

The Comedy of Manner: Rhetorical Discourse of Congreve's *The Way of the World*

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Abstract

The Way of the World is abundant of rhetorical devices which are exploited to express Congreve's viewpoints and assert his humorous and sarcastic senses. William Congreve, through his characters' use of these devices, attempts to reveal Restoration's *The Comedy of Manner* and to convey a rational and sensible predilection to his educated audiences and readers. He seems to take an inconsistent manner; in fact, he adopts different attitudes and styles, such as direct, ironic, sarcastic, amused, etc. Like his contemporary Restoration dramatists, Congreve lays more emphasis on the manipulation of rhetorical devices to realize numerous literary dramatic functions, particularly equipping his audience with persuasive arguments (Bruegge, 2014:1). Further, the use of these rhetorical maneuvers helps *Congreve* to make the events of his paly more actual, more comprehensible, more persuasive, and more emotional. In other words, these maneuvers are envisioned to stimulate, persuade, unite and sway people in the way of achieving specific ends.

Thus, this paper endeavors to investigate the employment of the rhetorical elements in Congreve's *The Way of the World* , detecting the functions of these elements in creating the funny and ironic sense and building up comical and persuasive opinions.

Key words: The Comedy of Manner, rhetorical devices, Congreve, *The Way to the World*

المستخلص

إن مسرحية طريق العالم مليئة بالأدوات البلاغية التي يتم استغلالها للتعبير عن وجهات نظر كونجريف وتأكيده حواسه الفكاهية والساخرة. يحاول وليام كونجريف من خلال استخدام شخصياته لهذه الأدوات الكشف عن "كوميديا السلوك" في عصر النهضة وتمثيل ميول سببية وعقلانية لجمهوره وقرائه المتقفين. في الواقع، يبدو أنه يتخذ طريقة غير متسقة. ، حيث يتبنى المواقف والأنماط المختلفة ، المباشرة والساخرة والمسلية ، الخ . وكباقي كتاب المسرح المعاصرين في عصر النهضة ، يركز كونجريف على استعمال الأدوات البلاغية لتحقيق العديد من الوظائف الأدبية الدرامية ، وخاصة تقديم حجج مقنعة لجمهوره (Bruegge, 2014: 1). علاوة على ذلك ، فإن استخدام هذه الأدوات البلاغية يساعد كونجريف على جعل أحداثه أكثر واقعية وأكثر مفهومة وأكثر إقناعاً وأكثر عاطفية. وبعبارة أخرى ، من المتوقع أن تعمل هذه الأدوات على تحفيز وإقناع وتوحيد وتأثير الناس نحو تحقيق أهدافه. وبالتالي ، فإن هذه الورقة تسعى إلى التقصي في توظيف الأدوات البلاغية في مسرحية طريق العالم للكاتب كونجريف، والكشف عن وظائف هذه العناصر في خلق شعور ساخر ومضحك وبناء آراء كوميديّة مقنعة.

كلمات مفتاحية : كوميديا السلوك ، أدوات بلاغية ، كونجريف ، طريق العالم

1. Introduction

At the end of the 17th century, a special of comedy came into existence, known as the *Comedy of Manners* which seemed to be discourteous and murky, attached with agitated and shameful discourse focusing on sexual relationships. The events of most literary works, dramas, novels, poetry rotated around fiddly lovers, deceived husbands and unfaithful wives. Particularly, Restoration dramas were comical, awkward, energetic and heartless as they portrayed the lifetime and conducts of the aristocratic people of the time. They ridiculed the stylish society, their humorous and rational dialogue, and their immoral conducts (Shmoop.com, 2017).

The main characteristic trait of Restoration upper-class society is associated with the manipulation of sophisticated conduct and the type of vocabulary and cultured language loaded by rhetorical ingredients aimed to stimulate and display amusing representations, marked by intellectuality from which the audience can get shrewd yet entertaining and imaginative appearances. Influenced by the Restoration age, Congreve's characters are required to employ certain lexical items that echo a perspective with lucidness and origination, to help understanding in a delightful vulgarity. On their part, audiences can draw melodiousness from sharing with characters the innovative manner of accepting an idea (Bruegge, 2014: 8).

