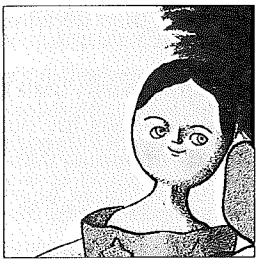
1 An Introduction to My World of Literary Toys



The fantasy world in which literary toys come alive overlaps but does not duplicate the material, mundane universe, where, in all known cultures, toys are concrete inanimate objects made from whatever materials are available to children, parents, and other adults and designated for imaginative, imitative, motor, or group play.

Toylike objects have other general societal uses, the first of which may even precede any recognized use in play. Such artifacts originally appeared as ritual objects in adult ceremonies of fertility, funeral, and ancestor-worship rites and as sacrificial substitutes or fetishes. They have also been crafted as mercantile models meant to advertise skill in fashion design, furniture making, and early technological prowess, and they function in turn as displays of conspicuous consumption. In them can be recognized educational tools meant to train the young in such orthodox societal roles as mother- and soldierhood or to exercise specific motor skills. Finally, these artifacts have often become collectible items, stimulating private or public nostalgia or historical and anthropological research, representing in miniature certain cultural artifacts, or simply existing as works of art for aesthetic contemplation.

Animated toys as characters in literature transcend these "real-world" uses in significant ways, representing not only human hopes, needs, and desires but human anxieties and terrors as well. Both developmental and existential concerns emerge in toy stories. Even before I began my serious investigation

into toy literature, I recognized that one or more of the following motifs usually appears in its narratives:

1. Toys, when they are shown as inanimate objects developing into live beings, embody human anxiety about what it means to be "real"—an independent subject or self rather than an object or other submitting to the gaze of more powerfully real and potentially rejecting live beings.
2. Toy characters embody the secrets of the night: they inhabit a secret, sexual, sensual world, one that exists in closed toy shops, under Christmas trees, and behind the doors of dollhouses—and those of our parents' bedrooms. This is an *uncanny* (in Freudian terms) world of adult mysteries and domestic intrigue.[1] It can be a marginal, liminal, potentially carnival world.
3. When manipulated by human beings—adults or children—toys embody all the temptations and responsibilities of power. As characters with whom humans identify, they also suggest the relatively powerless relationship of human beings to known or unseen forces: their dreadful vulnerability.
4. And when toys come alive as beings created by humans (usually male), they replicate "divine" creation and imply vital possibilities for human creativity while arousing concomitant anxiety about human competition with the divine. These creations also threaten human hegemony.

When I turned to toy texts previously unfamiliar to me, other aspects common to many of them demanded attention as well. For instance, the competition between adults and children for the control of toys loomed large. I realized that I had underrated the extent to which toys play out anxieties about violent mutilation, deformity, and rejection by loved ones and reveal the anger and depression that pervades the survivors of such suffering, even when those feelings are masked by self-sacrificial protestations. As I became aware of developing relationships between animated toys and anthropomorphized animals in toy narratives, the persistence of animistic, paganistic longings beyond the Judeo-Christian system also assumed great importance. With regard to form, I had to pay more attention to the nature of verbal play in toy dialogue: it frequently depends on "naive" punning or literal misreadings of figurative language, significant in calling into question conventional notions of the relation between language and "reality," signifier and signified.

In this book, I place my observations into a wider social and literary context, viewed from an eclectic, but clearly feminist, theoretical perspective. As an adult female, I find that Barbie and Ken dolls cast a large shadow

over my work. Societal uses of toylike objects in human culture and the place of toys in Western developmental psychology constitute the important background for this text. Within this context, and concentrating on British and American literature or texts that have been translated into English, I focus my study on toys as characters in eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century literature for children and adults. I make no claims to survey toy stories in toto, cover the field chronologically, or argue one particular theory throughout. I consider Newbery Medal winners and comic strips, beloved texts from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Golden Age of children's literature, and literary fairy tales. I sometimes group texts on the basis of the nature of the coming-alive experience and sometimes on the kind of toy represented.

