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Psyche's Daughter of Today: Sara Jeannette Duncan and the New Woman

Summary

The Canadian novelist Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922) constructed a New Woman heroine in the *fin-de- siècle* novel, *A Daughter of Today* (1894). Written in the popular mode of the transatlantic novel, the work engages in debate on the appropriate construction of femininity in art and public life. The heroine, Elfrida Bell, descends from artist, to muse, to model, to painted image—a descent framed by a rival male artist and a hostile London art scene. Represented as Psyche, the heroine undergoes a quest and failure similar to the mythical one. Adaptation of the Psyche myth clarifies the position of Duncan in the spectrum of gender ideologies of the *fin-de- siècle*.

Key words: Sara Jeannette Duncan, New Woman, Psyche, Canadian Fiction

Psihina Hči današnjega časa: Sara Jeannette Duncan in nova ženska

Povzetek

Kanadska romanopiska Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861–1922) je v svojem findesièclovskem romanu *Hči današnjega časa* (1894) ustvarila novo podobo junakinje. Delo, napisano v priljubljeni obliki t.i. prekooceanskega romana, razpravlja o primerni konstrukciji ženskosti v umetnosti in javnem življenju. Junakinja Elfrida Bell izgubi položaj umetnice in postane najprej muza, potem model in nazadnje slikana podoba, kar je plod zarote umetnika-tekmeca ter sovražne umetniške scene v Londonu. Upodobljena kot Psiha se junakinja poda na pot iskanja in, podobno kot njena mitološka “sestra”, doživi polom. Priredba mita o Psihi osvetli vlogo pisateljice Duncan v spektru spolnih ideologij fin de siècle.

Ključne besede: Sara Jeannette Duncan, nova ženska, Psiha, kanadska proza

Psyche's Daughter of Today: Sara Jeannette Duncan and the New Woman

1. Introduction

In 1894, the “annus mirabilis“ (Pykett 1992, 137) of New Women’s writing, Canadian literature stood poised to contribute several novels about a new generation of women. Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *A Daughter of Today* (1895) is not as sensational in content as many of its British counterparts (e.g., Sarah Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, 1893; Geroge Egerton, *Keynotes*, 1893), but still boldly modern in its choice of the independent New Woman as heroine.¹

Duncan’s heroine Elfrida Bell is a freethinking rationalist, one of the intellectual elite, who is fitted as much by birth as by talent to storm the European art scene. This she does, following a generation of Jamesian heroes and heroines to Paris. Duncan chose to make the Bell family into Americans, not Canadians; however, there is more than a hint of the autobiographical in this story of a colonial talent who fails in her assault on the stronghold of artistic London.²

The novel exhibits the pattern of unfulfilled narrative expectations common to many novels of the New Woman era. One critic coined the term “boomerang books” to describe such New Woman fiction (Ardis 1990, 140). This is not the predictable progress of the conventional heroine, who moves through courtship and danger to marriage and a happy ending, but a disturbing parabola of failed ambition and thwarted expectation. Unlike earlier heroines, New Woman heroines, including Elfrida, have quests of their own, unrelated to any courtship plot. Elfrida, for example, seeks independence and artistic success and begins her quest strongly in a Parisian atelier. However, the quest for success falters, as Duncan’s heroine becomes entangled in cross-currents of the European art world. In the middle of the novel, the heroine confronts her image in a central pictorial representation, seeing herself imprisoned in a painting by a male artist.

The heroine’s struggles against such artistic (and sexual) commodification are not easily resolved by the conventional happy ending. In Duncan’s *A Daughter of Today*, artistic realism dictates a tragic ending: Elfrida fails at painting and enjoys only one triumph in her literary career. She scorns marriage and acknowledges too late her sexual interest in John Kendal, the painter of her portrait. Fired by ambition, jealousy, and revenge, Elfrida destroys this masterpiece of revealing portraiture and commits suicide, her final artistic gesture. The closure of this novel and others in the genre indicates the paradoxical position of New Women in a novel tradition once dominated by romance. The new heroines’ demands – on the one hand, as women for independence, and, on the other, as artists for voice and vision – conflict with the old demands of the happy ending: an education in proper womanly behaviour, an

1 There has been debate about exactly who coined the phrase “New Woman,” but Ann Ardis argues that it was invented and used by Ouida in May 1894.

