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WRITING AND READING THE CANONS



CANONS DON'T suddenly appear. They evolve. Their evolution influences how we write and read them. There's a chicken-and-egg scenario here. What comes first, a canonical text or its ideology and aesthetic? If we believe in divinity and inspiration, we can say the shape of a canon, and what a canon shapes, is divinely inspired. But we also need to account for human determination and discernment. We determine what characteristics canons have, whether we write or read them. We discern which texts ought to be included or excluded. This process of giving forms and attaching meanings to idea and art applies to the sacred canon, and to the novels once thought essential to the curriculum (the secular canon, that elephant in the room).

The existence of the secular canon, and its relationship with the meta-narrative, is contended. Are authors still writing with an eye towards it? Are we still canonising their literature? Can the novel that interrogates the meta-narrative still be canonical? The answer to all these questions is yes. This article offers four reflections: on the construction of divinity in the sacred canon, written to represent classical metaphysics; on the construction of humanity in the secular canon, written to interrogate classical metaphysics; on Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, a novel that simultaneously represents and interrogates classical metaphysics in a canonical way; and, on the resilience of the secular canon in an age where some read novels instead of scripture and some go to book club instead of church.

CANONICAL DIVINITY

THERE ARE THREE SETS of books in the Jewish canon: Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). Tradition ascribes divine authorship to the Torah, through Moses, but many scholars believe different communities compiled it over a long period. Those who finalised the Jewish canon, somewhere between the exile and the first

century BCE, excluded apocryphal texts they didn't consider to be divinely inspired. The principal difference between the Jewish canon and what Christians once called the Old Testament is that some Christian traditions accept the Apocrypha as canonical while others take the Jewish view.

The first thing to notice about the Christian canon is its acceptance of the Jewish canon—especially the

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Jewish revelation of God's nature and manner of dealing with creation—as the precondition on which its further revelation depends. The second thing to notice is

the evolutionary process, similar to that of the Jewish canon, through which Christian canonisers decided, from a variety of competing texts, what texts authentically represented their Christology. Here's another chicken-and-egg scenario. What comes first, canonical Christology or the texts that represent it?

The shaping of the Christian canon was a hermeneutical struggle among various Jewish and Gentile communities to represent their personal experience of Jesus the man or their historical understanding of the Christ event. From the breadth of Christian writings, we know that emerging Christology ranged from the orthodox, as orthodoxy came to be defined, to the heterodox, as heterodoxy came to be defined. Looking at the four canonical gospels, the Christologically-related Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) had an easy passage into the canon while the passage of the Fourth Gospel (John) was more difficult.

The Gnostic gospels were excluded from the canon because of their heterodox Christology, and for literary reasons as well since there's a fundamental relationship between aesthetic and ideology. Compared with other writings, canonical scripture functions as great literature as well as sound theology. Non-canonical writings function as another kind of literature altogether, regardless of the ideas they represent. Comparisons are odious but they're still made when shaping canons. In the sacred canon, there are literary as well as theological reasons

for including the Gospel of Luke and excluding the Gospel of Mary Magdalene. In the secular canon, there are literary as well as philosophical reasons for including *Mansfield Park* and excluding *The Da Vinci Code*.

In each of the Synoptic Gospels Jesus asks his disciples: Who do you say I am? When they tell him he's the messiah he charges them to tell no one. We call this the messianic secret. In the Fourth Gospel there's no secret since Jesus is more forthcoming about his identity and mission: I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. When compared to Matthew, Mark and Luke, this is a startling admission to make and it needs to be considered against John's relatively difficult passage into the canon.

As John stands somewhere between the Synoptics and the Gnostics, it's worth contemplating why John's Christology was eventually deemed to be canonical while Gnostic Christology wasn't. The litmus test of orthodoxy is that Gnostic Christology cannot reconcile the canonical understanding of Jesus as true God and true man—like us in all things except sin—because according to the Gnostics Jesus is a divine figure whose humanity is either denied or isn't the same as our own. Occasionally the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel doesn't seem fully human either.

