

Woman Does not Exist: Lacan, Poe and Re-(W)righting the Feminine

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ABSTRACT: *For Lacan, in a social order characterized by the Law of the Father, women's identity is erased and they have to appropriate themselves according to the idea of the 'feminine' as conceived by masculine phantasmatic economy. This cultural 'reconstruction' of a woman's self is carried thorough a rigid process of mortification that turns women into an 'object' of knowledge, left to be reconstituted and reformulated. Literature is one such site where this textual reconstruction takes place and where this idea of 'The Woman' is raised to the level of a cultural fantasy. This essay interprets three short stories "Ligeia", "The Oval Portrait" and "Morella" by Edgar Allan Poe to demonstrate how the female self is obliterated and her identity reconstituted to fit into masculine fantasy framework. All three stories have male narrators and the women characters die at the end and the essay contends that this death should be read as the symbolic extinction of female self to morph her into the male idea of the 'feminine'.*

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Lacan's apparently antifeminist assertion, "woman is a symptom of man" ("Seminar XXII" 22) garnered a lot of controversial attention as it was understood in terms of earlier Lacanian formulation of a 'symptom'. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek equates this early formulation with Otto Weininger's conception of ontological nothingness of 'The Woman' as she is "a materialization, an embodiment of man's sin: in herself, she doesn't exist, which is why one need not fight her actively to get rid of her. ("Symptom" 21) This implies that it is the desire of the male subject that bestows ontological status upon woman and in the absence of this desire the woman disintegrates, turns to nothing. She is a pathological symptom and the moment this symptom is 'deciphered', articulated in speech, it disappears; "Woman does not exist in herself, as a positive entity with full ontological consistency, but only as a symptom of man. Weininger was also quite outspoken about what was compromised, betrayed when man falls prey to a woman: the death-drive" (Žižek "Symptom" 21). But Lacan's formulation of symptom has something more to it and we can observe a shift in this formulation towards the end of his career. In the later Lacan, a symptom is conceived as a signifying formation which is central to the subject's ontological stability and, in fact, it is through the symptom that the subject is able to constitute a link with 'jouissance' (Žižek "Symptom" 21). This later twist in the conception of symptom 'turns the tables' as the disintegration of the symptom would invariably lead to the disintegration of the subject itself; "In this sense, "Woman is a symptom of man" means that man himself exists only through woman qua his symptom: his very ontological consistency depends on, is "externalized" in, his symptom. In other words, man literally ex-sists: his entire being lies "out there," in woman" (Žižek "Symptom" 21).

The male subjectivity hinges on the 'feminine' but the reverse is not true. A woman does not exist through man alone rather she is 'not-all' - not wholly immersed in the symbolic order like men but she knows there is something beyond too. This 'beyond' of the 'jouissance' is related with the 'death drive' Throughout his oeuvre, Lacan repeatedly mentions women like Antigone, Sygne de Coûtfontaine, Medea and Madeleine, the women who go beyond. "These are women who go beyond the limits. They strike the objects most dear to the man or get themselves stuck by death. Death appears as the horizon of a certain register of love and of jouissance beyond the phallus" (Laurent 79).

In Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction we discern such a pattern in which the principle characters, invariably male, are obsessed with 'the woman' – the woman who is just a symptom, a male fantasy. This woman

is what Freud call 'The Thing', some fictional object or essence that is something more than a person in a person. The male psyche constructs this image of 'the woman' in a fantasy space and paradoxically this fantasy space is 'open' in the sense that in a given time frame any woman can occupy it. This implies that the fantasy framework is already there and a woman is made to be adjusted in it – often through a rigid process of transmutation. Three short stories by Poe i.e. 'Ligeia' 'The Oval Portrait' and 'Morella' are analysed with this Lacanian perspective. The three stories are selected on the ground that these share amongst themselves a textual construction of a 'fantasy woman' by a male narrator and how this construction ultimately leads to the symbolic death of the real women. All three women serve as, what Lacan would call, 'The object cause of desire' for the male protagonists and are nothing more than props for their narcissistic egos. As Lacan has said; "when one is a man, one sees in one's partner what one props oneself up on, what one is propped up on by narcissistically" (Lacan "Seminar XX" 87).