The following pages are mainly dedicated to the identification of the rhetorical elements employed in Congreve's *The Way of the World*, and the various purposes that these elements exhibit to highlight the theme of comedy as associated with issues ascertaining humorous senses, such as, beauty, sex, fantasy, reality, association, clarification, assertion disposition, arrangement; decoration , variety etc. As a starting point, it is important to give a brief description of William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, focusing on its historical background, synopsis, plot and context.

2. *The Way of the World*: Preliminaries

Traditionally, Restoration was known as a time of business and greediness and even the people of the Restoration era worried money, desire and sexual characteristics. Main social issues such as love and marriage were assessed in respect to materialism. The main features of Restoration era were artificiality and immorality. People tried to find relaxation and luxury, yet serious issues mattered less to them. A very prominent example of the Restoration works in

literature is William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, which is largely regarded as one of the best Restoration comedies and is occasionally performed on the stage. However, the play ridicules the cheekiness of the former periods. As a play of the comedy of manners, it mocks at the impertinences, pretensions, and burdens of the aristocratic classes. Therefore, it is characterized as having a witty dialogue and romantic plotting. The play revolves around the two lovers Mirabell and Millamant. In order for them to marry and receive Millamant's full dowry, Mirabell must receive the blessing of Millamant's aunt, Lady Wishfort. Unfortunately, Lady Wishfort is a very unpleasant lady who scorns Mirabell and wants her own nephew, Sir Wilfull, to wed Millamant (Hill, 1983:14).

The way of the World is considered as Congreve's chef-d'oeuvre and the highest of his dramatic accomplishments. Though, when first performed on the stage, it was unsuccessful. Ayesha Shariff (2017: 3) ascribes this failure to the fact that it was "largely due to the play's complexity", besides, it overflows in a huge number of "characters and complications, not to mention the numerous intrigues devised right from the beginning of the play up to its end"; rather, the audiences are told of a deception already contrived by Mirabell before the act takes place. The deception voices his arrangement to marry his servant to the page of Mrs. Wishfort to attain his aim, summed up in his desire to marry Millamant, the latter's ward.

Like other Restoration comedies, the play is introduced as derision on the social behaviors and conducts of the age. The themes of the play encompass criticism and condemnation of the upper-classes, particularly those of courtship, as well as "the nature of love and the role of money in marriage". Thus, *The Way of the World* is often seen as reflecting the struggle between the old traditions

and the new concepts. The particulars and alterations of relations are perceived with an penetrating psychological visualization: the dominant nature of Lady Wishfort turning to horrifying dependence on her counselor Mrs. Marwood; the carefully shaped changes of power between Fainall and Mrs. Marwood; and the enthusiastic charisma between Mirabell and Millamant, disguised beneath a covering of contempt and insignificance (Hilton, 1969).

Practice of entertainment and sharpness is a remarkable aspect of Restoration comedy. The characters deploy language in a very awkward and amusing manner. For instance, Mirabell gives an example of wittiness as he comments on early eighteenth century marriage "You should have just so much disgust for your husband as may be sufficient to make you relish your lover." In fact, the whole arrangement of the play goes around the subjects of unfaithfulness, marriage and fortune hunting. That is, the plot unveils the characters through their hunts and actions. The manner they perform makes merriment unavoidable and sarcasm inevitable. Through this manner, Congreve is ridiculing the conduct of the people of the English society, particularly the upper class (Palmer, 1970:23).

3. Rhetorical Devices

Restoration literary writers often attempt to decorate their message with certain artistic and aesthetic traits. As an example, Congreve's *The Way of the World* exploits several rhetorical devices to achieve the purpose behind its existence. The following sections attempt to ascertain the use of these devices in this play, focusing on the purpose and influence of each device on the creation of entertaining and ludicrous meaning.

3.1 Simile

Simile is a rhetorical device employed to equate one thing to another by means of words such as “as” or “like”. This figure of speech increases and elucidates an image by directly comparing one object to another, and therefore the comparison is explicit. Or as Cuddon, (1998: 830) puts it, simile is "equally common in prose and verse and it is a figurative device of great antiquity”.