Whether orthodox or heterodox, canonical or non-canonical, when we embark on any quest for the historical Jesus we're constantly reminded of how constructed the personality of Christ is. It's hardly radical to acknowledge that mainstream Christianity has accepted some constructions to be true and declared others to be false, as it seeks to answer the question Jesus asks: Who do you say I am? What's radical is the suggestion that these constructions are entirely human and have nothing to do with divine inspiration. The challenge—which confronts Jews and Christians alike—is to lay bare the evolutionary nature of their similar-but-different canons and still see the hand of God guiding them.

CANONICAL HUMANITY

LITERARY NOVELS once regarded as essential to the curriculum have distinctive characteristics compared with other novels. According to its ideology and aesthetic, each novel asks: Who do you say I am? But the question is asked about humanity rather than divinity, since it's framed in a post-metaphysical age where constructions of divinity are no longer thought to be within the province of the novelist, or are studiously ignored for political reasons, or are deemed irrelevant, or are now simply invisible.

This secular canon includes particular genres of novel, each of which contributes to the literary exploration of what it means to be human: neoclassicism, romanticism, modernism and postmodernism.

Neoclassicism and romanticism are opposite sides of the same coin. Both share the paradigm of classical metaphysics and both are grounded in Plato's model of the mind as a tripartite structure of reason, feeling and base appetite. They belong in equal measure to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, which in turn was inspired by the Enlightenment of ancient Greece.

The varieties of modernism belong to the critique of the Enlightenment—that is, to the post-metaphysical interrogation of classical metaphysics and its Platonic model of the mind—conducted in various ways by phenomenology, existentialism, metapsychology and structuralism. Postmodernism continues modernism's interrogation and critique but its commitment to post-structuralism allows it to be less hostile towards classical metaphysics, and more aware of the debt the literary novelist owes to classical metaphysics.

When we consider the secular canon in terms of these genres, each with its own ideology and aesthetic, we come up against another chicken-and-egg scenario about authorship; whether authors are inspired or constructed, or struggle with inspiration and construction in the same way we struggle with nature and nurture. Not long ago, literary authors were able to claim a special status, granted to them by the romantic vision of the intellectual artist beaver away at the human condition, adopting this or that position on the relationship between imagination and reality, *logos* and *mythos*, or freedom and contingency. What was the chicken-and-egg scenario there? The literary author's autonomous sensibility or the social expectations of what they were meant to achieve?

Margaret Atwood studied literature as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto and a postgraduate at Harvard. She's deeply familiar with neoclassicism, romanticism, modernism and postmodernism; with the novel that interrogates the shared meta-narrative of coloniser and colonised; and with the national novel that's simultaneously international. She also has a broad and impressive knowledge of the sacred canon, other writing from the classics and humanities and sciences, and the history of ideas, which she wears lightly and gracefully. She knows too that while her literary predecessors were allowed to claim a special status, her contemporaries are expected to behave differently.

In her non-fiction, Atwood speaks more of the author struggling to fill the empty page than working to any tradition, let alone a tradition with canons and a meta-narrative, but sometimes traditional themes appear in her novels if only to let her interrogate the conventions they represent. In *The Blind Assassin* (2001), for which she won the Booker Prize, her protagonist Iris—the muscle that controls what the eye can see; the messenger of the gods—chose “between [neo]classicism and romanticism” in her youth. Iris preferred “to be upright and con-

tained—an urn in daylight”, while her younger sister Laura becomes a romantic prototype and all that implies canonically.

This chronology is correct. Neoclassicism comes just before romanticism; they coexist in the same family or paradigm. Both are “like bookends” framing the character of Alex Thomas, who is the revolutionary face of modernism. Towards the end of the novel, Atwood surprises the reader by subverting the canonical roles of neoclassicism and romanticism. Iris ends up being quite different from the typical neoclassical prototype. It’s she, not the romantic Laura, who had the clandestine affair with the modernist Alex. It’s she who wrote the novel within the novel famously attributed to Laura. It’s she who remained anonymous and allowed history to regard her sister as a tragic heroine. Conversely, Laura’s identity remains a mystery. She commits suicide because of an excess of feeling—a very romantic thing to do—while Iris the survivor lives on to tell their story, Canada’s meta-narrative, extraordinarily similar to Australia’s meta-narrative, which only she has the strength of character to tell.