In Poe's short story 'Ligeia', the narrator is obsessed with the eponymous woman and the first part of the story is kind of eulogy for Ligeia whose "rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language" (Poe 2012) made their way into his heart "by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown" (Poe 2012). The economy through which he describes her - her ethereal charms, intellectual acumen, the radiance of her complexion, the beauty of her eyes – constructs a phantasmagorical image of her and as the narrative develops, the readers wonder "what or who is Ligeia: a text, a word, a name, a woman, a ghost, a spirit, an image or an idea, something material or immaterial, a medium or a message?" (Bloom 150).

Even her name invokes all kinds of associations for the narrator and these associations consistently remind the readers that she might not be real. If we follow this line of thought then there is enough evidence in the text to suggest that Ligeia is not real, that she is just an ideal image, a fantasy. The narrator thinks that it would be a vain attempt to portray her accurately "She came and departed as shadow" (Poe 2012). He does not remember her family name and also is unable to recall the exact circumstances of their meeting. And then he seems to be even more specific when he says; "It was the radiance of an opium-dream—an airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies which hovered vision about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos" (Poe

2012). She is the radiance of an opium dream, an airy spirit, a vision more wildly divine than the phantasies - all these phrases suggest that Ligeia is an idealized male fantasy or to use Lacanian term The Woman who does not exist. The narrator piles on adjectives, metaphors and classical allusions to drive home his point and that being to materialize this phantasmatic image. Even he devotes a whole paragraph on the description of the radiance of her eyes;

They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race. They were even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad. Yet it was only at intervals—in moments of intense excitement—that this peculiarity became more than slightly noticeable in Ligeia. And at such moments was her beauty—in my heated fancy thus it appeared perhaps—the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth—the beauty of the fabulous Houri of the Turk. The hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black, and, far over them, hung jetty lashes of great length (Poe 2012).

Her learning has a surreal aspect to it and the narrator himself observes that it was hard for him to believe that a woman can have such a vast and varied learning which is only a prerogative of men.

I have spoken of the learning of Ligeia: it was immense—such as I have never known in woman. In the classical tongues was she deeply proficient, and as far as my own acquaintance extended in regard to the modern dialects of Europe, I have never known her at fault. Indeed upon any theme of the most admired, because simply the most abstruse of the boasted erudition of the academy, have I ever found Ligeia at fault? (Poe 2012).

The whole paragraph is fraught with a sense of wonder - the wonder of a man who cannot convince himself that a woman can have such vast learning. The male narcissistic self can only put up with a 'learned woman' if she is just a work of art created by him. Not surprisingly, he comes to know about her learning quite late as if it was just a surplus enjoyment, a coordinate added to an already existing fantasy scenario. Again like a constructed scenario, there is an element of exaggeration as the narrator claims that he does not know even a man who is well versed in such diverse disciplines like moral, physical and mathematical science.

The more the narrator dwells on her, the more she takes on a fantastic aspect. The narrator's musings on the eyes of Ligeia that turn to philosophical speculations on the nature of elements, universe, science and fate also tell us that despite considering Ligeia as the 'quilting point' on which his own subjectivity hinges, he does objectify her and his observations about her are at par with the scientific observations of a scientist. This reductionist approach clearly suggests that how a woman is not granted 'transcendence' by the patriarchal discourse. Men have always idealized women, tried to find in them something more than them, and whenever they find a real woman of flesh and blood, they attempt to transform her to fit into their fantasy framework.

