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‘No silver lining without a cloud’: Carnival, Impermanence and Gloom in Angela Carter’s *Wise Children*

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Abstract:

This research article aims to study Angela Carter’s novel *Wise Children* (1991) as a novel which deploys Bakhtin’s concept of carnival in order to emphasize the idea of impermanence inherent in the Bakhtinian notion. The novel shows that the concept of carnival is not only about mirth and revelry but also about their temporariness. The novel focuses on the grim reality which cannot be ignored by taking refuge of temporary merriment. This paper shows how each brief period of gaiety in the novel is followed by a prolonged period of gloom. There is a constant undertone of pain beneath the apparently festive spirit of the novel. This paper argues that the transitory nature of the carnival elements in human life is foregrounded in the novel through the use of pairings of characters. Four pairs of characters are discussed in this paper. In each pair, one embodies the brighter aspect of the concept of carnival and the other one stands for the darker aspect. It is the worldview of the latter one which prevails in the long run.

Keywords: carnivalesque, temporariness, social hierarchy, utopian, nostalgia, chaos

The medieval concept of carnival was explored by Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1968). According to him, the carnival in the medieval age was a festive period when all stifling social hierarchies were subverted and the authorities were mocked. The carnival paved the way for the comic mixing of the high and the low. It was a period marked by laughter and merriment. Kate Webb, in her essay “Seriously Funny: Angela Carter’s *Wise Children*”, has argued that “throughout *Wise Children* Carter celebrates the vital and carnivalesque in life”. Webb has explored the elements of gaiety and mirth in the novel. The focus of her essay is on the brighter side of life shown in the novel. I argue that these constitute the superficial layer of the novel. Carter’s novel is concerned more with the darker aspect of the Bakhtinian notion of carnival than the brighter aspect. In the novel, every occurrence of carnivalesque chaos and disorder is followed by restoration of the social order. This emphasizes the impermanence of carnival gaiety which is a significant part of Bakhtin’s notion. The novel reminds us that carnival is after all a temporary suspension of order. It supports the view that “carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the . . . established order” (Bakhtin 10). Carter’s focus is not on the carnival merriment but on the utopian aspect of carnival. The novel shows how carnival ultimately is “only limited and utopian” (95). Bakhtin has made it clear that carnival was “ephemeral; it was followed by the fears and oppressions of everyday life” (91). This view is revealed in the novel through the narrator when she says that there is “no silver lining without a cloud” (Carter 203). This paper shows how Carter’s novel foregrounds this darker side of Bakhtin’s notion by emphasizing the

temporariness and ultimate limitation of carnival. The novel testifies to Dora's opinion: "There are limits to the power of laughter" (Carter 220).

I

In Angela Carter's novel *Wise Children*, the central characters Dora Chance and Leonora Chance are the first pair of twins who draw the attention of the readers. They act as foils to each other throughout the novel. While they have most features in common, they differ on a significant point. Leonora, who is commonly called Nora throughout the novel, is a carnivalesque character. She prioritizes merriment in life and tends to ignore the ugly aspects of life. For Nora, life is a series of revelry and gaiety. Dora's perspective on life is contrary to that of her twin sister. Unlike her sister, Dora is fully aware of the ultimate limitation of the carnivalesque elements in life. Dora knows that happiness is a temporary phase in life. She endorses the view that life is not a bed of roses. This contrast between the two sisters is underlined by the narrator Dora herself: "She said: 'Yes!' to life and I said, 'Maybe . . .'" (5).

The events of the novel ultimately uphold Dora's perspective and show Nora's exuberance as immature. In the novel, Dora proves to be wiser and more mature than her sister. Nora is a reckless young girl who repeatedly gets involved in shallow and farcical love affairs. Each time it is the wise sister Dora who has to come to the rescue of Nora when she lands herself in some trouble owing to her imprudent nature. Dora says that Nora "threw her heart away as if it were a used bus ticket. Either she was head over heels in love or else she was broken-hearted" (80). Then Dora shows how she had to manage a difficult situation which once arose when Nora slipped out of a party with a married man. Dora had to cover up Nora's absence and also had to allay the suspicions of that man's wife. Dora says about that woman: "There was a jealous madness in that woman. I took the bull by the horns and started off the masquerade – I answered to the name of Nora . . ." (81). Thus it is always Dora who keeps things from going out of control. It is her pragmatism which prevents Nora from being humiliated. Dora rebukes her sister: "A sort of grand carelessness possessed her each time she fell in love" (81-82). Dora is the one who maintains order in their lives. Commenting on Nora's frivolity, Dora says that "all that came naturally to her. To me, no. I was ever the introspective one" (84). The novel makes it clear that if Dora had been as careless like her sister, their lives would have been in utter disarray.

