

Research Article

lavier Martín*

Dystopia, Feminism and Phallogocentrism in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) is a very dark dystopian fable which introduces the reader to a post-apocalyptic scenario in which the planet Earth is on the edge of destruction, and human beings have been almost completely eradicated and substituted for a new, genetically-engineered, race. In this article, I am going to analyse the fundamental role phallogocentrism plays in the destruction of humanity and in the creation of a new world order populated by primitive but more ecological creatures.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, Canadian literature, feminism, dystopia, ecofeminism

Introduction: Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy

Margaret Atwood's status as one of Canada's best known and most praised authors is such that, as J. Brooks Bouson points out, the author has been praised as "the public voice of Canadian letters [and as] Canada's literary superstar" (1). Atwood's extensive, complex and intricate corpus includes essays, literary criticism, poetry and fiction (both short stories and novels). Thus, it would be both unnecessary and unfeasible to offer a short biography here of a woman writer and who has sold millions of copies of many of her works and has won prestigious awards such as a *Guggenheim Fellowship* (1981), the *Governor General's Award* on two occasions (1966, 1985), the *Booker Prize* (2000) and the *Prince of Asturias Award for Literature* (2008). Nonetheless, I do consider it necessary to point out that throughout her highly heterogeneous and constantly mutating corpus, Atwood has always been preoccupied with such topics as women's rights and their role in Western society, environmentalism and the effects, both positive and highly negative, of technology on citizens in an increasingly globalised world. As Ashley Winstead points out, "Like the monthly interest contract that generates dollars from a promise, Atwood understands the performative power and political efficacy of speculative narratives to be located in the agency of language itself" (231).

This article will analyse Atwood's 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake*, which is the first volume of the dystopian *MaddAddam* trilogy, which includes the above-mentioned *Oryx and Crake* (2003), together with *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013).

Dystopia, De-evolution and Feminism

Like much other science fiction and/or speculative fiction novels, these three novels can be characterised as very dark fables, located in a not-too-distant future, in which homo sapiens's technological and scientific *hubris* condemns our planet and our own species to extinction. Similarly to what happens in Kurt Vonnegut's *Galápagos* (1985) and Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace* (1982), in Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, human beings have been able to improve technology to limits beyond their wildest dreams, but

^{*}Corresponding author: Javier Martín, Universidad de Córdoba, Córdoba, spain, E-mail: javier.martin@uco.es

these improvements have been reached at a very high price, that of the apocalypse.

Since the dawn of humanity, human beings have considered themselves to be the most perfect creatures on Earth. Consequently, we have positioned our species at the top of a pyramid which encompasses all living creatures on the planet. Thus, every ancient religion conceptualised gods and goddesses as anthropomorphic, both from a physical perspective and from a moral one. As is well-known, throughout history divine entities have tended to share human virtues and faults alike. This conception has been re-enforced by the majority of holy texts, such as the Christian Bible. As a quintessential example, I consider it relevant to quote the *Bible*'s *Book of Genesis*:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground. (Genesis 1: 26)

During the Middle Ages, theocracy placed God at the centre of both human lives and the universe. Nonetheless, men continued to have a privileged status, since mankind was created in God's perfect image. Later on, during the Renaissance period, anthropocentrism became prevalent, and philosophers (even theologians) substituted human beings for God as the central focus of their study.

With the advent of modernity and the rise of capitalism, science and reason replaced religion and philosophy. But the idea that mankind was better than any other species remained unchanged, as Darwin's Origin of Species clearly corroborates.

It would be extremely difficult to disagree with Darwin's conclusions from a merely scientific point of view. However, from a moral perspective, the superiority of mankind becomes more dubious: for example, while men have been able to produce countless scientific, social and artistic wonders; they also have perpetrated the most indescribable acts of cruelty and atrocity towards the planet and their fellow humans. Human viciousness and lack of respect for the environment can be traced back to the very origins of the species. However, the exponential scientific and technological advancements that took place during the twentieth century allowed mankind to become exceedingly destructive, both to the planet and to itself.