Indeed, choices of both topics and texts owe much to my own tastes and fancies, since toys, on shelves or in books, refuse to come alive if handled in a heavy-handed fashion, without a certain playful enthusiasm—an enthusiasm that I am unable to summon up for every toy narrative and every kind of toy character. Certain ideas and texts seem destined to play off each other as they did when in the midst of the Gulf War I sat down to write my polemic chapter on toy soldiers, "Where Have All the Young Men Gone?" In contrast, although I have visited the teddy-bear museum in Stratford-upon-Avon and seem to bump into a teddy bear every place I turn (having more than one good friend who regards the bear as serious totem), I have not managed to devote a whole chapter to these creatures that occupy such a special place in literature as well as life. Winnie the Pooh, of course, is not neglected, but the host of his species that come alive in later books are, for the most part, missing here. Other, less obvious, lacunae appear in my omission of some species of toy—rocking horses, for example—or in my glancing only in passing at beloved texts like Lewis Carroll's two Wonderland books or Johnny Gruelle's Raggedy Ann series.

Some readers may find me either more or less theoretical in my approach than they would wish, especially when dealing with certain classic texts beloved since childhood. This study owes much to my training as a New Critic and the experience in formal close reading of texts that it gave me. But philosophically I have moved a long way from Monroe Beardsley's class in aesthetics at Swarthmore College in the late fifties, where I was taught to shun critical "fallacies" in order to adopt aesthetic tenets designed to keep criticism objective and definitive. Gradually, through life experience, teaching, and a relatively recent introduction to feminism and the associated literary theories gathered under its wing, I have changed into a different reader of literary texts.

I am still interested in formal literary traditions, conventions, and practices. But I am now convinced that no definitive, objective reading will emerge and that no pure interpretation exists. Moreover, perhaps "phallacies" are unavoidable. The task of establishing the political purity of the aesthetic approach no longer interests me. I once searched for a closed unity of interpretation, a universal reading. Now I discover from self-examination that, like the authors, characters, and other readers of the texts I read, I am caught in the tangled mesh of situation, intertwined with texts that no longer seem to me the well-woven and tied-off tapestries whose warp and woof I once tried to discern.

What this means for my critical practice is that I have continued to do what I was first trained to do: close readings of individual texts. But like those postmodern theorists who attend to individual texts, I neither consider my responses privileged or universal readings nor do I attempt to keep one text pure and separate from another. I choose an intertextual approach, one that takes into account my experiences, literary and otherwise, and theories developed in diverse fields of study. I am indebted to recent assimilative or critical studies like Toril Moi's *Sexual, Textual Politics,* Susan Stewart's *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection,* Brian Sutton-Smith's *Toys as Culture,* and Leonard Barkan's *The Gods Made Flesh* for giving new insights into the ways information from various fields can be applied. When it suits me, I am ready to use Dorothy Dinnerstein and Erik Erikson, as well as Jacques Lacan, among the neo-Freudians, or Jean Piaget, D. W. Winnicott, and Sutton-Smith together as play theorists; moreover, Marxist leanings find themselves in close juxtaposition with individualistic humanist longings. My sense of character in the novel derives as much from Northrop Frye's generic categories as from Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of the dialogic imagination. I want to play with imagery at the same time as I recognize, with Jacques Derrida, the importance of the silenced, unimaged negation behind the imaged. In fantasy theory, I am attracted to both William Robert Irwin's "game of the impossible" and Tsvetan Todorov's structuralist "fantastic."

Nevertheless, in considering both toys and toy characters, I find certain theoretical stances especially apt and useful. Take, for instance, the Freudian concept of the gaze. As I was working on Chapter 2, I came across a gorgeous coffee-table book entitled *The Doll* (1972). The text was written by Carl Fox, former director of the museum shops of the Smithsonian Institution and the Brooklyn Museum, and a doll collector himself. The stunning photographs, which dominate the work, were taken by H. Landshoff. For me, Fox's commentary is extremely provocative. He ends his introduction with the following: "We offer you a gallery of doll portraits drawn in time, place, and cultural

history. *They are images of mankind that confront you with unblinking eyes, wherein you may find the mirror of beauty, memory, and childhood grace. The reflections are multiple, pleasant, and even perverse.* What we strive for is a talisman for memories, a conjuration to evoke for you some feeling of innocence, delight, and mystery. *Perhaps the greatest single attraction of the doll is its almost magical power to engulf the viewer and lift him out of himself into the doll's world—whatever it may be*" (emphasis mine, 13).