The novel is immensely literary, as idea and as art, and yet Atwood is careful about admitting to a literary vocation and acknowledges the pitfalls of the romantic image of the artist as inspired. She’s wary of the “drastic mythologies” of the author as self-dedicated “priestess of the imagination” devoted to creating a “perfect work”. But even Atwood admits: “In truth, if you do not acknowledge at least some loyalty to this ideal ... you are unlikely to achieve more than mediocrity, and perhaps a glaring insignificance.”

In an age where the secular canon is contested, and the author shouldn’t admit to writing for it—since she’s meant to be writing against it for the sake of her sisters—Atwood still believes in a special kind of story. In the process she reinforces the postmodernist axiom that there’s nothing outside the meta-narrative. For example, she tells the story of Gilgamesh, the first shaman and author:

He wants the secret of life and death, he goes through hell, he comes back, but he hasn’t got immortality, all he’s got is two stories—the one about his trip, and the other ... about the flood. So the only thing he really brings back with him is a couple of stories. Then he’s really, really tired, and then he writes the whole thing down on a stone.

Being a shaman, descending to the dead, negotiating with them, ascending to write up what you’ve wrested from them, is exhausting but important. And who is meant to read this important story? Atwood tells us there is an implied reader, an ideal reader, for whom she is writing, who exists on a continuum somewhere between

a real person in her life and the God who commands her to write but refuses her the security of knowing the certainty of the command. If all this doesn’t make Atwood canonical what does?

CANONICAL GRACE

ALIAS GRACE (1997) is one of Atwood’s more canonical novels, being as grounded in the meta-narrative as *The Blind Assassin*. Its central mystery, based on a true story, is brilliantly described but never solved. Grace Marks was one of the most notorious Canadian women of the 1840s, convicted of murder at the age of sixteen. Her trial was widely reported in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States because the combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes was “attractive to the journalists of the day”.

As opinion about Grace was divided from the start, her death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. During her long incarceration Grace continued to polarise public opinion. Attitudes towards her reflected contemporary ambiguity about women: was Grace “a female fiend and temptress, the instigator of the crime” or “an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent” by threats from her co-accused for fear of her own life? In searching for the true character of the historical Grace, as a theologian searches for the true character of the historical Jesus, Atwood confronted the same problem as the theologian: all textual evidence portrays a highly constructed person.

Atwood’s purpose was not just to write a history or a biography about Grace. It was to write a novel through which she could achieve something she couldn’t achieve in non-fiction. This doesn’t mean *Alias Grace* is untrue, any more than the non-literal portrayals of Jesus in the canonical gospels are untrue. Atwood interpreted her sources with wisdom and integrity, adding to them only when it was appropriate. In answering the “Who do you say I am?” of Grace’s humanity, Atwood complements the “Who do you say I am?” of Jesus’ divinity. She worked with the same kinds of information the authors of the canonical gospels worked with. She didn’t tamper with that information. She didn’t go down any Gnostic path.

There are four themes in *Alias Grace* central to Atwood’s portrait of Grace’s identity: her experience of being a constructed woman in the nineteenth century, without a voice to describe herself; her relationship with Simon Jordan, a doctor whose motive is to use those constructions to develop an empirical system of metapsychology (that prefigures Freudianism); her relationship with Jeremiah the Peddler, and his many aliases, a con-man who appears to have an affinity with her but who in fact is simply another constructor of her identity;

and her relationship with Enoch Verringer, a clergyman representing Western religion, who supports her throughout her incarceration, against a great deal of powerful and institutional opposition, and who is ultimately responsible for her pardon.

At the end of the novel, Grace reveals her own theology—forged from her metaphorical passion, death and resurrection—through which she rearticulates the fundamental truths of classical metaphysics while at the same time adapting its paradigm to make sense to her. It's unclear whether this theology is hers alone, or is shared by her literary creator, just as it's unclear whether the historical Jesus shares the theology attributed to him by his literary creators. Some things are only clear in the light of faith.