Is not the narrator in "Ligeia" doing the same when he meets Lady Rowena Trevanion, the real woman of flesh and blood? He cannot love Lady Rowena, of course, as she is a real woman and he is in love with this 'image' of a woman, the woman who is just a figment of his imagination. This is really very interesting that in case of Ligeia, the narrator has dedicated the whole first part of the story to the description of her cerebral and corporeal aspects but when it comes to Lady Rowena, he simply sidesteps it all and pays more attention to the description of the room and the paraphernalia used in its decoration. The realistic description of the Abbey, and the bedroom which was "pentagonal in shape" and of "capricious in size":

Over the upper portion of this huge window, extended the trellice-work of an aged vine, which clambered up the massy walls of the turret. The ceiling, of gloomy-looking oak, was excessively lofty, vaulted, and elaborately fretted with the wildest and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Gothic, semi-Druidical device. From out the most central recess of this melancholy vaulting, depended, by a single chain of gold with long links, a huge censer of the same metal, Saracenic in pattern, and with many perforations so contrived that there writhed in and out of them, as if endued with a serpent vitality, a continual succession of parti-colored fires.

Here we clearly discern the difference in description between the two women. While describing Ligeia, the narrator almost completely ignores her spatio-temporal existence as he invokes abstract imagery and adjectives as if the focus of his attention is not a woman of flesh and blood but a figment of his imagination. On the other hand, as the above passage

from the story suggests, Lady Rowena is described in relation to concrete settings. There is a realistic depiction of the room with all its decorations and bric-a-brac as if the narrator is looking at the real person who exists in space and time. Moreover, there is a mention of Lady Rowena's family and her title i.e. Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine while in case of Ligeia, the narrator could not recall her parentage or the exact circumstances of their meeting. This does serve as evidence that Lady Rowena is a woman of flesh and blood while Ligeia is just a figment of imagination of the narrator, his fantasy. Furthermore, the realistic description of the setting serves another purpose too i.e. it is clear that the narrator is trying to realize his fantasy by creating this setting where he would meet 'the woman'. The anti-climax is that Lady Rowena is not 'the woman' but 'a woman' and thus she can never fill in that hole in the fantasy space.

That my wife dreaded the fierce moodiness of my temper—that she shunned me and loved me but little—I could not help perceiving; but it gave me rather pleasure than otherwise. I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man. My memory flew back, (oh, with what intensity of regret!) to Ligeia, the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed. I revelled in recollections of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty, her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love. Now, then, did my spirit fully and freely burn with more than all the fires of her own. In the excitement of my opium dreams (for I was habitually fettered in the shackles of the drug) I would call aloud upon her name, during the silence of the night, or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if, through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardour of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned—ah, could it be forever?—upon the earth (Poe 2012).

The passage is highly suggestive as it provides a profound insight into the nature of 'fantasy' and resultant process of mortification. Lady Rowena is hated by the narrator because she cannot fit herself into his fantasy. When the narrator says that his memory flew back to Ligeia what does it entail? It clearly points to the fact that he was trying to fashion Lady Rowena in the image of Ligeia. In the delirium of his opium dream he would call upon her name. This process of mortification calls to mind Slavoj Žižek's reading of Hitchcock's film "Vertigo". The protagonist of the movie, a retired police officer John Scottie Ferguson, is hired by his friend to keep

an eye on his wife, Madelaine. Scottie falls in love with her but one day she ascends the staircase of a tower in front of his eyes and jumps. This leaves Scottie devastated and heartbroken. After a few months, he comes across a woman who has this uncanny resemblance with Madelaine. The name of this woman is Judy and she is just a common girl with vulgar habits. The twist is that we come to know that she was the one who actually played the role of Madelaine in a criminal plot scripted by Scottie's friend. Scottie knows that Madelaine does not exist – she is just a fantasy but he tries to recreate her by forcing Judy to become Madelaine.

This comical identity of "resembling" and "being" announces, however, a lethal proximity: if the false Madeleine resembles herself, it is because she is in a way already dead. The hero loves her as Madeleine, that is to say, insofar as she is dead—the sublimation of her figure is equivalent to her mortification in the real. This would then be the lesson of the film: fantasy rules reality, one can never wear a mask without paying for it in the flesh (Zizek "Looking awry" 85).