The Chance sisters are chorus girls of vaudeville theatre, also known as music halls in Britain. They call themselves as song and dance girls. It is clear that they belong to low culture. Dora repeatedly highlights how the sisters had to face discrimination in the public arena due to their profession which lacks dignity. They are the illegitimate and unacknowledged daughters of a famous Shakespearean actor Melchior Hazard. Dora shows how Melchior enjoys immense popularity due to the respectability of Shakespearean theatre which is considered high culture. Bakhtin's concept of the carnival is characterized by the temporariness of breaking of hierarchies. The novel demonstrates this temporariness. As Dora says, "we felt our art was swirling down the plughole and those were the days when

high culture was booming, our father cutting a swathe with the senior citizen roles in Shakespeare . . .” (165). Those who represent low culture are always relegated to the margins. Those who represent high culture are ultimately the triumphant ones. Dora confesses that they had to lead a miserable life: “At best it was a farce, at worst, a tragedy, and a chronic inconvenience the rest of the time” (11). Melchior Hazard’s family belongs to high culture and therefore they are assured of lasting reputation. But the Chance sisters, being a part of low culture cannot hope for such fame. This gap between the high and the low is emphasized by Dora: “How could mere song-and-dance girls aspire so high? We were destined, from birth, to be the lovely ephemera of the theatre, we’d rise and shine like birthday candles, then blow out” (58). At a later stage in life, Dora feels the futility of their lives and asks herself, “[W]hence came we? Whither goeth we?” (11). Then she answers the second question: “Bound for oblivion, nor leave a wrack behind” (11). While the Hazards lead a luxurious life in a posh house, the Chance sisters are comparably much poorer: “There was nothing so stuffy as the lives of small-time theatricals, in those days, and South London was a ghetto of chorus girls and boys and what not” (59). The word ‘ghetto’ reflects the abject conditions of those who belong to low theatre. Thus the lives of the sisters are devoid of mirth. In their old age, the Chance sisters are approached by Tristram Hazard for a television show. Nora fails to fathom the real implications of such an offer. But Dora immediately becomes aware of the consequences of accepting Tristram’s offer. Dora is conscious of the fact that their performance would be ridiculed by people. Hence Dora says that, “the very thought of us two aged ladies performing a geriatric Charleston for the delight of the viewers made me nauseous . . .” (39).

Though Nora tries to create a carnivalesque mood in their lives, the novel makes it clear that her vision cannot be sustained in the long run. Nora enthusiastically says: “Life must go on” (52). But the novelist depicts the extreme hardships they undergo when they go to work in Hollywood. The sisters’ excessively hectic schedule makes them feel like “victims of a plot” (142). Nora’s shallow optimism is undercut by Dora’s narration of their suffocating lives: “We worked like slaves. Take after take after take. The same routine, the same song, the same line - over and over and over” (142). It highlights the depressive monotony of their work. Dora complains that “it very near broke us” (142). Dora underlines the carelessness of the film producers regarding the safety of minor actors. The producers are extremely careful with the safety measures of the major actors. But the set which they created for the lowly actors is very unsafe and causes numerous accidents. Dora points out that it “was a deathtrap” (143). It shows society’s insensitivity to those who are at the lower rungs of the social ladder. It reveals the utopian nature of carnival. Such is the injustice meted out to the minor actors that Dora says: “I felt I was in exile” (143).