An investigation of *The Way of the World* has recoded many examples of simile. An illustrative example of simile, “Friendship without freedom is as dull as love without enjoyment, or wine without toasting” (I. ii.), shows that this device alludes to the themes of *friendship, drinking, love* and *sex*. It is important to notice that simile, metaphor and imagery, together with ornamental rhetorical expressions play a great role in Restoration Comedies which are always established to thrive and flourish through wit and humor. Here, the simile mirrors noteworthy facets about the characters' conduct in respect to the main themes of *drinking, love* and *sex*.

Another example of simile is manipulated to establish a humorous context, “They could neither of ’em speak for rage, and so fell a sputtering at one another like two roasting apples” (III. iii.). This simile creates an effective amusement, and simultaneously it identifies a situation happening offstage, where the characters speak quickly and loudly in an irritated manner when they are distressed or astounded: “using this colorful language, then, creates a humorous image even of something unseen, and adds anticipation to seeing the drunken men come onstage” (Gradesaver.com: 2017).

3.2 Metaphor

Metaphor is rather like simile, but the comparison is implicit. The speaker does not use the words “like” or “as.” And instead of saying that one thing is *like* another, the speaker says that one thing is another. Put simply, “one thing is described in terms of another” (Cuddon, 1998: 507). This figure of speech discloses an indirect comparison between two things.

In an obvious example in *The Way of the World*, the metaphor designated by the expression “a murdered reputation” is expressively serious in so far as it postulates a dread of reputation injury or social murder and suicide, which makes all the characters in the play alert to the extent that their reputations are troubled, that is, they are obliged to act and move with schemes and secrets. For example, Millamant secretly marries Mrs. Fainall off to Fainall without informing the latter about her illicit with him before her marriage.

3.3 Symbol

A symbol, as figure of speech, points out a “sign proper”, It is a matter of "social convention, for the relationship between the signifier and what it signifies is something arbitrary, which is placed under the heading of the discipline called semiotics" (Abrams and Harpham, 2009: 324f).

One symbol to be taken into consideration is Ms. Marwood’s letter which has been seen in Act IV; it is a symbolic constituent of the climax that will soon appear which she promises to write it, after she overhears the scheme designed at the beginning of the play. When the letter becomes in Lady Wishfort’s hand, she has crystalized the gossip and behaves in such a way as to let the plot of the play be directed in the way it does.

Alcohol on the stage is considered a symbol for the desire to escape some of the stiff rules of behavior that is socially and ethically recognized. Lday Wishfort used to drink alcohol in her dressing room and it is sometimes implied that she is drunkard on the stage. Alcohol dissimulates the characters' feeling of propriety necessary for the status of Restoration society. In this sense, alcohol is taken as a symbol of escape from the propriety, and at the same time it is linked to the collusions and arrangements planned by others.

Waitwell's disguised as Sir Rowland with his clothing is exactly the essence of the fashion of the upper class. It is Mirabell who outfits him, which indicates that it is Mirabel's style. But as he is to be known as Mirabell's uncle, the style will be suitable for an older person, "this physicalization of the costume element of fashion ... calls attention to the silly and theatrical nature of society and physical societal signs of status" (Gradesaver.com, 2017).

3.4 Irony

The term *irony* gives the sense of "dissembling, or of hiding what it actually the case; not, however, in order to deceive, but to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects" (Abrams and Harpham, 2009: 165). In drama, irony designates a situation in which the audience shares with the writer's knowledge about specific situations of which a character is unaware, and the character acts in a way opposite to the anticipations of the audience (ibid.). A second kind of irony is concerned with the difference between the ostensible meaning and the intended meaning that is meant to be exposed by either a character or its creator.

At the very beginning of *The Way of the World*, Congreve quotes an introduction in which he ironically ridicules the audiences themselves:

**Satire, he thinks, you ought not to expect;
For so reformed a town who dares correct?
To please, this time, has been his sole pretence,
He'll not instruct, lest it should give offence.
Should he by chance a knave or fool expose,
That hurts none here, sure here are none of those:
In short, our play shall (with your leave to show it)**

(The Way of the World, Prologue)

In this quotation, Congreve means to mock at many spectators watching this comedy and their response to it “which he attempts to forewarn them not to have, [and] is part of what he is parodying about them”. Even the title of the play implies that Congreve ridicules the behavior of people in the Restoration era as it displays how the world moves and works. The spectators may be thought to comment on foolish and ridiculous behavior of Restoration people in society, that is “the way of the world”. Indeed, Congreve is satirical when giving such a title; he believes that there is something in society that has gone awfully bad—society is described as being imprudent and ridiculous. On the contrary, Congreve has depicted an ideal world—the world of true love, pure emotions and faithful relationships—represented by the kind of life Mirabell and Millamant on the one hand and Harcourt and Alithea on the other hand, are going to lead, which is a life based of true feelings, mutual deference and peace.