In this quotation from an adult male collector of dolls, I am first struck by the singular inappropriateness of using the signifier *mankind* with regard to the largely female or at least asexual world of dolls and male pronouns for the viewer, who is likely to be female. Given that clue to Fox's masculinist viewpoint, however, I am even more dazzled by how well this quotation fits psychoanalytic theory of the gaze, emphasized in particular by Lacan. This theory considers such looking to be an aggressively phallic, even sadistic, if not necessarily male, visual activity.

According to theories of the gaze, mastery over objects of desire, people as well as things, is achieved by looking at them without acknowledging their independent power of looking back. At most, the object or person is simply assumed to mirror the viewer's own perceptions and desires. This idea is certainly reflected in Fox's concept of the doll as a "mirror of beauty, memory, and childhood grace." More interesting still is Fox's last sentence, in which the author expresses some of the attraction to, as well as possible fear of, engulfment by the viewed object. Feminists like Luce Irigaray and Jane Gallop apply the theory of the gaze to gender relations. They hypothesize not only the male desire to be lifted "out of himself" but the fear of engulfment that lies behind this vision, a fear that requires the gazed-upon object or person to be unalterably "other."

These terms, too—*self* and *other, subject* and *object*—belong to that part of Freudian theory taken up by Lacan and feminist theorists who recognize the ways a patriarchal view of the world has fostered a concept of an individual, conscious selfhood that necessarily defines itself in separation from other selves: in opposition to the communal, the female, and those of diverse races, creeds, and classes conceived of as other and treated as objects with no self-consciousness. When the unconscious objects that are toys become self-consciously alive, they blur the lines between self and other, subject and object, and require the reader to note those blurred dividing lines, imaginatively if not analytically.

Experience of the toy outside the world of books as quintessential other and object heightens our awareness of what it means for a toy character to attempt to become a conscious self and a subject, often the protagonist, within the text. This same experience of physical toys also alerts us to the

difference between biologically determined sex and socially constructed gender—a difference vital to feminist theories of psychological development.[2] How does one determine the gender of a toy? Rarely by its genitalia, mostly by its clothing, hairstyle, and the language used to signify it.[3] This absence of biological sexual markers in most toys calls attention to the arbitrary assertion of constructed gender differences in the depiction of toys as characters, especially in those texts that reflect gender roles from the world outside the text.[4]

Dominant ideas not only of gender but of race and class penetrate the texts in which toy characters appear. The fact that toy narratives belong to the fantastic mode does not blind me to the ways they are mimetic. For instance, typical dollhouse stories for children begin by showing Mama Doll in the nursery or kitchen (or in the parlor if there is a Maid Doll or Black "Mammy" Doll in the kitchen), Papa Doll in the library, and Brother and Sister Doll playing with their gender-linked playthings wherever they are allowed to play, while Intruder Toys of various sorts try to break into this cozy-bourgeois-nuclear-family world (see Chapter 6). Such texts can subvert or enhance the values of the mimicked world through the working out of conflicts and struggles.

Of course, toys as objects are created in imitation of many other living (and nonliving) things besides human beings and frequently come alive as, say, anthropomorphized animals, so that boundaries between species are both blurred and called to the attention. In considering the kind of toy narrative where, among other "live" things, dolls, toy animals, and sometimes humans interact, I have found apt the concept of "liminal" or threshold behavior postulated by anthropologists like Victor Turner, which describes the occasions provided in many societies for otherwise forbidden crossing of social boundaries to take place. Concepts of borderland and marginal space where insiders and outsiders meet are valuable for engaging these texts.

Finally, character, both in fantastic and realistic fiction, depends upon reader and text playing a game of draw-the-lines-between-the-dots in order to image a being from the words printed on the page. To take an early and striking instance: the "living being" who emerges from a text like the prologue to Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale—the gap-toothed, half-deaf Wife, who seemingly creates herself from snips and snatches of antifeminist dogma beginning with the Church Father Jerome in his tirade against the unorthodox Jovinian—is a mutual creation of reader and text. From such experience of reader response it is no great leap to the willing suspension of disbelief that accepts as a being or subject Hitty, the wooden doll who writes her life story with a pen almost as big as she. Toy characters are no more or less real than human characters in literature (and I think they may be even as

"true," in the sense that Michael Riffaterre defines "fictional truth"). Certainly, both types of character depend upon the reader to respond to the words that inscribe them.

