

# The Grotesque Body and Ageing in A.S.Byatt's Short Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper deals with the work of the novelist Antonia Susan Byatt who became attracted to the short story genre which she often uses to express her fantastic ideas concerning the human body and its transformations, including ageing and death. Byatt often presents the human body as grotesque – it is deformed, hybrid, and/or monstrous. In her stories, the human bodies changed by circumstances or other factors usually signify the characters' crisis in which they create new autonomies, new forms of existence. The paper discusses Byatt's way of using the grotesque in depicting ageing and illness of her protagonists. The analysis is focused on two short stories from Little Black Book of Stories (2003) and explores the protagonists' identity disintegration and body transformation as a result of inevitable life processes and the perception of human life as fragile and unstable.*

## KEYWORDS

ageing, A.S.Byatt, body, grotesque, body transformation, identity disintegration

## Introduction

The novelist Antonia Susan Byatt (1936) had already been an established figure of British literary scene when she started to publish short fiction, namely her first collection *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987) which was followed by *Angels and Insects* (1992), *The Matisse Stories* (1993), *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (1994), *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998), and *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003) up to date. Although as a novelist Byatt is renowned for her realistic writing, in her short fiction her writing takes a more fantastic shift. She says she wanted “to accommodate the strange”<sup>1</sup> which she did not find place for in her novels. In her short stories Byatt often combines her fantastic visions with her deep interest in women's issues such as the lack of freedom within the marriage and social frames, or their marginalization, although she rejects being labelled as a feminist. She also discusses the issues of creativity, the relationship between the visual and the textual, reality and its representation, and storytelling. She presents a wide variety of female characters who struggle against adversities and social degradation, who do not conform, nor fit the social order and its rules. Interestingly, her protagonists age with her.<sup>2</sup> Samantha Mathews notes that “[a]s Byatt's career progresses, storytelling appears more than ever a matter of life and death for her, inseparable from the life of the body, rites of the passage and an awareness of mortality”<sup>3</sup>. Byatt now explores the post-sexual age of women, depicting characters who are liberated from the responsibilities towards their husbands and children and when mortality is an everyday prospect. A good example is her latest collection *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003)

1 Jean-Louis Chevalier, “Entretien avec A.S.Byatt,” *JSSE: Proceedings of the Conference on The English Short Story since 1946*. 22 (1994): 13.

2 Celia Wallhead, *A.S.Byatt: Essays on the Short Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 19.

3 Samantha Mathews, “Monsters, Trolls and Creative Writers,” *The Times Literary Supplement* (31 October 2003): 21.

which is peopled with several ageing women. Byatt describes various aspects of the old age and how differently people can experience that period of their life.<sup>4</sup>

One of her concerns is the problem of women's identity associated with their changing bodies which become a site of crisis and a signifier of their social status. The result is often a feeling of otherness and monstrosity of the body. Although there are claims that fantastic hybrid beings that appear in her short stories are Byatt's main response to women's ageing (Carmen-Veronica Borbély), or that Byatt's stories on ageing are first of all Gothic (Cellia Wallhead)<sup>5</sup>, I argue that it is also the grotesque of everyday life and the lifespan as reflected in ageing bodies that she uses as one of her approaches. The grotesque body is not a rare aspect appearing in Byatt's work. It has occurred in her previous collections already, in stories like "Medusa's Ankles" (*The Matisse Stories*, 3–28) or "Lamia in the Cévennes" (*Elementals*, 79–111), and it seems to be one of Byatt's ways how to deal with the strict cultural and social norms imposed on women and their bodies.

The paper discusses different aspects of the grotesque which Byatt frequently uses to express her concerns and varied perceptions of old age. My analysis focuses on two short stories – "The Pink Ribbon" and "A Stone Woman", both from the collection *Little Black Book of Stories*. I analyze the protagonists' identity disintegration and transformation caused by their age and illness, with a focus on their body-mind unity. Although each of them is depicted in a different way the unifying element is the grotesque and the broken discreteness of the body.