Plentiful examples of dramatic irony are found in Congreve’s *The Way of the World* , used as a means of stimulating laughter and uncertainty, and at the same time it is considered a structural element, as it contributes to the development of character and action. A good example of dramatic irony is associated with Mirabell’s scheme which comprises a great deal of irony; he has his servant falsely wooed women, especially the woman who has severely treated him, and he has got himself in situations in which he should behave

secretly. It may be conceived that he has done the right plans according to what his character is: ‘and, even more ironically, he is correct—though it seems he will fail, he is able to use his charm and wit to solve his problems, and those of Lady Wishfort if only in the process, and gets his way with both love and money”.

Much of the action of *The Way of the World* relies on the use of the rhetorical device “irony”; it is used in many significant instances in the play:

If irony is included in the discussion, then arbitrary limits must be set because from some point of view, irony pervades *The Way of the World*. The title is ironic; the action is ironic; the relationships of the characters to each other are ironic. (Cliffsnotes.com, 2017)

3.5 Impersonation or Prosopopoeia

Impersonation means to pretend to be another person (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*, 2016, s.v. *impersonation*). It is a rhetorical device which involves the pretense of a character to be another one. It is a figure of speech intended to achieve certain dramatic purposes (e.g. ironical situations, suspense and curiosity).

On one occasion, Mirabell pretends that he loves Lady Wishfort who directly has faith in him, but when she realizes that his love towards her is false, she displays her aggressive attitude towards him. She is Millamant’s aunt who is to decide whom Millamant should marry, and then the latter should lose her inheritance of 6000 thousand pounds. Mirabell and Millamant turn to be true lovers and want to marry. Mirabell makes a trick, letting his servant Waitwell disguise as his rich and old uncle in order to woo Lady Wishfort. The trick has been discovered and Lady Wishfort is left in a embarrassing situation.

Impersonation is created in the play for the sake of generating a dramatic irony that is envisioned to charm the audience, and at the same time it is an attempt to mock at the behaviors of the Restoration society.

Impersonation is looked upon as a tremendous maneuver planned by Mirabell to cheat Lady Wishfort into giving up her niece. He tries to aggravate her passion, so that when she agrees to marry Sir Rowland, she will immediately give her agreement to Millamant to marry Mirabell, once the trick is discovered. Impersonation is also manipulated by Mrs. Marwood when she puts on a mask to avoid attention in the park after she quarrels with Fainall, and when she hides in the closet and overhears Mirabell's intrigue. Impersonation and disguise are considered essential elements of comedy:

Pretense and disguise are the raw materials of comedy, and they abound in this play. Everyone is pretending, from Lady Wishfort, who must wear layers of paint to hide her age and layers of self-righteousness to feign her disinterest in men, to Mrs. Fainall, who appears to be a wife at the mercy of her husband and turns out to be a shrewd businesswoman. Mirabell plays at being Lady Wishfort's lover; Fainall appears to be an honest husband; Foible is not the loyal waiting woman she seems; and Sir Wilful good-naturedly feigns his pursuit of Millamant, who, in turn, demonstrates that the shallow and capricious "femme fatale" is in reality an intelligent, passionate, and worthy match to Mirabell. (Encyclopedia.com, 2017)

3.6 Contrast

Contrast occurs when "two images or ideas juxtapose each other for the sake of heightening or clarifying a scene, a theme, or an episode" (Leech, 1996:178). Many contrasting pictures are found in the *The Way of the World* involving: intriguer and false lover, reality and appearance, life and death, and light and darkness. This figure of speech is used to expose an important contrast between false appearance and reality (Perrine, 10777:102). Appearances in the

play designate that most of the characters behave according to the concept of propriety, for they pretend that they show good manners, while in fact most of them follow a libertine and profligate life. For instance, Mirabell, before the play opens, has an unlawful relationship with Mrs. Fainall whom he marries off to Mr. Fainall, lest her supposed pregnancy should be discovered. Mirabell too has been a lover of Ms. Marwood who has formed a plot against him when learning that he intends to marry Millamant.