The influential philosopher Theodor Adorno affirmed that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). In the wake of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, human-induced global warming, and so on, it becomes necessary to wonder to what extent is not equally barbaric to consider humans to be the most advanced species on this planet.

Many contemporary American novelists have devoted some of their most valuable works to this exact question: are humans really superior to other species or, on the contrary, have we developed some sort of Derridean autoimmune disease which is destined to destroy itself, us, all other species and even the planet. It is not surprising that many of these authors were speculative fiction authors, science fiction authors or simply writers who embraced those genres when tackling this challenging and ominous question. The list of novels which depict a human-induced apocalypse is virtually endless, and ranges from Isaac Asimov to Thomas Pynchon (I am well aware of the fact that considering Pynchon as a science fiction author might be controversial, but I am also firmly convinced that many elements from Gravity's Rainbow [1973], V. [1963], Maxon and Dixon [1997] or even The Crying of Lot 49 [1965] can be defined as science fictional).

From the perspective of feminism, this topic is not new either, since as Soraya Copley states, "the pollution of the environment and of the food chain by reckless humanity is not a new subject in dystopian writing. It has been a major preoccupation in a range of feminist dystopian texts for over forty years, and it continues today with renewed emphasis on post-apocalyptic and eco-critical dystopia" (41). As a matter of fact, feminist dystopia is not new to Atwood either. As Cristina Nicolaescu explains in her analysis of the author's 1972 novel Surfacing, "Ecofeminism builds a kind of bridge between these two theoretical groundings ["voice" and "subaltern" in Gayatri Spivak's theory] and tries to link feminism and ecology in the sense that the oppression of women and the oppression of the environment are two issues, which are closely connected" (350-51).

At this point it is important to mention that Atwood disagrees with the majority of critics who consider her speculative works to be dystopian, insisting that they are rather examples of "ustopia," which she defines as "the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, each contains a latent version of the other" ("The Road to Ustopia"). Atwood's definition of "ustopia" is fully coherent with Lyman Tower Sargent's concept of "critical dystopia." The latter includes speculative dystopian fiction written after 1980 and demands more careful reading, due to the many nuances it contains (1-37).

Lee Rozelle is one of the few critics who agree with Atwood, declaring that, from an ecocritical perspective *Oryx* & *Crake* is closer to utopia than it is to dystopia (61). Another important critic who shares this same idea is Calina Ciobanu, who states the following:

As Atwood figures it, however, the end of the Anthropocene is hardly the end of the world—it is simply the end of our world, the end of the world as we know it. As such, it is also an opportunity to imagine how a world that has been radically undone by that anthropo of the "Anthropocene" might come to reconstitute itself anew. (153-54)

Oryx and Crake: It's the End of The World... as We Know It

The novel *Oryx and Crake* opens *in media res*, introducing readers to a post-apocalyptic scenario in which the environment has been almost destroyed and strange, genetically-modified flora and fauna reign. The desolation is absolute, and the ruins of former metropolis lie decadent, ominous and surreal: "These things [the abandoned and collapsing buildings] are not real. They are phantasmagoria. They were made by dreams, and now that no one is dreaming them any longer they are crumbling away" (261).

In this context, the only living man on the planet awakes. He does not have a name of his own anymore and calls himself "Snowman" or "the Abominable Snowman." He is the last residue of mankind but still has a paramount role to play in the development and survival of a new race of genetically modified humanoids. They are the *Crakers*.

Using Umberto Eco's metaphor of narratives as fictional woods (1994), Snowman becomes our guide, the one narrating how the world was before the human-induced apocalypse, how Armageddon was planned and took place. At the same time, he also gives the readers some hints on the future of the planet and the new inhabitants that will take over once he is gone. Nonetheless, as an exemplary postmodern protagonist, Snowman is not really reliable since, in the world of *Oryx and Crake*, language starts to become meaningless once homo sapiens are no longer on Earth to employ it and load it with explicit, implicit and pragmatic meaning: "He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can't reach the word. He can't attach anything to it. This is happening much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries in his cherished wordlists drifting off into space" (43). Jimmy's role as a narrator is so complex that critics such as Sarah A. Appleton consider the possibility that the events narrated by this character are not real but the product of his own hallucinations:

Jimmy may also be cluing us into the possibility that the world he inhabits does not, in fact, exist; this world may only dwell in his imagination: it is the nothing that is. As countless references in the text to a myriad of dystopian fiction attest, this post-world may have been conjured by Jimmy and composed of fragments of films, books, and video game plots. Moreover, the individuals he holds responsible—Crake and Oryx—may also be mere "shadows," figments of his tortured mind. Indeed, Crake and Oryx may represent portions of his own psyche: superego and id, shadow and anima, mind and soul, thanatos, and eros. (10)

As a result of the wild environment surrounding him and the above-mentioned, progressive dissolution of meaning he's experiencing, Snowman hardly considers himself to be a human being the way he was before apocalypse took place. Nonetheless, there is a key aspect from his former self which remains unaltered: the way he conceptualizes women as mere sex objects, as the following fantasy proves: "let's pretend I'm here with you, big butt and all, getting ready to suck your brain out of your dick" (44).

Through Snowman's fragmented, chaotic and frequently contradictory memories, we discover his own past, as well as the events that led to the present desolated state of affairs. During Snowman's childhood,

American citizens were divided in two very different social classes (reminiscent of many other dystopian novels such as Orwell's 1984 [1949]), which live either in the *compounds* (a hyperbolic version of current high class, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant suburbs) or in the absolutely decadent and dangerous pleebands (located in the downtown areas of the cities). Snowman's family belonged to the higher class since his father had contributed to the development of the bio-engineering which will be responsible for the imminent extinction of the human race. His mother, on the other hand, was a very idealistic woman, whose biography is quite similar to that of the American anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman (after abandoning her family she becomes an activist, and her role as an idealist is so important that "she had attained the status of mythical being" [224]). Similarly to what happens in many of Atwood's novels, it becomes obvious that the author is both pro-women's rights and a supporter of feminism. She also comes across as being highly sceptical of some feminist thinkers who, according to the author tend to be too simplistic. Thus, as J. Brooks Bouson declares, Atwood's preoccupations in *Oryx & Crake* are certainly feminist, but at the same time go beyond feminism: "[In the MaddAddam novels] Margaret Atwood reflects [...] not only on feminist but also on humanist and posthumanist concerns, as she questions the very survival of humankind in an era of environmental destruction, excessive consumption, unregulated biotechnological experiments and pandemic viruses" (9).

Thus, in *Oryx and Crake*, the first person to denounce bio-experiments as "immoral and sacrilegious" (64) is a woman. But, at the same time, she wrongly identifies her husband, and men in general, as the enemies of not only women but of mankind, since as Snowman remembers, "In Righteous Mom's cosmology, evil Dad was the sole source of hemorrhoids, kleptomania, global conflict, bad breath, tectonicplate fault lines, and clogged drains, as well as every migraine and menstrual cramp Righteous Mom had ever suffered" (68).

As a result of his highly dysfunctional family, Snowman was never close to his relatives and spent the majority of his time as a child and teenager with his only friend, Crake, surfing the internet or playing video games. Crake will late become the most intelligent person on earth and the one who will perpetrate the apocalypse; like Ozymandias in Alan Moore's seminal graphic novel Watchmen [1986-87]. The binary opposite established between Crake and Snowman is clear. Crake's intellect is outstanding; he has absolutely no interest in social interaction, Snowman is (according to Crake himself) a "neurotypical" who loves socialising and sexual affairs. The majority of the web pages they surfed together as kids and teenagers showed how cruel this dystopian future is. They display animal and human torture and executions, together with many sex acts which cannot be described as anything but aberrant and degrading to girls and women. In this novel pornography is omnipresent and it is absolutely coherent with both Andrea Dwokin's and Catherine McKinnon's theories on pornography as well as Jean Baudrillard's conceptions of hyper-reality and simulacra:

So they'd roll a few joints and smoke while watching the executions and the porn- the body parts moving around on the screen in slow motion, an underwater ballet of flesh and blood under stress, hard and soft joining and separating, groans and screams, close-up of clenched eyes and clenched teeth, spurts of this or that, If you switched back and forth fast, it all came to look like the same event. Sometimes they'd have both things at once, each on a different screen. (99)

Atwood had already dealt with the topic of pornography in a previous novel, Bodily Harm (1981), in which the protagonist is exposed, in a similar way, to hardcore pornography. As Fiona Tolan explains, those movies make the protagonist of the novel "more mistrustful of men as she senses her own role as merely "raw material" for an industry that disregards her subjectivity" (283).