2 To take just one example, “Bell” is the surname the novel’s heroine but also the maiden name of Sara Jeannette Duncan’s mother.

acknowledgement of previous mistakes in judgment and acceptance of display as a framed, beautiful, and loved object in the possession of the hero.³ Appearing shortly after *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1890-91), *A Daughter of Today* is indebted to Wilde for its sense of the sinister interdependence among artist, subject, and painting, as well as the subtle sexual dialectic inherent in the painter/model relationship.

In depicting this complex relation Duncan draws on nineteenth-century traditions of ekphrasis in the realistic novel as well as on mythology to define both the ideal of female beauty and a pattern of unfulfilled female quest. Within the Greek story of Psyche's love and betrayal, Duncan found both a classical counterpart for her own conflicted view on the independence of the contemporary woman, as well as a prefabricated structure of aspiration and failure. As in the myth, female failure is directly related to the objectification of female beauty. Against the background of the Psyche myth, Elfrida's struggle to take literary London by storm becomes a drama of visual commodification, set against esthetic debates current in late nineteenth-century studios and Academies. As painters and critics debated the place of realism or "nudity" in art and literature, Duncan's Elfrida aspires to lead a minor revolution for women in a literary and artistic world where roles have been largely prescribed. A closer look at the Psyche trope is necessary in order to understand what Duncan says about the independent, artistic woman at the turn of the century.

That Duncan should choose this particular figure from Greek myth as the defining motif for her heroine is probably less coincidence than the culmination of a long-standing cultural discourse. Psyche appeared frequently in English and French poetry, prose, painting, and drama in the nineteenth century (Lemaitre). Her story had captured the imagination of the Romantics (Keats's "Ode to Psyche," 1819: 1820), and later the Pre-Raphaelites (William Morris's "The Story of Cupid and Psyche" in *The Earthly Paradise*, 1868). Of the Victorians, Tennyson used a character called "lady Psyche" in the discussion of women's rights in his poem *The Princess* (1847). New translations from the original (by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Bridges) had given the public palatable poetic versions of the myth. Coventry Patmore's Psyche odes reinterpreted the myth in the context of Christian mysticism, presenting the Psyche story as a vision of God wooing the soul (*The Unknown Eros*, 1877). Less than a decade before Duncan's novel appeared, Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) offered another Christian interpretation for the pagan story. In Chapter 15, Elfrida reads *Marius* with "hungry and hopeless delight," confirming Duncan's familiarity with Pater's popular essay-novel.

The most revealing portrait of Elfrida is the drawing of Psyche for which she receives a medal in Philadelphia (24). Duncan provides a probable source for Elfrida's interest in the myth: William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*, containing Burne-Jones's illustrations of the legend of

3 Misao Dean's introduction to *A Daughter of Today* affirms Duncan's belief in a gendered agenda for modern fiction: "the attempt to portray a new kind of heroine, substituting an active, thinking subject for the passive, instinctual object of patriarchal fiction" (1988, xviii).

Eros and Psyche, adorns the table in her family living-room (41).⁴ That her award-winning drawing is truly a self-portrait emerges in the analogy between Psyche and Elfrida. The mythological Psyche is punished for seeking to know the identity of her lover (Cupid) who comes to her nightly. The sin of seeking knowledge, of wanting to see the face of love, is close to Elfrida's own "sin" in aspiring as a woman to be an artist also. Despite failure as a painter in the male-dominated Parisian art world, Elfrida posthumously repeats these words for her gravestone: "*Pas femme-artiste*" (392) – emphatically *not* a woman artist. Failing like Psyche at the one "impossible task" (Kestner 1989, 91), Elfrida must settle, as her mythological precursor does, for something other than success and happy endings. Against explicit orders, Psyche opens Persephone's casket expecting the secret of beauty and finding nothing but deadening sleep. Elfrida's corresponding nemesis is not physical beauty, but the mask or persona behind which she has hidden her true self. In her final portrait, this mask is removed, and the space behind is revealed in all its bareness. Psyche is rescued by Eros from her sleep in the underworld but must give up her mortal self in return for this rescue. No romantic love or lover awaits Elfrida after her unmasking; she must give her life to achieve closure and save some sense of identity.