A striking example of contrast in the play is between nature and art, as obviously shown in Lady Wishfort's who attempts to use makeups for the sake of making herself look younger than what she is, or she may look more beautiful, but Congreve has made her look worse. When she appears to be very concerned about her appearance, Foible tells her that "Your ladyship frowned a little too rashly, indeed madam. There are some cracks discernable in the white varnish." Looking in a mirror, Lady Wishfort cries, "cracks, say'st thou? Why am I arrantly flayed; I look like an old peeled wall. Thou must repair me, Foible, before Sir Rowland comes, or I shall never keep up to my picture." (III. i) But at the end of this drama Lady Wishfort has experienced an austere yet humbling punishment. She has hidden her true appearance, self, and body with the view to impress Sir Rowland, but she comes to know that she has been deceived, for she has been made the victim of the intrigue made by Mirabell; Sir Rowland turns to be a servant in disguise.

3.7 Charactronyms or Allegorical Names

Charactronym is a name especially given to a fictional character (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*, 2016, s.v. *charactronym*). Leech (1969: 163) defines allegory as a "multiple symbol which has an individual interpretation but it can

elaborate a total interpretation". Thus, it can transfer a concealed message "through figures of symbol to comprehend an abstract concept to be a concrete concept". Allegorical names refer to the use of names that signify abstract ideas and are often given to archetypal characters that display the same merits. This usage is inherited from the medieval morality plays which consist of typical characters with names implying no change in personality—names such as death, virtue, friendship, etc.

For the sake of creating typical characters, Congreve uses characteronyms or allegorical names to refer to abstract ideas and stock characters that do not develop right from the beginning of the play till the end. In *The Way of the World*, specimens of the characters' names reflect the kind of the personality the name indicates.

I- Fainall

The name "Fainall" means *feign all*. The meaning of his name is suggestive of his behavior as a husband; he is a faithless husband who always relies on his wife's inheritance for the sake of his livelihood and comfort. His good reputation in the town is the opposite of what he really is, for his true nature shows that he is greedy, false and profligate. At the time he is making an affair with Mrs. Marwood, he wishes to control his wife's and his mother-in-law's properties. Thus, his name indicates the opposite of what he alleges of "feign," for his name indicates that he is a pretender whose wit serves him well to cope with society.

II- Mirabell

"Mira" means to "look," and "bell" means *beautiful*. the play envisages Mirabell as a clever, handsome, young, and gentleman of a strong character. He

is of good manners and an admirer of Millamant. Because of these merits which he enjoys, he is once the lover of Mrs. Fainall, and he is liked by Mrs. Marwood. Besides, Mrs. Fainall interests the idea that he loves her, which turns to be pretention, and makes this lady loathe him. He is a man clever enough to carry out his schemes to marry Lady Wishfort's niece against her will, securing his love and Millamant's dowry.

III- Mrs. Marwood

“Mar” means “*to damage.*” As her name designates, she tries to spoil the comfort and happiness of others for the sake of enriching herself. She almost succeeds in spoiling Mirabell's advance for marriage to Millamant, the two true lovers, by unfolding their love and so enraging Lady Wishfort who scorns Mirabell because of his false advances to her. It is recognized that Mrs. Marwood and Fainall, besides their adulterous acts, try to steal Lady Wishfort's fortune, but their plot and jealousy are found out.

3.8 Anticlimax

Anticlimax is a rhetorical device used by writers when they convert their situations or language from seriousness to joking. It is sometimes referred to as bathos. In fact, it signals the writer's intentional “drop from the serious and elevated to the trivial and lowly in order to achieve a comic or satiric effect” (Abrams and Harpham, 2009: 24). The climax of *The Way of the World* occurs when Millamant has got full control over the situation in which Mr. Fainall tries to gain his wife's inheritance which appears to be under the control of Mirabell. In this way, Fainall's scheme to get money from his marriage turns to be a failure and at the same time it leads to an anticlimax that makes fun of him and ridicules his plan. Another example of anticlimax which makes the audience

laugh is the situation in which Lady Wishfort discovers that she has been deceived by Mirabell's plan to make her believe that his supposed uncle Sir Rowland (Waitwell) is trying to woo her and ask for her hand in marriage.