When I began this study, I was most aware of how toy characters in literature, like many other characters in fantasy, often function as *subversive* forces acting out crises of individual development generally repressed by modern society. This function, shared by toys in life, is familiar to child psychology as well as to psychoanalysis and to philosophers and intellectual historians who discuss the creative role of play in the lives of human beings in general. Those who have studied individual literary works about toys recognize the ways toy characters both disguise and express suppressed desires, helping to evade individual and societal censors. Critics have also examined how play and art belong to the same realm, a realm in which human beings have the power to create a whole world and the creatures that inhabit it.

Moving beyond the social sphere to the cosmic, we find another motif common to toy narratives: the anxiety that this creativity—in competition with the gods—entails. This anxiety reflects concerns about the nature of human existence and what it means to be or, alternatively, not to be real. These works can bring out the ways mortals feel themselves to be playthings of the gods or, worse, abandoned by a careless owner. They can also depict our fear that technologically sophisticated human creations may take on a life that will outlast human life.

When adult readers come to existential depictions of toys in literature, the anxieties those toys act out perhaps bring the readers full circle to their own childhood needs: when a faithful, comforting, and all-suffering playmate created from a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair may have helped them through life's early unavoidable traumas. From adult memories of such consolation comes a human nostalgia for what A. A. Milne in *The House at Pooh Corner* calls "that enchanted place on the top of the Forest" (178), where living toys wait patiently for human return. Such adult remembrances of consolation also permeate Kenneth Grahame's story "A Departure." In it two young children, watched over by a sympathetic older brother and the benevolent Man-in-the-Moon, sneak out into a moonlit garden to bury a doll and a toy bull, thus commemorating the involuntary but unavoidable transfer of all their other toys to a children's hospital. This nocturnal excursion is clearly a subversive act on the part of the children, in which they both protest their lack of power over the destination of their toys and take a step on their own initiative toward adult independence. The adult participants, who include Grahame's narrator/persona, seem dominated, however, by a nostalgic, romantic longing for a past and a childhood that never existed, as implied by the title of Grahame's collection, *Dream Days* (1898). The two children

solemnly performing for themselves a necessary rite of passage were less likely to dig up those toys again and again than was the adult narrator.

I recognize that my own interest in digging up toy narratives was begun under the influence of a similar adult nostalgia. As readers of my study will discover, this nostalgia diminished upon my reading and rereading these texts, which with a few notable exceptions seem to me to have missed many opportunities that objects becoming subjects offer for going beyond simple mimesis of prevailing cultural constructs. Thus, I frequently ask my readers to take a good hard revisionist look at longings of and for the past excited by many toy texts, and to consider whom such longings really benefit.[5]

Moreover, in the process of digging deeper into the texts as well as of introspection, I have found myself trying to discern the nature of the subversion I frequently discover in these texts. Throughout this book I shall note an individualistic, nonconformist, "shock the bourgeois," antiauthoritarian rebellion rooted in such nostalgic romanticism (subversion of the kind noted by Rosemary Jackson in her study of fantasy); in toy narratives, this kind of subversion of familial and institutional restraint may attractively aid the young in their individual struggles to become "real."

Goals that might, however, have thrilled the child-me as a projection of my egocentric needs and desires are not necessarily what a woman with threescore years of experience in this world still finds fulfilling. I see myself now searching these texts for signs of another, more radical, subversion—subversion of the elitism, racism, sexism, and androcentrism in a pervasively patriarchal culture. This is the future-, other-oriented subversion that I now feel necessary for human survival on a shrinking, polluted planet. Literature that raises the kind of questions raised by toy narratives can play a role in fostering this more radical subversion, just as it has in fostering individualistic subversion.[6]