Contemporary constructions of Grace are aliases through which Atwood represents the clashes of horizon that occurred during much of the nineteenth century. These aliases are traceable to the Hegelian dialectic of master and servant, which in turn originates in the Greek myths of rationality and irrationality. Grace's contemporaries choose from two Platonic choices, or rather from one choice with antithetical aspects: she can be a servant embodying the heart's noble feeling (a madonna), or she can be a servant embodying the groin's base appetite (a whore). Her contemporaries never allow her a master's reason—although one suspects Atwood believes she has a great deal of reason that she's forced to conceal—and while she's aware of her aliases as constructions she still acts them out because there's no alternative for her.

Depending on who you were in the nineteenth century, you would more than likely be trying to translate Grace's aliases into science or its opposite somewhere between spirituality and spiritualism. Those who believed Grace to be evil are identified with neoclassical reason; they need to invoke science to demonise and control Grace because of their classical fear of the irrational and their misguided trust in reason. Those who believe Grace to be good are identified with romantic feeling; they form a federation of strange bedfellows—religionists, spiritualists, mesmerists, hypnotists, con men—who don't share neoclassicism's fear of the irrational: that is, until the irrational takes some of them out of their comfort zone.

SIMON JORDAN hopes to penetrate Grace's unconscious, recover her memories, and discover the truth about her innocence or guilt. One of his motives is to validate his empirical theory of mind, which would give him fame as well as contribute

something important to modern medical science. Another motive is hidden and only emerges as his relationship with his landlady evolves from something harmless to something as dangerous and transgressing as the relationship Grace is meant to have had with her alleged lover and accomplice.

Both doctor and patient appear to treat the psychoanalytical experiment seriously but Atwood sends it up. One comic sign, which bemuses the heroine, is Jordan's attempt to use associative objects to trigger repressed memories. He begins with a red apple but no memory is evoked. Grace merely sees it as a reminder of a fruit she's deprived of in prison. Her response, when he leaves the room, is to press the apple against her forehead, signalling to the reader that he's trying to transpose the myth of the apple, and hence the myth of the fall, from one side of her cranium to the other. Then he tries tuberous root vegetables that all grow underground and hopefully will lead Grace's conscious into the underworld of her unconscious.

As the novel progresses, and each new attempt to systematise her unconscious fails, Jordan interrogates Grace in an increasingly forensic manner. As he becomes more aggressive she becomes more opaque. Whatever truth she possesses is packaged within dreams or is simply forgotten; at times she covers her eyes with a hand and says (somewhat campily, I suspect) "All that time is dark to me, sir". When he attributes motives that place her in an unflattering light she points out to him that thinking about a criminal act is not the same as doing it. As Grace says, if "we were all on trial for our thoughts, we would all be hanged".

Their relationship becomes a "contest of wills" in which Jordan wants to know what Grace "refuses to tell" or what she "chooses perhaps not even to know". His intention is to pry the truth out of her. He sees himself as a fisherman who's got "the hook in her mouth". He hopes he can "pull her out" of "the deep blue sea". He thinks of this mission "as a rescue" but Grace has already admitted to the reader that she doesn't appreciate being likened to a fish. Perhaps that's why she's evading his hook.

During these pre-Freudian endeavours, Jordan maintains an appalling and arrogant insensitivity to the social and economic and moral dimensions of Grace's reality. Atwood is clear about his lack of humanity for Grace, his ambition for himself, and the abusiveness of his psychoanalytical experiment. Ultimately, Jordan fails to rescue Grace, and Atwood makes us grateful for his failure. He abandons Grace and escapes from his dangerous landlady. Later, Grace writes him a letter reminding him that

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spiritualists,
hypnotists, conmen.*

he was going to “write a letter to the Government” on her behalf, to set her free, and she’s now afraid he will “never do so”. The power he had over her life—as a man and a doctor—explains her complicity in a pseudo-scientific experiment that’s indistinguishable from any other treatment she’s received from men throughout her life.