For Scottie, Judy is important as far as she enters his fantasy framework. Judy loves him but in order to get this love reciprocated she must morph herself into his fantasy woman or in other words she has to take the form of a dead woman.

Similarly, Lady Rowena cannot only gain the love of the narrator if she assumes the form of Ligeia and in failing to do so she becomes detestable for the narrator. Towards the end of the story, she is attacked by a sudden mysterious illness and it is highly likely that it was nothing but this morbid desire of the narrator to 'erase' her 'self' and create her anew that took the form of a disease. Though here the story takes a 'gothic' turn as Lady Rowena consistently complains to the narrators that she sees visions. The vision that haunts her is actually that of Ligeia and it is this vision that becomes the cause of her death. The Lacanian reading of the story reveals that the vision was not some supernatural phenomenon, the return of the dead, rather it is the 'fantasy image' of the narrator that haunts Lady Rowena. The story ends at the death of Lady Rowena – a woman by the hand of 'the woman'. Lady Rowena must assume the form of the dead woman or the fantasy woman in order to be loved by her lover. No wonder, the concluding lines of the story tell us about this transformation in the most grotesque manner;

One bound, and I had reached her feet! Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements

which had confined it, and there streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and dishevelled hair; it was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight! And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. "Here then, at least," I shrieked aloud, "can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the lady—of the LADY LIGEIA." (Poe 2012).

Lady Rowena has to kill her real self as she can only be granted an existence if she resembles the idea of a woman as fantasized by the narrator.

"The Oval Portrait" is another of Poe's stories that deal with this concept of rewriting (righting) the feminine and in the process erasing the female self. The narrator of the story is again a male who, along with his valet, is forced to spend a night in a deserted Chateau. The difference between "The Oval Portrait" and "Ligeia" is that the "The Oval Portrait" is a 'framed narrative' i.e. a story within a story. Just like the second part of the narrative of "Ligeia", the narrator is meticulous about the description of the setting of the rooms, the paintings and other decoration as if he does not want to leave anything to imagination. The most astonishing feature of the room is that it is bedecked with many paintings and the narrator finds a book which is a kind of manual chronicling the history and story behind each work of art present in the room. After some time, quite suddenly, the narrator happens to notice a portrait of a lady that entranced him.

The portrait, I have already said, was that of a young girl. It was a mere head and shoulders, done in what is technically termed a vignette manner; much in the style of the favorite heads of Sully. The arms, the bosom, and even the ends of the radiant hair melted imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the back-ground of the whole. The frame was oval, richly gilded and filigreed in Moresque. As a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself. But it could have been neither the execution of the work, nor the immortal beauty of the countenance, which had so suddenly and so vehemently moved me. Least of all, could it have been that my fancy, shaken from its half slumber, had mistaken the head for that of a living person. (Poe 2012).

The most important assertion related to the portrait occurs towards the end of the paragraph when the narrator says that his fancy “had mistaken the head for that of a living person” (Poe 2012). What does this imply? The answer to this question can be found in the ‘framed narrative’. The framed narrative tells us about a young beautiful girl who falls in love with a painter who is always absorbed in his work. The painter wanted to paint her portrait and asked her to sit for him in the dark turret-chamber.

But he, the painter, took glory in his work, which went on from hour to hour, and from day to day. And he was a passionate, and wild, and moody man, who became lost in reveries; so that he would not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him (Poe 2012).

The painter’s idea of artistic perfection is founded on the ‘erasure’ of her ‘self’. With the passage of time, the ardour of the painter borders on insanity and the more he is obsessed with his art, the more oblivious he is of the humanity of the girl. He does not realize the fact that his colours are drawn from the cheeks of his beloved as his only concern was to create a master piece that is more real than the real woman in front of her. The last lines of the story just like that of “Ligeia” are horrific as the art of the painter creates a paintings that is ‘life-like but when he turns towards the girl he finds out that she is no more.

And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, 'This is indeed Life itself!' turned suddenly to regard his beloved - She was dead! (Poe 2012).