## Ageing as Grotesque

Ageing as a developmental and a constant process of the human body is characterized by the gradual decline of mental and physical body functions. It challenges the paradigms of classical beauty and ideal body which is "closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek".<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, ageing as a process is expressed in a changing mind and body which corresponds with the unstable character of the grotesque corporeality. The link is also illustrated by the frequent artistic tendency to exaggerate physical weaknesses and changes which are developed and accumulated over time.

Grotesque bodies, in general, are characterized as hybrid, monstrous, deformed and fluid. They subvert cultural norms and transgress boundaries, whether cultural or their own. As Mikhail Bakhtin states, "the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, complete unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits."<sup>7</sup> However, the unity of the grotesque body with the world only applies to the medieval and Renaissance cultures. With the rise of modernity the grotesque moves to the margin, and functions as a way to define and fix normality.<sup>8</sup> However, for our purpose, the theory of Julia Kristeva is more relevant since she discusses

4 Antonia Susan Byatt, *Little Black Book of Stories* (London: Vintage, 2004), first published by Chatto & Windus, 2003.

5 Carmen-Veronika Borbély, "Monstrous Genealogies: Reconstru(ct)ing Teratological Females in A.S.Byatt's Fiction," in *Dark Reflections, Monstrous Reflections: Essays on the Monster in Culture*, ed. Sorcha Ni Fhlainn (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2008); Celia Wallhead, *A.S.Byatt: Essays on the Short Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

6 Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8.

7 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* [1965], trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26.

8 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

a female body and its marginal, abject position. Abjection is caused by “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>9</sup> For Kristeva, the process of abjection takes place in the border territory between I and not-I, and corresponds with the challenging of the dichotomy of the self and the other by the indeterminacy of body boundaries inherent to the grotesque. As Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund point out, the boundaries “between the internal and external, the inside and outside, the private and the public spheres are porous and fluidly transformative, generating fears about the potential violation of borders between the inner and the outer.”<sup>10</sup> The body which is always in a process, unfinished, with unstable boundaries, therefore becomes a good vehicle for expression of the feeling of fragility of the human life and body.

In Byatt's short stories the idea of instability of human life is often represented by grotesque bodies which usually transgress the cultural norms of perfection and stability, and undergo a process of transformation, disintegration and dissolution. The crisis of identity as a part of this process seems to be one of the crucial aspects of Byatt's short writing. She presents human bodies as alien (object) and familiar (resembling the subject) at the same time. Byatt's characters' body boundaries are often breached on many levels. It is not only fluidity or hybridity of the body but also mental alienation from oneself and the society, and splitting of the self. Those are the aspects which are analyzed in the two short stories.

### **Mado and the Split Self**

“The Pink Ribbon”<sup>11</sup> is a story of an elderly married couple of James and Madeleine (Mado) Ennis. Madeleine suffers from the Alzheimer's and James takes care of her. The third person narrative is told from James's perspective and focuses on his perception of his wife and her disease. Byatt describes a woman whose present life, and that of her husband is determined by the disease. Its many aspects and details presented by Byatt cause that we perceive her life as grotesque.

One of the main aspects of Madeleine's life is the splitting of herself resulting from her illness. In her state, Mado's single self is disintegrated and fragmented into many selves which are in contradiction. At the same time, these multiple selves have unstable boundaries, overlapping and fusing at times. One of the crucial aspects expressing Mado's different selves is her speech. One moment she speaks as a secret agent in the Intelligence Service she used to be, talking to the people she had sent to foreign fronts, then as a young wife full of love and desire, or as an infant babbling, repeating words she has just heard, without any sense. Only the self of her present life is not heard, as if it was a hybrid mixture of all her past selves. However, it is difficult for James to decode to whom, to which imaginary person, she speaks, and which self actually prevails. Mado's speech is fragmented, reflecting her mind fragmented by her illness. Changes of registers, repetition of words, unfinished sentences, utterances as if out of context, are her repertoire which may seem comic on one hand but on the other it ruins communication. Language as an aspect of

9 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

10 Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 57.

11 A.S. Byatt, “The Pink Ribbon,” in *Little Black Book*, 231–276.

cultural identity and of humanity is not fully functional here. It disallows Mado's connection with the human world represented by James and causes her alienation.