JEREMIAH THE PEDDLER has an apparent affinity with Grace. Atwood describes an attraction between them and weaves a mystery around their friendship. From the moment Jeremiah meets Grace he wishes her luck, warns her of “sharp rocks ahead”, and tells her she’s “one of us”, which means she too is a romantic prototype.

Occasionally Jeremiah the Peddler reappears in Grace’s life, each time in a new disguise, as the noted medical practitioner Jerome DuPont, as the master of neuro-hypnotism Geraldo Ponti, as the celebrated medium Gerald Bridges. He often makes prescient observations about her reality and the dangers before her. Grace once asked him about this prescience. His reply is: “The future lies hid in the present, for those that can read it.” But is he simply reading the signs for what they are? Is his clairvoyance just common sense?

Early in the novel Jeremiah asks Grace to “come away” with him. When she asks whether they will be married, his answer is: “Marriage never did any good ... if the two are of a mind to keep together, they will.” Grace is alarmed. If she’s surrounded by present dangers there’ll still be future dangers with Jeremiah on the fringes of respectable society. These are similar to the dangers facing Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* should she become too involved with Willoughby, or those facing Jane in *Jane Eyre* should she marry Rochester before his first wife dies. Life with the handsome and basically decent Jeremiah may well be better than any other available to Grace at the time. But she’s been chosen for a crucible of suffering, just as Jesus was, and the life she’s eventually given provides her with rewards Jeremiah couldn’t or wouldn’t give her.

The turning point in Jeremiah–Jerome–Geraldo–Gerald’s clairvoyant ability comes when he hypnotises Grace as part of another pseudo-scientific experiment, in the presence of Simon Jordan and Enoch Verringer, in an attempt to discover the truth about the murder. Jerome does the hypnotising, and the reader suspects he’s tutored Grace in what to say while she’s under. But either he’s a good actor, or he’s confronted by what the hypnosis reveals, since Grace reveals something unexpected even to him.

While Grace is under, a voice issuing from her admits to being present when the murder was committed. But the voice is ambiguous about who committed it: “The kerchief killed her. Hands held it ... The wages of sin is death. And this time the gentleman dies as well, for once.

Share and share alike.” The voice claims to be another servant, the dead Mary Whitney, who entered Grace’s body while she was unconscious a few years earlier. The voice admits to telling the murderer “to do it”, making the murder a proxy not only for any motive Grace may have but for the motives all female servants may have against all masters who abuse them.

Atwood lets the reader suspect Jeremiah–Jerome–Geraldo–Gerald is just another constructor of the historical Grace. After the hypnosis, when he realises she’s a mystery, even to him, he disappears from her life, this time for good. Perhaps she’s challenged him in the same way she’s challenged Jordan. The reader is never sure.

WITHOUT ENOCH VERRINGER the novel’s moral recognition wouldn’t eventuate. Eventually, both the neoclassical Jordan and romantic Jeremiah escape from what Grace represents. Verringer stands by her because he knows that to abandon her is to abandon Christ.

Verringer is committed to the social gospel. He’s the only protagonist who sympathises with the cultural context of Grace’s situation. As he explains to Jordan early in the novel, there’s “a widespread feeling against Grace”, in this “most partisan” country, from Tories who “confused Grace with the Irish Question” even though “she is a Protestant”. In the public mind “the murder of a single Tory gentleman” was the same “as the insurrection of an entire race” of immigrants such as Grace.

Verringer puts the case succinctly: “We are caught between the notion of a possibly innocent woman, whom many believe to be guilty, and a possibly guilty woman, whom some believe to be innocent.” He’s interested in the truth the Lord says will make us free, even if that truth is uncomfortable as well as an affront to empiricism and science. Witnessing to that truth means recognising the social and economic and moral dimensions of Grace’s dilemma. Verringer eventually encounters evil during Grace’s hypnosis, which leaves him “somewhat shaken” and needing to pray for the strength to make the “leap of faith” required to maintain Grace’s innocence in the face of the possibility of her guilt. The strength that allows his leap of faith comes from a belief in a God who “must have his reasons, obscure though they may appear to mortal eyes”.