In “The Oval Portrait” we see that art is also a medium for the masculine ego to recreate the ‘feminine’ in its own fantasy image. The Woman as a symptom of man surfaces in different forms and manifestations. In this story, it emerges as the male desire to represent women through a work of art but the representation is never of a woman of flesh and blood rather a projection of the male fantasy of ‘The Woman’ who does not exist in reality. The narrator of the story is also a man and when for the first time he sees the oval portrait he thinks that he is looking at a real person. Being a male, the itinerary towards a woman is through

fantasy and for him fantasy is more real than reality. For the narrator, the woman on the canvas would always be more real than the woman represented by the painting. Another important point that should be noted here is that both in “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait”, the narrators use drugs like opium which induce a hallucinatory stupor and symbolically we can relate it to this fantasy image of the ideal woman these narrators have.

In Poe’s another short story, “Morella”, we find a curious twist to the formula of fantasy as the eponymous woman’s death is desired by the narrator. The narrator does not describe the circumstances of his meeting with Morella and curiously the passions that she aroused in him were not that of Eros; “and bitter and tormenting to my spirit was the gradual conviction that I could in no manner define their unusual meaning or regulate their vague intensity” (Poe 2012). After their marriage, Morella shuns everything for him and devotes wholeheartedly to her husband and for the narrator “It is a happiness to wonder; it is a happiness to dream” (Poe 2012). For the amazement of the narrator, Morella is not just a beautiful woman but she is a scholar, a philosopher, whose erudition is immense and she continues to impress her husband with her observations on the nature of philosophical and mystical speculations. Under her influence, the narrator also develops this habit of meditation and he admits the fact that it was a consequence of his scholarly exchanges with Morella. Very soon, the very nature of meditation leads the narrator to a different line of thinking and more he delves into the philosophical musings of philosophers like Pythagoras, Fichte and Schelling, the more he gets estranged from his wife; “But, indeed, the time had now arrived when the mystery of my wife’s manner oppressed me as a spell. I could no longer bear the touch of her wan fingers, nor the low tone of her musical language, nor the lustre of her melancholy eyes” (Poe 2012).

The text does not explain the nature of this transformation on the part of the narrator; why does he start feeling like that? This feeling grows so intense that he desires Morella’s death. In the other two stories, we have observed how the male narrators are obsessed with ‘re-formation’ of women’s ‘self’ to fit them in their fantasy framework and this process of fitting in, in fact, becomes the cause of their death but here the narrator himself wishes the death of his beloved. How can this shift be explained?

Phallogocentric discourse posits a woman as ‘object’, the object of the male ‘gaze’ and it is this male gaze through which her ‘being’ is defined. The male gaze fixes the feminine essence and transfigure it to fit into its fantasy framework. But Lacan makes a very interesting

intervention here by taking the concept of ‘gaze’ from Sartre and shifting the focal point of the gaze to the object;

Whereas Sartre had conflated the gaze with the act of looking, Lacan now separates the two; the gaze becomes the object of the act of looking, or, to be more precise, the object of the scopoc drive. The gaze is therefore, in Lacan’s account, no longer on the side of the subject; it is the gaze of the Other. And whereas Sartre had conceived of an essential reciprocity between seeing the Other and being-seenby- him, Lacan now conceives of an antinomic relation between the gaze and the eye: the eye which looks is that of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object, and there is no coincidence between the two, since ‘You never look at me from the place at which I see you’ (Evans 73).

The narrator goes through this traumatic experience of ‘being looked at’ when he stares into the eyes of Morella and this really unsettles his ‘subjectivity’:

In time the crimson spot settled steadily upon the cheek, and the blue veins upon the pale forehead became prominent; and one instant my nature melted into pity, but in, next I met the glance of her meaning eyes, and then my soul sickened and became giddy with the giddiness of one who gazes downward into some dreary and unfathomable abyss (Poe 2012).

The ‘dreary and unfathomable abyss’ that he looks into is the ‘return of the gaze’ and the abyss is the abyss of his own ‘subjectivity’. This unsettling and disturbing ‘return of the gaze’ questions the stability of male subjectivity and this is the reason that the narrator desires the death of Morella.