In completing her Psyche-like task, Elfrida's progress is blocked first by the masculine aesthetic of the Paris *atelier*, then by a combination of sexual discrimination in Fleet Street and anti-colonial prejudice in London literary society, and finally by the sexual politics of the male artist's studio. Having failed in Paris to divorce the woman from the artist, Elfrida abandons painting and becomes a journalist in London. An initial success at art criticism brings her into conflict with the painter John Kendal, whose work she has dared to critique. Although Kendal praises Elfrida's emerging critical voice, he resents her intrusion into the world of art criticism; as an American and a woman, she should accept cultural marginalization in the artistic hub of the Empire. Kendal takes control of Elfrida's voice by making her into muse, then model, then painted image.

Kendal's main weapon is painting, which he uses to relegate Elfrida by painting her in a socially embarrassing position. This is the novel's central tableau, a moment when Elfrida gives homage to the eminent British novelist George Jasper (194-5). Wishing to acknowledge admiration for his work, she "half sank on one knee and lifted the hand that wrote 'A Moral Catastrophe' to her lips (194-5).⁵ Lost in adulation, the naïve Elfrida is ignorant of the monstrous breach she has made in the British cultural wall, for she has not been introduced. This offense against society parallels Psyche's affront to Venus: appropriation of the spotlight and of male attention. As outraged spectator of Elfrida's tableau, Kendal takes over Venus's punishing role and makes Elfrida pay for her presumption in usurping centre stage. Elfrida must be "framed" as guilty and made to see herself through others' eyes. His painting of the incident reveals to her the **unbecoming false humility of her self-dramatized position:**

4 Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833-98); William Morris (1834-96), both members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Morris's sumptuous proposed edition of 1865, with the illustrations by Burne-Jones was never published. The project, however, inspired Burne-Jones to use the motif of Eros and Psyche in various media. A new edition of *The Story of Cupid and Psyche* was produced in 1974: A. R. Dufty (Ed. & Introd.), William Morris: *The Story of Cupid and Psyche, with Illustrations Designed by Edward Burne-Jones, mostly engraved on the wood by William Morris*. London: Clover Hill Editions, 1974.

5 George Jasper resembles Henry James in his eminence, celebrity and public dignity.

. . . the astonished drawing-room, the graceful half-kneeling girl with the bent head, the other dismayed and uncomprehending figure yielding a doubtful hand, his discomfort indicated in the very lines of his waistcoat. 'A Fin de Siècle Tribute,' Kendal named it (211).⁶

Kendal has painted the scene as if it were the “moral catastrophe” of Jasper’s best known work. In Kendal’s title, “tribute” is doubly ironic and calls into question Elfrida’s motives for public self-abasement, even as it miscodes the painter’s own intentions. Far from paying tribute, the painting critically isolates a moment of unctuous self-display. Kendal’s fascination with this particular tableau reveals his own perverse need to cut Elfrida down to size.

By painting Elfrida’s moment of humiliation, Kendal leagues himself with Jasper to close the ranks of English artists to upstarts, both colonial and female, who invade the foreground and appropriate major roles in the iconography of the cultural picture. For Kendal, painting the incident in the drawing-room is a way of “disposing . . . finally” of the incident: “He knew it could be very effectively put away on canvas” (211). Elfrida has been “captured” on canvas, rendered harmlessly invisible in the midst of her bid for visibility.

Seeking final control of her image, Kendal paints Elfrida again, this time in his own studio and on his own terms. He envisages this final portrait as “reparation” (325) for the former pictorial rebuke, but it becomes an act of retribution: “He had an obscure idea of having inflicted discipline upon her in giving the incident form and colour upon canvas, in arresting its grotesqueness and sounding its true *motif* with a pictorial tongue” (212). Part of his psychological manipulation of his subject involves forbidding Elfrida to see her portrait “in its earlier stages” (344). Like Psyche, she waits in the dark, forbidden the vision that would confer knowledge and power. Elfrida has come full circle, from painter to subject, ceding control of her image to the male artist in a surrender that is partly sexual: “She saw the artist in him dominant, and she exulted for his sake. It was to her delicious to be the medium of his inspiration, delicious and fit and sweetly acceptable” (345). The sexual nature of the artist/model transaction is reinforced by Elfrida’s gustatory diction (delicious, sweetly) and also by Kendal’s terminology; he calls this portrait his “consummate picture” (346).