Although there are many identities which Mado fuses, there is only one body they inhabit, which points at the grotesque character of her existence. Instead of integrity and unity of the person expressed in one body linked to one consciousness and lifespan, Byatt presents one body comprising many selves. According to Sabine Coelsch-Foisner body transformation in literature becomes a site of the struggle for identity which is connected with crucial functions of consciousness like self-awareness, memory, and recognition<sup>12</sup>. It is exactly these aspects that are problematic for Mado. It is not a complete loss of these functions, but her lack of control of them, their mixing up. The splitting of her self is expressed in the names James calls her. In the past it was Madeleine, now it is Mado, as if he hinted at her mental state. He also divides their life together into then and now, marked by these names. "...it was in both their interests that he should never think of Madeleine, for his duty was here, now, to Mado, whose need was extreme."<sup>13</sup> However, the dividing line between then and now is blurred and not even James is sure when exactly the change started. Mado is also referred to as a zombie or a wandering soul, which confirms her instability. The ultimate example of the breached body boundaries in the story is Dido, a palpable spirit of Madeleine, who comes one night to their house and speaks to James. She is "the etheric body separated from the clay".<sup>14</sup> James as a former teacher of Latin descends into the depths of the text of Aeneid, like Aeneas into the Underworld, and eventually meets Dido, Aeneas's former lover. Byatt parallels Dido with Mado's past life, with her sexuality, which is symbolized in Dido's red dress. It points at the sexual aspect of Mado which is associated with her past and which is not present in Mado's current life. Mado is now just a shadow of her former self, the 'clay' holding her here, while her spirit is embodied in Dido. Dido becomes the voice of Madeleine who is no longer able to communicate with her husband, the voice which comes from outside, not from her own body.

As the transformation of the body primarily appeals to the visual imagination,<sup>15</sup> there is usually a witness of the change, and in this case it is James. He functions as a mirror of Mado's self, noticing her change and in a way reporting it back. Whether literal or metaphorical, the mirror is a frequent literary motif. According to Rosemary Jackson "it establishes a different space, where our notions of self undergo radical change." The distance and difference employed suggest "the instability of the 'real'", offering the change of self into other.<sup>16</sup> Although James does not act as Mado's other, this distance between the self (Mado) and the mirror (James) can be perceived as Kristeva's border territory of abjection. James's perception of and feelings towards his wife move between love and repulsion, compassion and rage, duty and transgression. They are close yet separate, bound by marriage, their relationship and life together, but distanced from each other by Mado's illness. The distance of the mirror makes the recognition problematic. James does not recognize his wife

12 Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, "Introduction: Fantastic Body Transformations," in *Fantastic Body Transformations in English Literature*, ed. S. Coelsch-Foisner, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 4.

13 Byatt, "The Pink Ribbon," 263.

14 Byatt, "The Pink Ribbon," 272.

15 Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, "Fantastic Body Transformations as Counter-Narratives of Life: An Anthropological Model," in *From the Cradle to the Grave: Life-Course Models in Literary Genres*, eds. S. Coelsch-Foisner, S. Herbe, (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag WINTER, 2011), 195.

16 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), 87–88.

compared to what she was like before, Mado does not recognize her husband, and when reflected in his eyes she does not recognize herself. In addition, the distance between the self and the mirror does not remain the same. Because of Mado's unpredictable behaviour James is insecure and has to adjust his perception of Mado constantly, as if measuring the distance between him as a mirror and Mado's self. As a parallel there is also an actual mirror with a similar function and effect on Mado: "Her own face in a mirror, seen through a doorway, who's that, I don't want her here, she means no good."<sup>17</sup> Alienation that she feels towards her body is in parallel with the disruption of her personal integrity and also with alienation she feels towards the outer world and society.