For the most part, signs of such future-, other-oriented subversion are lacking in these texts. I have found toy stories to be generally conservative in dealing with the givens of a patriarchal culture and subversive largely in the individualistic sense. Only occasionally, in breaking down barriers among various "creatures," will a toy fantasy go beyond communal status quo and in doing so seem to deny the centrality of human concerns—concerns that dominated those ancient burial rites in which humans tried to take into the underworld toylike representations of the creatures and appurtenances that added meaning and a sense of individual power to their brief lives.[7]

I do not wish to be buried with my toys. Literature for children and adults cannot, it seems to me now, turn only to the past for solutions and to childhood or funereal consolations in order to help survive the traumas of the future. For this reason, I have in the last chapter of this study gone beyond the

toy narrative to the speculative fiction of robot and cyborg. Some of the latter narratives, which are usually categorized as that brand of fantasy known as science fiction, seem to me occasionally to take giant steps forward in confronting present existentialist concerns suggested by toy fantasies but addressed by those fantasies largely in traditional, limited—if often seductively charming—ways.

In this very personalized tour of the literary world of animated toys, therefore, I guide readers to the entrance of Toyland and usher them through its gates, but then keep asking the members of my tour group to consider whether, having found it an attractive and exciting place to visit, they would really want to live there forever.

Notes

Chapter 1: An Introduction to My World of Literary Toys

1. In Freud's essay on the uncanny, published in 1919, he explicitly refers to E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (analyzed here in Chapter 10) and also discusses what happens to children when dolls come alive (disagreeing with his colleague Ernst Jentsch, who thinks that children find this idea frightening). Freud finds that "an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed." Freud also considers the uncanny in literature to be "a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life" (249).

2. Toys of different "races" call attention to the construction of race as well.

3. According to Ruth Cronk, president of the International Barbie Doll Collectors Club, "If Barbie were blown up to human size, her measurements would be 39-21-33." Unfortunately for Ken, however, although his creator, Ruth Handler, wished him to be "anatomically correct," Mattel's male marketing department said no (Owen 65).

4. Dr. O'Connor, in Djuna Barnes's transsexual vision *Nightwood,* points to the sexual ambiguity inherent in dolls, drawing a parallel between childhood attraction to dolls and adult attraction to transsexuals: "The last doll, given to age [*sic*], is the girl who should have been a boy and the boy who should have been a girl! The love of that last doll was foreshadowed in that love of the first. The doll and the immature have something *right* about them, the doll because it resembles but does not contain life, and the *third* sex because it contains life but resembles the doll" (148).

5. The arguments of Janice Doane and Devon Hodges in *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference* have convinced me that "nostalgic writers construct their visions of a golden past to authenticate woman's traditional place and to challenge outspoken feminist criticisms of it. *Nostalgia* is not just a sentiment but also a rhetorical practice" (3). Moreover, I consider the stimulation of nostalgia to be a rhetorical practice that can be used to preserve traditional place with regard to race, class, and nationality as well.

6. In her study *Nuclear Age Literature for Youth: The Quest for a Life-Affirming Ethic,* Millicent Lenz confronts the future with optimistic and idealistic energy. Lenz advocates restructuring mythic paradigms and removing the mythic hero from traditional plots of conquering and being conquered or of individual victory. Her complex vision belies the simplistic nostalgia that pervades most toy narratives. Her optimism is very different from the gloom of Neara H., the female protagonist of Russell Hoban's *Turtle Diary,* who is a writer for children: "People write books for children and other people write about books for children but I don't think it's for the children at all. I think that all the people who worry so much about the children are really worrying about themselves, about keeping their world together and getting the children to help them to do it, getting the children to agree that it is indeed a world. Each new generation of children has to be told: 'This is a world, this is what one does, one lives like this.' Maybe our constant fear is that a generation of children will come along and say: 'This is not a world, this is nothing, there's no way to live at all'" (113).

I sometimes fall into a pessimism close to that of Neara but, like Lenz, I try to suggest that literature can provide alternatives for human survival that are not merely a falling back on traditional, not-very-convincing answers to existential problems, as toy narratives tend too often to do.

7. I own a T-shirt that sports the slogan "Whoever dies with the most toys wins," a sentiment that ironically suggests the less attractive, acquisitive aspects of desires to "take it with you."