Over the decades Verringer keeps working towards Grace’s pardon, against the weight of public opinion, institutional authority, and vested interest, and above all against the neoclassical fear of the irrational that was being repackaged as science in the nineteenth century. If Jordan eventually fears what Grace represents, and even Jeremiah eventually avoids her, Verringer never fears or avoids her because he accepts that Christ can be known through Grace and this knowledge doesn’t depend on her innocence or guilt. It depends on the broader social and

economic and moral truth about her life as a poor female servant, not simply on a few constructions of her identity. It depends on the call to repentance and forgiveness through which the fullness of divine and human love are known. Only Verringer, the novel's representative of Western religion, understands the significance of her name, Grace Marks, the Marks of Grace.

At the end of the novel, released from thirty years imprisonment and Verringer's pastoral care, Grace marries Jamie Walsh, son of her murdered employer's overseer, who had shown her a boyish love in his youth yet testified against her during her trial. Whenever Grace recalls "a few stories" from her previous life of "torment and misery", Walsh repeatedly asks whether she will ever forgive him. Grace is annoyed at first, although she doesn't admit it, because she knows that "few understand the truth about forgiveness".

For Grace it's not the culprits who need to be forgiven, it's the victims: "because they are the ones who cause all the trouble. If they were only less weak and careless, and more foresightful ... think of all the sorrow in the world that would be spared". Just as Atwood loves female villains, and the example of female evil, she's fond of subverting the prototype of woman as victim. She's not alone. Since Austen the secular canon has been written by female authors who bestow upon their heroines varying degrees of disadvantage that need to be overcome. This canonical pursuit is not simply a matter of describing and inscribing female victimhood. It's a matter of maturity, and the canonical author knows maturity isn't easy.

In the last chapter, Grace is embroidering a quilt. The pattern is called the Tree of Paradise and she's changing it to suit her own ideas because "the Bible may have been thought out by God" but it was "written down by men" and "like everything men write down, such as the newspapers, they got the main story right but some of the details wrong". In her pattern, if you ate of the forbidden fruit "you would die, but if you didn't eat of it you would die also; although if you did eat of it, you would be less bone-ignorant by the time you got around to your death".

Around her pattern there's a border of entwined snakes, as "without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing". Within the pattern are triangles for all the female victims in her story. She intends to embroider featherstitching "around each one of them" to "blend them in as part of the pattern" so "we will all be together".

Grace has survived all constructions of her identity, neoclassical and romantic, quasi-modern and pseudo-scientific. She knows life is a story, perhaps even a meta-narrative. While she was telling her story to Jordan during her imprisonment, she was unsure whether she "must go on" with the story or whether the story "must

go on" with her, carrying her "locked tight shut" inside it "along the track it must travel, straight to the end" even though she hurls herself against the walls of the story screaming and crying and begging God to let her out. For Grace, only God can release her from the story, and she thanks God for allowing her to transcend the story.

THE NOVEL AS SCRIPTURE

CANONICAL NOVELS, like canonical scripture, don't only offer an ideological position. They also function as works of art; their ideology and their aesthetic support each other. Atwood is an author whose work has grown and developed enormously—as idea and as art—during her distinguished career.

It would be wrong to place Atwood in a theological tradition she may not believe in and may even object to. Still, it's noticeable that Atwood refers to God quite often in her non-fiction, even if in novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* her critique of religion gives some readers the impression she has an anti-religious cast of mind. If it's unwise to make too much of this, it's useful to recall what Charlotte Brontë said in the preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, when defending herself against those who questioned her religious orthodoxy:

Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns. These things and deeds are diametrically opposed: they are as distinct as is vice from virtue. Men too often confound them: they should not be confounded; appearance should not be mistaken for truth; narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ.

I suspect Atwood agrees with the canonical thrust of Brontë's sentiments, regardless of her private beliefs.

What Atwood has in common with Brontë, and with other canonical women, is a commitment to interrogating the meta-narrative for the sake of truth. The authors of the canonical gospels had the same commitment. Atwood's interrogation of Grace's constructed identity doesn't exclude her from the canon. Indeed, the way she conducts her interrogation is what makes her novel canonical. Grace isn't Jesus but we can know Jesus through Grace.

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