When there is an attempt on part of Genghis Khan - the celebrity producer in Hollywood - to bridge the chasm between the high and the low, the attempt is nullified by society. When it becomes known that Genghis Khan is going to marry Dora, a great public outcry breaks out against this alliance: “All the US asked: ‘Will this great man of the cinema propose to little Miss Nobody from Nowhere, England?’” (149). Here Carter shows that the carnivalesque mode cannot be sustained in life. Dora points out her helplessness in an industry which runs

according to the whims of rich people. She wails out: "I felt I didn't have a will of my own" (150). Although Dora tries to ignore the seamy side of their work in Hollywood and tries to cheer up, she finds that she cannot be happy under the circumstances: "I tried to laugh but it was wry. I felt sad" (153). Dora sums up their nightmarish experiences in Hollywood and describes their return to England: "So we went home with Grandma, sadder and wiser girls" (161).

The novel shows how nostalgia and mourning are a vital part of the existence of the Chance sisters. This is another manifestation of the limitation of carnival tradition in the novel. Nora's attempts to make their life joyous are thwarted in many ways. But the most terrible blow to her lively spirit is inflicted by the death of their beloved Grandma. They are left absolutely desolate in their home which used to be animated by Grandma's presence: "Nora and I sat down . . . and listened to the silence in that long, narrow house where we would live alone, in future, and had a good cry . . ." (164). Dora emphasizes the oppressive silence which started haunting them. This is a significant testimony to the temporariness of the carnival elements. Dora also points out that their carefree days of childhood came to an end with the demise of Grandma. She feels nostalgic about the days when Grandma was alive: "The heart went out of this house when Grandma died" (165). Even before Grandma dies, there is a suppressed grief for the pathetic end of the sisters' real mother Kitty, who was abandoned by their father Melchior Hazard. Dora ruefully reflects that their mother was just seventeen years old when she died in childbirth. Thus there is a perpetual pall of gloom over the lives of the twin sisters.

The novel is about unfulfilled longings and the disappointments that ensue from them. Dora describes how forsaken she and Nora felt in their childhood because their father refused to acknowledge them. They longed to get a glimpse of their famous father. Dora poignantly describes the day when their uncle Peregrine took them to meet Melchior: ". . . we might be permitted, just the once, to say the word we'd never used in all our lives: 'Father'" (71). But the little girls' desires are crushed when Melchior sees them but deliberately ignores their presence. Dora says that it was "the bitterest disappointment of my life till then. . . . Because those eyes of his looked at us but did not see us . . ." (72). Melchior's attitude caused such anguish to the children that they felt "unwelcome, worse than unacknowledged. . . . How we blubbered. Cried so much we couldn't see where we were going . . ." (73).

The novel gives the message that life is not simply about laughter and revelry. Along with delineating the personal grief of the Chance sisters, the novel also highlights the trauma suffered by the entire nation due to the two World Wars. Through the depiction of the harsh reality, the novel probes the limitation of the concept of carnival. Carter has been called "an extremely astute observer of the cultural milieu within which she lived and worked" (Gamble 12). Carter has presented an authentic picture of the destruction caused by the two wars. Through the voice of Dora, the novelist shows how the wars affected the lives of common people in Britain:

You must remember that there was a war on, when we were born. . . . First of all, the neighbours' sons went marching off, sent to their deaths, God help

them. Then the husbands, the brothers, the cousins, until, in the end, all the men went except the ones with one foot in the grave and those still in the cradle, so there was a female city, red-eyed, dressed in black. . . . (Carter 28)

The widespread carnage and the plethora of untimely deaths caused by the war is a critique of the utopian worldview of Nora. As Dora says, “it was no carnival, not the hostilities. No carnival” (163). Dora opines that we cannot ignore the harsh reality for long and it is silly to be basking in a utopian world: “Things were killing one another all around. We were stiff with cold and frozen with terror” (167-168). The fact that gloom replaces merriment in the novel is clearly mentioned. Dora says that war would “replace the comic mask with the one whose mouth turns down . . .” (154). Thus the novel gives the message that wars are facts which we cannot laugh away.

The novel captures the loneliness of Dora and Nora. Even Nora who had always believed in ignoring the darker side of life ultimately confesses in her old age that she feels lonely. It is her acceptance of the reality: “I feel a little lonely in the world. . . . No father, no mother . . . nor darling child” (189). Here Nora regrets her spinsterhood and childlessness. Towards the fag end of her life, the realization dawns upon her that she has been inhabiting a make-believe world. The sisters yearn for the days of their youth. Andermahr and Phillips have argued in their book *Angela Carter: New Critical Readings*, that the sisters “are reconciled to the diminishment of their looks that age inevitably brings”. I argue that the sisters find it very hard to come to terms with their loss of beauty. This is revealed in their pathetic attempts to conceal their age with the aid of cosmetics: “We paint an inch thick” (Carter 6). Their ruminations on the past also make them aware of their callous behaviour towards their Grandma. Dora recalls it with regret: “I see it, now, as a defeat that we . . . inflicted upon her out of heedlessness and vanity and youth” (94). This bleak atmosphere of loneliness and regret is another evidence of the temporariness of carnival elements in the novel.