Chapter 2: Toys

1. Unfortunately, Fraser and Boehn both cite the customs of the Hopi Indians to prove their arguments that children were probably allowed to play with ceremonial toys, claiming that the Hopi give their kachina dolls to their children to play with after the ceremonies (Boehn 48–49, Fraser 34). This example does not, as I discovered almost by accident on a trip through the Southwest, support their case. Kachina dolls are neither used in ritual—they are models of ritual dancers who embody the spirits—nor are they are given to children for playing. Kachinas are created to teach ancient Hopi rites to the young.

2. Mrs. Gatty in *Aunt Judy's Tales* (1863) tells the interesting story of two motherless girls who find some discarded rabbit tails, which they pretend are a group of individuals called Tods: "They cuddled up their Tods in an evening; invented histories of what they had said and done during the day, put them by at last with caresses something very akin to human love" (87). The moralistic narrator recognizes with little approval what fetishistic displacement of grief over the loss of their mother takes place when they are heartbroken over the loss of one of these Tods.

3. Like automata, puppets (which require human hands to manipulate their strings and sticks) date from early times and were originally used in adult drama before being given to children as playthings.

4. The transformation mirrors humans' paradoxical attitude toward bears, whose young seem to play like human babies and whose ability to rear and even walk or

dance on two legs has fascinated and attracted humans without stopping them from hunting or oppressing the beasts. A man named Jim Ownby founded a nonprofit organization in 1973 called Good Bears of the World. Some ten years later, it had 7,000 members, dedicated to the promotion of "love, friendship and understanding by providing teddy bears to children and adults in hospitals, institutions and just about anywhere we find people who need a teddy bear. . . . We believe in teddy bear power!" (Voss 62). Bears, of course, have a long history in folklore, as animal grooms among other figures.

5. Jill Shefrin, in a note affixed to a harlequinade reproduced for the Friends of the Osborne and Lillian H. Smith Collection, describes the typical harlequinade as made from "an engraved sheet with a second sheet cut in half and hinged to the upper and lower edges of the first, so that each flap could be lifted individually as the verses directed. The sheets then were folded into four, accordion fashion, and roughly stitched in a paper cover" (n. p.).

6. Toy theaters of the nineteenth century inspired many a budding writer, Robert Louis Stevenson among them. Tracing the history of the toy theater would require another whole book (see Stevenson's "'A Penny Plain and Two Pence Colored'" and Suzanne Rahn's "Rediscovering the Toy Theatre").

7. Gruelle may not have been as inspired a writer of toy narrative as he was an illustrator, despite the fact that, according to Martin Williams, his wife used to read him fairy tales as he drew (71).

8. On 17 December 1990 "Mom for Christmas" was broadcast on television. In it, Olivia Newton-John starred as a lucky department store mannequin who was allowed to come to life for a couple of hours a night. She is granted a longer life in order to fulfill the need of a young girl for a mother. The widowed father also gets a new wife dumped in his lap, so to speak.

9. But many were written for children. In the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books at the Toronto Public Library, I found numerous short autobiographies of inanimate objects dating from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century—about fire tongs, a pin, a halfpenny, a broom, a kite, a geranium, a banbury cake, a work bag. Most of these short fictions displayed clear didactic intent but described exciting, picaresque adventures.

10. The Kilners, like their contemporary Mrs. Trimmer, also used animal protagonist-narrators. Pickering has shown that books written from the animal point of view were used to support Lockean theories about the character of the developing child as revealed in the child's concern for other living creatures.

11. Doll autobiographies, framed in various ways, are common throughout the nineteenth century. Five others I have seen are Mary Constable's *The Two Dolls: A Story* (1846); Miss Pardoe's *Lady Arabella: or the Adventures of a Doll* (1856); Julia Charlotte Maitland's *The Doll and Her Friends: or Memoirs of Lady Seraphina* (1852); Mrs. Alfred Gatty's *Aunt Sally's Life* (1865); and T. C. Skey's *Dolly's Own Story, Told in Her Own Words* (1890).

12. While *Hitty* probably was Field's greatest succès d'estime, her three adult novels were all made into movies, two posthumously: *All This and Heaven Too* (Macmillan

Lois Rostow Kuznets

When Toys Come Alive

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