3.9 Foil

A foil is a character that stands in contrast to the protagonist with the view to project the latter's merits. Put simply, it is "a character in a work who, by sharp contrast, serves to stress and highlight the temperament of the protagonist" (Abrams and Harpham, 2009: 265). One character in *The Way of the World* may represent a foil to the hero or the protagonist of the play by projecting its unattractive features or some immoral conduct, thereby making the hero shine in a comparatively more glowing light. For instance, Fainall represents a foil to Mirabell, who is a very gentleman, of whom the former uses illegal means to achieve his aims which make him appear to be a villain, and the latter emerges as a true gallant who tries to save the reputation and fortune of both Mrs. Fainall and Lady Wishfort. Thus, Mirabell's dignified behavior is rewarded and he brings the comedy to a happy ending. Similarly, Mrs. Marwood serves as a foil to Millamant. Furthermore, Millamant can be the foil of Mr. Fainall; the first is to show true love void of materialistic gains; the second thinks only of the materialistic gains which he may get from his convenient marriage.

3.10 Hyperbole

A hyperbole is a figure of speech in which "an overstatement or exaggeration occurs" (Harrel, 2012, 24). It is a literary device where the author uses specific words and phrases of a statement in order to produce noticeable effect. Hyperbole points to "language that describes something as better or worse than it really is, or it means a deliberate and obvious exaggeration" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2016,

s.v. *hyperbole*). For instance, *enough food to feed a whole army* is a common example of hyperbole.

Hyperbole works together with understatement (ironic expressions of reality) to make effective comedic scenes. In *The Way to the World*, the two characters, Witwoud and Petulant, are experts of using this figure of speech, as they are endowed with a witty potentialities often employed to insult or beat an enemy. In Act III, Petulant wishes to insult Sir Wilfull by noting that how obvious it is that he has been travelling. Petulant's views and speech turn to be silly and pretentious. However, Sir Wilfull cannot be deceived, or he cannot be taken aback. He matches Petulant by replying in an exaggerated and intentional way, "If you are not satisfy'd with the Information of my Boots, Sir if you will step to the Stable, you may enquire further of my Horse, Sir" (III. i).

4. Conclusion

William Congreve purposely incorporates different rhetorical devices in his *The Way to the World* to achieve numerous dramatic effects, without which the action of the play would not have been fully developed and the comedy would have been regarded as being dull, insipid and superficial. As a comedy, *The Way of the World* is written to excite the audiences with mirth, amusement and laughter. These elements of comedy by no means cannot be achieved without having a recourse to the rhetorical (aesthetic and linguistic) elements. The joke posed by the comedy should make the audience get relieved and at the same time feel that characters are not to face a tragic end. This task can only be achieved by employing particular rhetorical devices such as irony, pun, foil, contrast, hyperbole, anticlimax... etc. Congreve appreciates the value of amusement as a social phenomenon and he has written his comedy to entertain the audiences and to give them a moral lesson. The

play in question exposes the follies of the aristocratic society in a humorous manner with the view of satirizing the social practices and customs.

The most influential rhetorical device deployed in the play is “*irony*,” which does not only make the audience laugh at the follies of the aristocrats, but also satirizes them in an indirect manner. Other rhetorical devices utilized in the play are significant in a way that they develop action and character. They are part and parcel of the structure of the plays. Wit, hero, fool, and country bumpkin are being satirized in familiar domestic situations in which ridiculous human impulses witnessed during the Restoration period.

Restoration playwrights intentionally satiated their comedies with the kind of rhetorical devices to display their wit and to provide the kind of pleasure and amusement to sophisticated spectators who very well understand the witty expressions exposed to their intellectuality. The Restoration comedy of manners under consideration are characterized by clarity and novelty, whose understanding creates delight, mirth and amusement on the part of the audiences, for the rhetorical devices employed are to give a better comprehension of the situations and ideas presented—both effective and influential. Finally, Congreve's comedy of manners is successful as he can share the use of rhetorical devices together with the traditional devices that could produce amusement—eccentric characters, mistaken identity debauchery and the like.

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