From the feminist perspective, Morella’s death is the negation of ‘feminine jouissance’ that cannot persist in the phallic order but despite consistent attempts at its erasure it comes back like Freudian ‘Return of the repressed’ and haunts the male subject. The narrator wishes the death of not Morella of flesh and blood but the very nature of feminine jouissance that according to Lacan goes beyond the Symbolic and touches the Real. The male subject is fascinated and at the same time frightened by the feminine jouissance and tries to obliterate it. A radical reading of the story reveals that this erasure cannot be accomplished, as Morella says: “I am dying, yet shall I live” (Poe 2012).

To the horror of the narrator, Morella does return like Freudian ‘repressed’ in form of her daughter. With every passing day the daughter would resemble more and more her mother;

And hourly grew darker these shadows of similitude, and more full, and more definite, and more perplexing, and more hideously terrible in their aspect. For that her smile was like her mother's I could bear; but then I shuddered at its too perfect identity, that her eyes were like Morella's I could endure; but then they, too, often looked down into the depths of my soul with Morella's own intense and bewildering meaning (Poe 2012).

The ‘object of the gaze’ has returned and its staring back and this stare is unfixing the ‘fixed’ male ‘subject’. The narrator is so horrified that he would not even name his daughter and would call his daughter ‘my child’ or ‘my love’ which again designates a generalization, a non-recognition of the female specificity. When at last the narrator decides to baptize his daughter, he hesitates to give her a name;

And at the baptismal font I hesitated for a name. And many titles of the wise and beautiful, of old and modern times, of my own and foreign lands, came thronging to my lips, with many, many fair titles of the gentle, and the happy, and the good (Poe 2012).

The repressed in the consciousness, like a symptom, does return and it makes him pronounce no other name but Morella; “What fiend spoke from the recesses of my soul, when amid those dim aisles, and in the silence of the night, I whispered within the ears of the holy man the syllables—Morella?” (Poe 2012).

Morella is a name, an empty signifier, and for a male subject it can be attached to any signified but in case of Morella this empty signifier refuses to hand over its arbitrariness to the male subject; “What more than fiend convulsed the features of my child, and overspread them with hues of death, as starting at that scarcely audible sound, she turned her glassy eyes from the earth to heaven, and falling prostrate on the black slabs of our ancestral vault, responded—“I am here!” (Poe 2012). The prophesy has become true; the repressed has return and despite the fact that it is repressed again, as the daughter dies, but the chain of signifiers has not broken. The phallogocentric erasure of the feminine for the construction of ‘The Woman’ cannot obliterate ‘Women’.

In these three stories discussed above, death should not be taken as ‘physical extinction’ rather it is to be understood as the ‘erasure’ of

women's 'self' through imposition of male idea of the feminine. It is the process of 're-writing' the feminine to 'right' it as if a woman should be appropriated to fit in male fantasy framework. In "Ligeia", the narrator imposes this framework on Lady Rowena and towards the end of the story Lady Rowena's can only become Ligeia (The Woman) if her own 'self' is dead. "The Oval Portrait" also stages the symbolic death of a woman's self as male dominated art represents the fantasy image of women at the expense of her real self. On the other hand, "Morella" can be read as an answer from the obliterated female self as we see that how this obliterated 'self' returns to haunt the male subject. The celebrated male love is nothing but a narcissistic projection of the ego that can only come into being through murder – the murder of the feminine 'self'. As Otto Weininger's formulation makes it clear;

Love of a woman is possible only when it does not consider her real qualities, and so is able to replace the actual psychological reality by a different and quite imaginary reality. The attempt to realize one's ideal in a woman, instead of the woman herself, is a necessary destruction of the empirical personality of the woman. And so the attempt is cruel to the woman; it is the egotism of love that disregards the woman, and cares nothing for her real inner life . . . Love is murder (qtd. in Žižek *Metastases* 140).

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