This final portrait of Elfrida is so unbearable to her that she must destroy it, for it is not so much her representation as her other self. When finally revealed, the portrait conceals behind its flattering surface another searing indictment of Elfrida:

He had echoed her talk of disguises, and his words embodied the unconscious perception under which he worked. He had selected a disguise, and, as she wished, a becoming one. But he had not used it fairly, seriously. He had thrown it over her face like a veil, if anything could be a veil which rather revealed than hid, rather emphasized than softened, the human secret of the face underneath . . . It was the real Elfrida. (348-9)

⁶ Kendal’s paintings resemble those of Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902), who painted witty exposés of modern London society in the 1870s, concentrating on the contrast between formality of setting and costume and informality of pose and gesture.

For Elfrida to acknowledge the power of Kendal's representation involves "a degree of submission" (349) and a previously unthinkable act of "self-surrender" (351). Kendal, as she rightly perceives, has "stolen" something from her (350); she has been violated, almost sexually, by his act of painting.

Kendal puts Elfrida in her place as model and subject and makes her the silent collaborator in her public unmasking. This humiliation leads inevitably to her need to destroy the painting. Elfrida turns on the portrait in a cold rage dictated by her sense of the artistic symmetry of her act:

The portrait was literally in rags. They hung from the top of the frame and swung over the bottom of it. Hardly enough of the canvas remained unriddled to show that it had represented anything human. Its destruction was absolute—fiendish, it seemed to Kendal. (384)

Like Dorian Gray, she destroys herself along with the portrait, for behind the various masks, the self has dwindled away. Having failed to make her life into a work of art, Elfrida settles for the artistic death. The heroine who once painted herself as Psyche (soul) has had her soul stolen by the demon lover/artist.

In choosing to give Elfrida the face of Psyche, Duncan provides a context for reading Elfrida's failure. If the Psyche legend is "a powerful compound of men's attitudes to women's faithlessness and helplessness" (Kestner 1989, 90), then does Duncan use it to critique the goals of the New Woman generation? Comparison with the Psyche myth does not fully support this contention. Psyche fails because of her inability to resist the secret of beauty. This weakness may be read as signifying traditionally female follies (vanity and curiosity), and thus as asserting female incompetence in the quest. The myth, however, places Psyche's quest in the context of external forces that set the tasks, determine the rewards and generally collaborate in her failure. The parallel forces in the novel are the galleries, newspapers, writers, painters and critics who conspire to keep the young American in her place. Psyche and Elfrida fail with the collusion of powerful external forces, either celestial or social.

Read in this mythical context, *A Daughter of Today* is less an indictment of all New Women and their aspirations than a portrait of an individual whose flaws magnify those of the age. Elfrida suffers from excesses of ambition and self-interest, and a lack of self-knowledge. Even were these defects remedied, however, Elfrida would not have been guaranteed success in either London or Paris. Duncan's *fin-de-siècle* art world held only limited opportunities for women artists and demanded in return the kind of artistic and personal compromise that Elfrida abhors. Another female character, Janet Cardiff, compromises, publishes her tepid novel and gets her man—John Kendal. Duncan, however, treats these achievements with irony, even distaste, and the novel's final paragraph qualifies this couple's "domestic joy" (281). The flamboyant Elfrida haunts their union, and epitomizes the age even as she predeceases it. Elfrida occupies Psyche's threshold position as a "liminal persona" (Edwards 1979, 47), whose career declares that the world is yet unprepared to accept the asexual nature of either heroism or artistic talent.