Similarly to what happens to the female character in Bodily Harm, the material Crake is exposed to during the development of his personality affects his very understanding, not only of pornography but of the world itself. According to feminist critics such as Dwokin or McKinnon, the solution to the problems raised by pornography would be to ban it, since as McKinnon explains, "Protecting pornography means protecting sexual abuse as speech, at the same time that both pornography and its protection have deprived women of speech, especially speech against sexual abuse" (97). In Oryx and Crake, the wild scenes of brutal and cruel humiliation watched by Crake during his youth transform him further, into a nihilistic

character who is convinced that pornography itself is not the problem but a reflection of a species which is doomed beyond redemption. He, thus, becomes convinced that mankind's excessive intelligence and ambitious technological skills are not just a threat to women but, in fact, the planet's worst enemy. In other words, Crake does not think that banning pornography could alleviate the situation. On the contrary, he is convinced of the need to ban mankind as a species.

Suddenly, one night, while surfing child pornography online and developing a nihilistic view of the world, Crake discovered Oryx. At that time, she is only about eight years old and seems to come from a non-identified Eastern tropical country. She is performing sex on a much older white sex tourist. But, as Crake clearly identifies, the expression in her eyes defy hopelessness and grief. At this moment, Crake is instantaneously sure of his own destiny and the destiny he is going to impose on all of mankind. After this gloomy and sad epiphany, he starts to develop his plan: he will create a new race of genetically-created humanoids who are free from lust, envy, superstition, money, gods and all the elements that simultaneously define us as human beings and as brutal creatures. Crake's plan will, consequently, change the world.

This fact constitutes an important departure from previous novels by Atwood, in which characters did fantasise with another world but were not brave enough (or simply could not) to create that alternate, more benign, universe. As Linda Hutcheon stated in an early analysis of Atwood's novels, which would be valid until the publication of *Oryx & Crake*, "In all of her novels, however, characters also create worlds which *only* they can inhabit, private fantasy worlds of daydream that offer escape from and consolation for the world which they must inhabit but cannot alter beyond a certain point" (28).

Once the new genetically-designed humanoids are ready, Crake will distribute a lethal virus in order to annihilate mankind. He will not do so to get revenge on humans but to make sure homo sapiens cannot slay the new species and/or the planet. Crake is also sure about something: these new boys and girls will need a teacher. To Crake, the only suitable candidate on the whole planet for this position is that very child prostitute from the videos, whose identity and whereabouts he does not know.

Crake's Plan and Phallogocentrism

As we see, the post-apocalyptic world Atwood creates in this novel is clearly being produced by phallogocentrism. The term phallogocentrism is a neologism coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his essay "Plato's Pharmacy" (1981) which, according to Mary Klages, can be defined as follows:

Phallogocentric refers to a combination of phallocentric and logocentric systems of thought. Jacques Derrida describes Western metaphysics as logocentric, centred on logic and on the spoken word as guarantor of presence and identity. An example of logocentrism is the Biblical account of the creation of the world: "In the Beginning was the Word." From a logocentric perspective, speech is the original form of language and writing is merely the transcription of speech; the power of speech is associated with consciousness, selfhood, and rational thought. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction is a critique of this philosophical stance. He accuses Jacques Lacan of being both phallocentric, in naming the Phallus as the centre of the Symbolic Order, and logocentric, in naming the Phallus as the source and origin of language, the transcendental signified, and names this stance "phallogocentrism." Hélène Cixous and post-structural feminists also critique phallogocentric Western philosophy for its subordination of the feminine to the masculine. (257-58)

Crake, a man, cannot tolerate all the harm men cause women and the planet. He will use a woman to amend previous mistakes but will not consult with her regarding the details of the plan. At the same time, he believes in reason and technology alone and rejects ideas such as compassion or love. Thus, when his friend declares "we're doomed without hope," his answer is cold, rational and deprived of any empathy: "Only as individuals" (139).