Carter points out Nora’s mistaken belief that the upper class of the entertainment industry considers vaudeville girls to be their equals. The naivety of such a belief is underlined by the pragmatic sister Dora when she tells the reader that her erstwhile lover Ross O’Flaherty had painted her in an extremely negative light in his book. He was a famous script writer in Hollywood. He had portrayed Dora as “the treacherous, lecherous chorus girl, . . . rapacious, deceitful. Vulgar as hell” (119). Dora also reminds the reader that ultimately it is that writer who achieves lasting fame and she is relegated to the margins. She says that she is “by the world forgot on her seventy-fifth birthday while he’s dead . . . and immortal” (123). Thus Dora highlights the unbridgeable social gap between the lower and upper echelons of the show business world.

Nora’s worldview is hence proven to be a mere chimera. Dora’s pragmatic worldview is what prevails in the novel. Commenting on those who, like Nora, dwell in a make-believe world, Dora says: “They look around the world and think: ‘there must be something better!’ but there isn’t” (144).

II

Now I take up another pair of twins: Melchior Hazard and Peregrine Hazard. They are twin sons of a famous actor named Ranulph Hazard and his wife Estella. There are more differences between Melchior and Peregrine than similarities. Like Dora and Nora, they act as foils to each other throughout the novel. In this pair, it is Peregrine who stands for the bright aspect of carnival and Melchior embodies the darker aspect of carnival. As in the previously discussed pair of twins, here too, the novel ultimately upholds Melchior's stance on life.

The difference between the twin brothers is clearly stated by the narrator: ". . . Melchior was all for art and Peregrine was out for fun" (22). After they had lost their parents in early childhood, Peregrine had gone away to America in quest of an adventurous life. But his mature brother Melchior had adopted his late father's profession, of becoming a Shakespearean actor. Time has shown that Melchior's decision was the right one. Peregrine has never been able to attain that peak of fame which Melchior has achieved. Peregrine's belief in a utopian world has only made him a perpetual vagabond. The narrator says about Peregrine: "Here today and gone tomorrow, not so much a man, more of a travelling carnival" (169). He treats his nieces Dora and Nora as rightful members of Hazard family. Melchior, on the other hand, considers them solely as chorus girls who are not fit to be a part of his illustrious family. So Peregrine believes in the breaking of the social barriers between the rich and the poor, which is a typical feature of the carnival tradition. Melchior is against this erasure of differences between the Hazards and the Chances. Maintaining the social hierarchy is of such importance to him that he refuses to acknowledge that Dora and Nora are actually his daughters born out of wedlock. The novel shows that eradication of social inequality is ultimately unattainable. The Hazard family retains their reputation, while the Chance sisters remain in the shadows. Even Melchior's dispossessed daughters cannot ignore his meteoric rise to fame. Dora concedes this fact: "I must tell you that our father had become a truly great man of the theatre. . . . At the apex. 'Our greatest living Shakespearian'" (89). Hence it is Melchior's ideology which prevails in the novel. Despite Peregrine's attempts, the Chances are always excluded from their elite father's family. Melchior is the dominant figure in the novel.

Peregrine with his laughter, mischief and vivacity embodies the comic face of the theatre. Dora has aptly defined him as the "heart and soul of mirth" (92). Melchior, on the other hand, is described as "dark and brooding" (21). He is known for his roles of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. This fundamental difference between the brothers is used by Carter to emphasize the limitation of a comic worldview. Dora acknowledges that Melchior stands higher than Peregrine in the social ladder though they belong to the same family. Carter makes it clear that Peregrine has a nobler heart than his brother. It is Peregrine who pays for the upbringing of the illegitimate daughters of his famous brother. Carter then shows that fate does not favour him despite his generosity. The man who embodies carnival has to constantly shift from one profession to another in search of fortune. Melchior's trajectory, on

the other hand, runs upward: “Fate continued to deal kindly with Melchior . . . he was rolling in money” (95).