It may be more important to an understanding of this novel to explore it as a novel of ideas, one in which Duncan has her characters act out important debates in the art world of the *fin-de-siècle*. Although the French movement of Impressionism was well under way, it had not been so long before that the French and English art establishments had taken very conservative positions on the definition and evaluation of art. At mid-century, for example, nudity in art was still associated with prostitution (Chu 1992, 39), and undraped figures needed the cover of classical subject matter. On Duncan's London art scene, John Kendal ranks among the adventurous: he exhibits at the Grosvenor, the gallery that led the artistic avant-garde until its closure in 1890 (Ledes 1996). Elfrida, having come from Paris ateliers with liberal views on morality in art, takes an even more radical aesthetic stance in the corresponding literary debate on naturalism. She favours style and subject matter that will capture "the nudity of things" (338) and despises artistic compromise: "Art has no ideal but truth, and to conventionalize truth is to damn it!" (Duncan 159). Duncan has her heroine draw explicit analogies between visual and literary art; thus, Elfrida compares Janet Cardiff's novel to "the class of Academy studies from the nude, which were always draped, just a little" (297).

In contrast, Elfrida's aesthetic follows a cosmopolitan, interdisciplinary path, a route to beauty that is pagan in the Ruskinian sense and that ". . . embraced Arnold and Aristotle and did not exclude Mr. Whistler, a composite creed, making wide, ineffectual, and presumptuous grasps to include all beauty and all faith" (127). The ruling motif of the *fin-de-siècle* emerges in this overlap between the aesthetic and the moral. Another contemporary writer of Canadian origin, Grant Allen, railed against the conventionalism of English publishing from a similar perspective: "It is almost impossible to get a novel printed in an English journal unless it is warranted to contain nothing at all to which anybody, however narrow, could possibly object, on any grounds whatever" (Allen, *British Barbarians* 1895, ix). Himself the author of a scandalous New Woman novel, *The Woman Who Did* (1895), Allen strove to convince English newspaper publishers that it was possible "to tell the truth and yet preserve the circulation" (Allen, *British Barbarians* 1895, viii). Duncan thus places her heroine in an exact, contemporary publishing context, and plays out in her plot the precise debates on gender, propriety and colonial status that animated literary life in 1890s London.

To exacerbate her literary sins even further, Elfrida tries to import journalism and its techniques into the writing of literature. In her first newspaper job, the young American writes boldly "the graphic naked truth" (100), only to find that "the paper doesn't want a female Zola" (101). Fleet Street wants something modern – "No theories, no fine writing, no compositions. Describe what you've seen and know" (76) – but nothing shocking or too French. Women are tolerated on the margins of London journalism, on certain news beats and certain pages of the papers, but always at the mercy of a judgmental male editor who only sees ladies by appointment (72). In such a milieu, even a good writer cannot get a foot in the door. Seeking a subject, Elfrida is led towards the sordid, sensational life of the chorus girl, and outrages her London friends by doing practical research at the theatre in order to write what she has experienced. Getting a temporary job in the chorus line of the Peach Blossom Company, Elfrida displays her legs on stage with such success that the manager offers her a permanent gig on the tour. Kendal sneaks into the theatre to see this woman in trousers, while Mr. Cardiff is driven to a marriage proposal to save Elfrida from the

ignominy of publication. This young American is, according to the editor-in-chief, “dangerous” (163) and cannot be allowed to import a North-American set of values to the heart of Belgravia, or to breach the walls between journalism and literature. In literary London of the decade, a woman cannot have a voice and legs, too.

It is possible that this episode of literary snubbing may to some extent mirror Duncan’s own experience as a young Canadian writer in London (minus the chorus-girl episode). Duncan contributed to several journals on both sides of the Atlantic and was part of a breakthrough generation that eventually erased most of the stigma of being from the colonies. The titles of her own early monographs show that Duncan practiced precisely the kind of participatory, investigative journalism to which her heroine aspires: *A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round the World by Ourselves* (1890), *An American Girl in London* (1891), and *Cousin Cinderella: A Canadian Girl in London* (1908).

Nevertheless, there was a perception in North America that English culture had high walls—even in the 1890s, as another Canadian writer notes in the same decade: “It is a fashion with some colonial writers to believe that there is a settled determination on the part of English critics to ignore their best work” (Bourinot 1893, 46). Duncan unleashes a satirical pen on this aesthetic narrow-mindedness. In writing as in painting, the London critics of *A Daughter of Today* want something “new and original, but . . . respectable, notwithstanding” (134). Duncan gives the male artist Kendal the role of gatekeeper; he polices the moral boundary of the London art scene because, though Paris-educated, he observes English social codes of respectability: “He was an artist, but he was also an Englishman” (97).