On the other hand, Snowman, his only friend and unconscious collaborator, is moved exclusively by his own masculine sexual urges: "He felt jerked around by his own dick as if the rest of him was merely an inconsequential knob that happened to be attached to one end of it" (297). It becomes evident that in *Oryx and Crake*, men are only capable of destruction even, when, as is the case with Crake, they are trying to find a solution to the planet's sufferings (which have been produced by mankind's intelligence, ego and brutality).

Oryx is a very different character. Sold as a child slave at a very young age, she was forced into prostitution and victimised in countless acts of cruelty and humiliation. Consequently, her childhood memories are reduced to her as a sex object and men as walking penises: "She could remember the singularity of his penis, but she couldn't remember the singularity of his face" (154). As she matured, men kept abusing her, but she was able to find a way to use these very same abuses as tools to escape her role as a subaltern, by trading sex for education: "I traded him [...] He taught me to read. To speak English and to read English words. Talking first, then reading [...] it was a good trade" (166). As we see, Oryx does not accept Andrea Dwokin's idea of pornography and prostitution but rather embraces that of other radical feminist thinkers who define voluntary prostitution as liberating and self-empowering to women, who are able to take advantage of the role men have given them as consuming objects. Thus, Oryx is not only not traumatised by all the abuses she suffered but also free from any hatred and does not have a desire for revenge. After learning English, Oryx is sold to an old American man as a "garage girl" (a sex-slave who is stocked by the owner in the garage, along with his car which, as a materialistic American man, is his other favourite object). While Oryx matures, suffers and becomes stronger, from a moral and intellectual perspective, Crake spends many developing his apocalyptic plan, as well as unsuccessfully trying to find Oryx. He finally locates this woman, who is essential to his future plan and who became mythical to him when he was a Bio-engineering graduate student. Oryx and Crake finally meet accidentally, since she is sent to him by Student Services; which provide outstanding students with prostitutes so that they do not lose focus on their studies when they need sex. Once again it becomes clear the world depicted in Oryx and Crake is a completely phallogocentric one that it is obsessed with satisfying masculine sexual appetites, at the same time as satiating mankind's scientific and technical lust.

While Crake studies advanced bio-engineering and Oryx is a sex-slave; Snowman attends a liberal arts college; an institution which, in this exaggerated version of phallocentric, capitalistic and utilitarian America, is utterly useless. Thus, the college has adjusted its very logo in order to attract more students: "Our Students Graduate with Employable Skills, ran the motto underneath the original Latin motto, which was Ars Longs, Vita Brevis" (220). As Lara Dodds remarks, "Jimmy's marginalization illustrates the hollowing out of culture that pervades the world of the novel" (118).

After graduating, Crake hires Snowman to create advertisements for his new company. The company produces and sells BlyssPluss Pills, which eliminate the external causes of death, prevent sexual diseases, are more effective than Viagra and will, as a hidden side-effect, annihilate human life on Earth by disseminating the Juve Virus (346, 399). The success of this new medicine is mostly due to its sexual benefits. In other words, men end up disappearing when trying to get more frequent and better sexual encounters. At this point it becomes necessary to quote Susan Bordo, who published Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body in 1993:

Many see the body both as a living cultural form and as a subject of scholar theorizing—as a significant register of the fact that we are living in fragmented times. Our cultural attitudes toward the body are full of dissonances, expressive of the contradictions of our society. On the one hand, sex has become deadly; on the other hand, it continues to be advertised as the preeminent source of ecstasy, power and self-fulfillment. (288)

The lethal pills will be distributed by none other than Oryx herself. As we see, Crake's goals are to save the planet from human-induced apocalypse but, at the same time, to give Oryx the opportunity for revenge on the men who abused her as a child and as a young woman; revenge she herself does not desire to achieve at all. But Crake behaves in a patronising manner towards women in general, and towards Oryx in particular. As a sort benevolent dictator, he will give Oryx what he believes Oryx needs, not what she naively considers she needs.

