⁹⁷.

⁹¹ E. Varika, *ibid.*, pp. 305-306.

⁹² D. Tzanaki, *ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

⁹³ There is a rich bibliography on Palamas' only theatrical work. See for example: Th. Grammatas, *Palamas' "Trisevgeni". Proposals for a Different Interpretation*, in *Modern Greek Theatre. History – Dramaturgy. Twelve Essays*, Koutoura, Athens 1987, pp. 102-115; W. Puchner: *Palamas and the Theatre*, Kastaniotis, Athens 1995, pp. 175-566.

⁹⁴ P. Nirvanas, *Trisevgeni*, in "Kritiki", 19-20, 1903, pp. 633-635.

⁹⁵ D. Tzanaki, *ibid.*, p. 236.

⁹⁶ Al. Vouzouraki, *The influence of socialist ideology on the promotion of the feminist issue in early 20th-century Modern Greek drama*, in "Scientific Yearbook of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Athens", 48, 2023-2024, pp. 185-188.

⁹⁷ K. Petrakou, *The appearance of feminism in modern Greek theatre*, in *Theatrical (St)ances and Paths. Sixteen Essays on Modern Greek Theatre*, Papazisis, Athens 2007, p. 75.

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