Another instance of the invincibility of Melchior’s power is provided by the incident of Melchior’s ancestral crown being saved from fire. On the night of Costume Ball, a Christmas party thrown by Melchior at his residence Lynde Court, a terrible fire breaks out. Initially Melchior fears that his crown has been burnt to ashes. When he laments the loss of his crown, Dora is amused and reflects that it anticipates the downfall of the Hazard theatrical dynasty. The crown was inherited by Melchior from his father Ranulph who wore it on the stage when he played King Lear. Thus the crown symbolizes the prestige of the Hazard family. The fire is here presented as a carnivalesque force because it causes hilarious chaos and disorder among the guests. Then Peregrine appears on the scene and it is made clear that he has been able to save the crown from being destroyed by the fire. The fact that everything else inside the house gets burnt except the crown is emblematic of the invincibility of the high culture. The carnivalesque fire failed to damage the crown. The narrator says that the crown was “unsinged, unmarked by fire, sootless” (106).

The fire also paves the way for the materialization of Melchior’s Hollywood aspirations. The fire had originated from the cigar of a renowned Hollywood producer and hence, he, as an act of recompense, promises Melchior that he would cast him in his next film. There is restoration of order after a temporary bout of carnival. Carter shows how Melchior is able to make a good impression on the American audience as well: “It was as if he’d put them under a spell, that voice, such glamour” (136).

It is Melchior’s charisma which fills his unacknowledged daughters with reverence and awe. They know that they can achieve fame in the theatre industry only with the aid of their father. It has been argued that this novel “is structured as a quest for paternal origin and influence . . .” (Munford 12). The Chance sisters seek the patronage of their father in order to be a part of high culture. But they find that this desire is unattainable: “We were doomed to sing and dance” (Carter 193). Melchior is knighted in recognition of his immense contribution to English theatre. Peregrine, despite his liveliness and generosity, cuts a pale figure besides his illustrious brother. The entire novel is a testimony of the victory of high culture over low culture, here embodied in Melchior and Peregrine respectively.

III

Lady Atalanta Hazard and Grandma Chance are the third pair of foils in my study. They are both mother figures to the twin sisters Dora and Nora Chances. Grandma Chance is not their grandmother. She is their foster mother who taught the girls to call her ‘Grandma’. Lady Atalanta is their father’s first wife, who had always displayed maternal feelings towards the two girls. Grandma Chance is a carnivalesque figure and Lady Atalanta stands for the limitations of carnival. As in the previously discussed pair of foils, here again, it is Lady Atalanta’s rational worldview which prevails over Grandma’s utopian perspective.

Dora describes how Grandma comically used to “shake her fist at the old men in the sky” (29). It was her gesture of angry protest against the men who were responsible for the bombardments during the World War. She is a thoroughly comic figure and her antics are a perpetual source of amusement to Dora and Nora. But Dora also highlights her powerlessness against social superiors. Grandma wants the girls to be publicly acknowledged by their father Melchior and tries hard to make him do so. But he flatly refuses. Dora describes Grandma's reaction: “. . . our father and his missus sailed off in a cab leaving Grandma waving her umbrella uselessly after them. ‘Damn’, said Grandma. ‘Damn, damn, damn’” (56). The novelist here emphasizes her comic ineffectuality in the face of harsh reality. Grandma can only curse the culprit from a distance.

Lady Atalanta is a character used by Carter to reinforce the impermanence of carnival merriment. She was once the wife of the most famous actor in British theatre. Her decline into a penniless divorcee is poignantly depicted in the novel. Carter shows how she does not even protest when her husband decides to marry a Hollywood actress: “Then she let Daisy Duck take away her husband. She didn't even put up a fight. She smiled bravely and let him go” (148). This divorce indicates the end of her carnival days. Sadness and gloom return in her life after a brief interval of gaiety. She is forced by her evil daughters to give away her home and all her money to them. She is rendered homeless in her old age. Dora says: “She'd begun to look sad . . . sadness became her . . .” (167). The sorrow underlying the apparent carnivalesque atmosphere of the novel is here manifest through Lady Atalanta's pain at being dispossessed by her daughters: “Lady A. lay flat on her back in Lewes General Hospital with one tear trickling out of the corner of her left eye, enough to break your heart” (180). Hence she stands for the restoration of the bitter reality of life after an interval of carnivalesque merriment.