When Snowman arrives at Crake's office, he discovers Oryx. She is teaching Crake's new geneticallygenerated race. The members of the new race are free from all human emotion and sexual appetite. Thus, in her posthumanistic reading of the novel, Jane Bone defines these new genetically-created children as beautiful monsters" (2016, 631). Jay Sanderson agrees with this definition, reminding us that, "In literature, hybrid creatures are often used by authors to evoke images that raise suspicion, apprehension and unease

about science, biotechnology, the government and human nature" (218).

Crake explains why Oryx can be their only educator in the following terms: "we need a go-between, someone who could communicate on their own level" (363). It might seem paradoxical that in a novel written by a feminist author such as Atwood, the female protagonist is a passive agent who fulfils a man's plans, and whose biggest contribution to those goals is to distribute a commercial product and to educate that man's children. But as Tammy Amiel Houser explains,

Atwood rewrites the feminine myth of gracious housewifery in several ways, both disrupting the stereotypical association between women and selfless giving and signifying an ethics of nurturance and generosity. The dual movement, a critique of women's domestic servitude along with an ethical endorsement of the idea of generous hospitality, establishes fascinating tensions in Atwood's fiction. (109)

As we see, to Crake's merely scientific mind, Oryx is absolutely pure. Nonetheless, to Snowman's phallic's eyes, she is very different: "He wanted to touch Oryx, worship her, open her like a beautiful wrapped package, even though he suspected that there was something- some harmful snake or homemade bomb or lethal powder—concealed within" (366). As Yael Shapira explains, Atwood has traditionally employed women and female bodies to build "a longstanding narrative formula that joins the "grotesque" female body to a story of women's misconduct to produce a cautionary tale about the dangers of female transgression" (52).

Crake thinks human beings are beyond redemption and need to be replaced by a new, uncorrupted, breed of creatures. It is important to mention that, surprising and uncanny as this notion might be, some prestigious ecologists such as Arne Naess agree with Crake and defend the idea that unless the human population is drastically reduced and becomes more primitive, the planet will be inevitably destroyed ("A 'Joke-Filled Romp' through End Times: Radical Environmentalism, Deep Ecology and Human Extinction in Margaret Atwood's Eco-apocalyptic *MaddAddam* Trilogy" 341-357). Some ecofeminist critics, such as Carolyn Merchant, also advocate for a more primitive social order in which nature is both worshipped and respected (11).

Crake is also convinced that men are more responsible for the destruction of the planet than women. Consequently, only a woman can teach new beings. However, it cannot be just any woman; it must be one who has suffered the worst torments and who has transformed from a slave into a sort of Nietzschean superwoman. Snowman agrees she is the ideal instructor, but due to radically different reasons: "He could never get used to her, she was fresh every time, she was a casketful of secrets. Any moment now she would open herself up, reveal to him the essential thing, the hidden thing at the core of life, the thing he was longing to know. The thing he'd always wanted" (370-371). In other words, the binary Crake/Snowman stands for the perfect case of phallogocentrism, a phallogocentrism which uses Oryx as a postmodern and paradoxical instrument of the creation of a new species and as the agent of global destruction.

Concluding Remarks

By the end of the narrative, Snowman remembers how, when the virus started to destroy mankind Crake killed Oryx and committed suicide, leaving Snowman (who had been made immune to the *Juve* killer virus) as the only man alive, as the only keeper of the new race of emotionally empty, but pure Crakers.

Beyond the moral debate regarding the extent to which annihilating homo sapiens is legitimate (or merited as a result of their actions throughout History) or not, Crake's plan proves to be a failure when the Crakers start to show interest in gods, material objects and monogamous matrimony. Therefore, it is safe to affirm that his experiment failed because it was dependent on a phallogocentric vision of the world, one which excluded not only art, love and emotions but also real, free, men and women from the utopian equation. Consequently, to avoid a dystopian present he creates an equally dystopian future.

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