The novel ends with the heroine’s contemplation of Kendal’s painting—a portrait that is simultaneously flattering and damning. Duncan never tells the reader what “disguise” or “veil” Kendal has thrown over the figure of Elfrida in the ill-fated final portrait. The costumed portrait was common; perhaps Kendal chose Cleopatra, who is mentioned in the conversation between painter and sitter. The reader is free to read the word “disguise” metaphorically, or even to imagine that Kendal has painted the subject as Psyche, in a revision of Elfrida’s own early portrait. Whatever the pose or costume, the veil reveals more than it conceals, and Elfrida cannot live with the revelation. In her myopic narcissism she cannot see the bias in the jealous, vengeful gaze of the male lover/painter, nor acknowledge the cultural constraints on the representation of women in mythological portrait painting.

There is no route from this aesthetic impasse to a happy ending. For Elfrida, marriage is impossible—a “form of bondage” (320) in the words of this opinionated New Woman. Nevertheless, Elfrida finds a new variety of bondage in her submission to Kendal’s brush, for she cannot step free from the frame of the painting at the end of her novel. Becoming Kendal’s model has placed her in complicity with his ideological agenda for amassing power himself, while denying Elfrida any entrée to the London art world. She can, and does destroy the painting, but cannot undo the social and psychological consequences of the event. Crossing the boundary between object and subject has been fatal. Thus, Elfrida does not need Kendal’s portrait as her

monument: she crafts her own accompanying scene and script—her death bed and suicide note. This persistent role-playing pushes the end of the novel towards melodrama, even as it provides a glimmer of retroactive triumph for Elfrida.

2. Conclusion

That Duncan retreats to melodrama indicates the difficulty of finding appropriate closure for the New Woman story. One critic argues that the popularity of Psyche as heroine in the nineteenth-century is related to this quest for new narrative patterns: “If marriage is the traditional ‘happy ending’, and death the only, and unsatisfactory, alternative, novelists must devise ways to render happiness without them” (Edwards 1979, 27).

Duncan also chose to avoid the “growing interdisciplinary discourse on sexuality” (Ardis 1990, 50) that characterized other New Woman novels, such as Allen’s *The Woman Who Did*. One could therefore argue that this female author retreats, like her secondary character Janet Cardiff, to a preference for the “slightly draped” subject. The brash Elfrida thus represents the opposing side in an aesthetic debate in which Duncan sides more with Henry James than with George Egerton. It might not be far-fetched to see the novelist as engaged in an aesthetic duel with her heroine. In such a conflict, the ambivalence and variety of the Psyche figure make fertile material for extending the social discourse on the “woman question” towards the aesthetic discourse about realism and representation. On the one hand, Psyche’s aspiration for forbidden knowledge validates a pattern of female ambition and artistry. On the other hand, Psyche’s failure codes female ambition as futile and male rescue as inevitable. The “boomerang” nature of the ending of this updated Psyche narrative depends on contradictions partly pre-existent in a legend about conflicting forms of womanhood, contradictions that mirror the range of gender ideologies of the *fin-de-siècle*. That the aesthetic and the social should be read as parallel texts is also not surprising, since it was common for nineteenth-century fiction to exhibit what Alison Byerly calls a “self-consciousness about aesthetic representation,” which could, in the hands of the female novelist, be “paralleled by self-consciousness about social representation and the role of aesthetics in the constitution of culture” (Byerly 2006, 8).

The novelist appropriates from the myth of Psyche only those elements that conform to her particular feminist and aesthetic agenda. Duncan’s daughter of today mirrors Psyche’s aspiration and struggle, but her tasks unfold in the hostile universe of the London literary establishment. In Duncan’s hands, the borrowed myth points to the cultural cabal that conspires to silence all voices from the margins of gender, class and empire. Duncan, as a colonial newcomer herself, has a stake in the unmasking of this conspiracy and works out the aesthetic problem of the body of the text as well as the body of the heroine. By foregrounding visual representation of the female face and figure as the site of cultural battle over gender boundaries, Duncan contributes to a continuum of representations, visual and verbal, artistic and commercial, which circumscribed the New Woman of the 1890s.

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