IV

Ranulph Hazard and his wife Estella Hazard are the fourth and final pair of characters in my study. Estella embodies the brighter side of carnival. She is a truly comic figure who occasionally breaks out into ridiculous behavior in public. Peregrine told Dora about how Estella sometimes used to burst into laughter while acting on the stage: “. . . she used to get the giggles, sometimes, in the middle of some big scene . . . everybody else would have to cover for her” (12). She is a perfect example of carnival laughter. Apart from laughter, she was also known for her disorderly personality. She never believed in keeping herself tidy and well-groomed. It is an instance of carnivalesque disregard of propriety. The narrator says: “her hair was always coming undone . . . spraying out hairpins in all directions, her stockings at half-mast, her petticoat would come adrift in the middle of the street . . .” (12).

Her husband Ranulph, on the other hand, stands for the darker aspect of the concept of carnival. He can be equated with the high culture or authority which his carnivalesque wife vainly attempts to flout. He is the cause of sadness in Estella's life. Carter makes it clear that Estella is only nineteen years old and Ranulph is almost thirty years older than her. Estella is rendered a “lamb to the slaughter . . . his grey hairs, his shaking hand, his dubious finances—he was a drunk, a bankrupt, a gambler, he'd . . . beaten and betrayed three wives into early

graves” (15). Hence it becomes clear that there is a darker side to Estella’s merry life. But the novelist shows that carnival does not imply unmixed joy. Bakhtin’s idea of carnival includes this realistic perspective on life. Bakhtin has made it clear that even the temporary act of carnival disorder is sanctioned by the authority for the purpose of maintaining order in the long run. This is shown in the novel by Carter through these four pairs of characters.

V

To conclude, *Wise Children* is a novel which reminds the reader that the carnival elements in life are temporary. The novel foregrounds the bitter reality beneath the temporary carnivalesque euphoria. It involves the fact that the stifling social restrictions are suspended only for a short period. Hence the carnival is not a permanent solution to human misery and sorrow. “It is a temporary transfer to the utopian world” (Bakhtin 276). It is this utopian aspect of the carnival which the novel makes us aware of. The novel gives the message that we should not lose sight of reality while basking in carnivalesque merriment. Aidan Day has argued that Carter’s novel is “not disengaged from social reality” (Day 10). The novel repeatedly shows the restoration of social hierarchies after a brief period of chaos. It is best depicted in the central event of the novel – the outbreak of fire in Melchior’s house. The fire causes temporary disruption of all social codes and conventions. It engenders a comic mixing of the high ranks and the low ranks. But it is followed by the return of social order as Melchior’s crown is saved. The fire could not permanently destabilize the social order. Aidan Day has emphasized Carter’s “empiricism and the passion for reason” (12).

All episodes of happiness in the novel are invariably followed by prolonged periods of gloom. The narrator Dora ruminates on this impermanence of happiness:

When I was young, I’d wanted to be ephemeral, I’d wanted the moment, to live in just the glorious moment. . . . Pluck the day. Eat the peach. Tomorrow never comes. But, oh yes, tomorrow does come all right, and when it comes it lasts a bloody long time, I can tell you. (Carter 125)

The novel acknowledges the need for carnival elements in life but it emphasizes their limitations. Carter reveals the untenability of a purely comic worldview in the modern age fraught with wars. The novel draws our attention to the mass killings and the massive destruction caused by war. It also underlines the havoc wrought in the cultural sphere. It has been argued: “In Carter’s novel . . . a sense of cultural loss is pursued through the disappearance of some of the icons associated with London, such as the Lyons teashops . . .” (Peach 5). Thus the entire novel establishes the temporary nature of the carnival elements in life, which constitutes an important part of Bakhtin’s concept. When Peregrine says, “Life’s a carnival”, Dora aptly replies: “The carnival’s got to stop some time” (Carter 222). Then she ruefully adds: “you listen to the news, that’ll take the smile off your face” (222).

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