Corresponding to her ill mind, Mado's body is presented as grotesque. It is shambling, with "...a heavy grey face with an angry mouth and dark eye-caverns,"<sup>18</sup> when it is reflected in the dark TV screen. Her hair is coarse and grey. James's act of brushing Mado's hair at the beginning of the story serves as another example of fragmentation and alienation of the self. The description is very impersonal, as if the hair was a separate object and not an integral part of a living person. The description of the procedure of hair-brushing takes nearly the whole first page, however, only towards the end of it the reader learns to whom the hair belongs. The eponymous pink ribbon attached to the completed hairstyle is in contrast with the old woman and her grey hair. The ribbon is crisp, fresh, sweet colour, and adds a comic tang to the grey drama of Mado's hair and life. As the pink colour is usually associated with baby girls, when combined with the old woman's hair it disrupts the visual and cultural norms. Similar contradiction and disruption can be found in the description of Mado as the "miserable hulk with a pink ribbon."<sup>19</sup> The tension between the misery of her life (and body) and the brightness of the colour causes that the whole picture is perceived as grotesque. James's effort to tidy his wife's hair can be viewed as an attempt to give shape to her body as its boundaries are unstable similar to her mind. In contrast to his effort, Mado is also depicted with her "grey hair spilled over her face and shoulders."<sup>20</sup> Mado's hair represents the ambiguity and instability of the grotesque body. It can be neat, combed, shaped according to one's wish on one hand, but also shape-shifting, disobedient, loose, or spilled on the other. The spilled hair hints at the body boundaries which are not completely firm. Mado is not in control of her body and its functions, which is also suggested in many marks on her dressing gown as a result of frequent accidents of various kinds. The excess of food spilled on the carpet, urine, excrement, rage, and also uncontrollable laughter, contribute to our perception of her body as unstable.

A telling aspect of Mado's grotesque state is Teletubbies, the TV programme she likes watching. The gloom of the old age is in contrast with the cheerful programme for little children. In a way it expresses the mental state she is in and the Teletubbies' hybrid bodies are in parallel with her child-like mind in an old body. "They had grayish shiny screens pinned on their round bellies, and antennae on their hooded heads. A symbiosis of a television and a one-year-old infant. Ingenious, after all."<sup>21</sup> The tragic and the comic go hand in hand here.

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17 Byatt, "The Pink Ribbon," 264.

18 Byatt, "The Pink Ribbon," 234.

19 Byatt, "The Pink Ribbon," 274.

20 Byatt, "The Pink Ribbon," 253.

21 Byatt, "The Pink Ribbon," 239.

The whole atmosphere of the story may feel rather heavy and we may perceive James as a victim of the difficult situation. However, he performs his little acts of revenge, of subversion to lift the mood and release the stress. The above mentioned pink ribbon becomes a symbol of James's revenge. He is aware that his wife hates that colour, she would prefer red, but he insists that she would wear the pink one. He also uses one of Teletubbies as a voodoo doll: "He found himself torturing Dipsy, winding his little wrist round and again, driving hairpins into the terrytowelling plump belly. As long as the little unkind acts were harmless, his rational mind said, stabbing".<sup>22</sup> The doll serves as a substitute for a real murder to release his stress, anger, and helplessness. It helps James to subvert the norm of a dutiful and caring husband to a certain extent.

Mado is an example of a disintegrated self in a deteriorated body, whose boundaries are breached on many levels. She is abject, inhabiting the border territory between the subject and the object, alienated and recognized at the same time. The disproportion and inadequacy of her state has the character of the grotesque which can be perceived as Byatt's way of expressing the instability of human body visible in the natural process of ageing.

## Ines and hybridity

Ines, the protagonist of "A Stone Woman",<sup>23</sup> is another example of Byatt's concern with ageing and illness, although this time the body transformation is depicted more fantastically. While the main trait of Mado's grotesqueness was the split self, Ines represents a hybrid body. The protagonist is a middle-aged woman living alone in an English town. After her mother's death, Ines suffers from a severe pain in her intestine and needs an urgent surgery. Her naval, the symbolic link to the human race, is removed and from that moment the fantastic petrification of her body starts. Gradually she develops a mineral body and her blood turns into molten lava. However, the slow process of her transformation is opposed to the mythical and fairy-tale petrification which tends to be sudden and permanent.

The hybrid body is one of the key elements of the grotesque as it challenges the category of humanity. Edwards and Graulund explain that "[m]onstrosity and grotesquerie merge in the hybrid forms that disrupt the borders separating what is acceptable within the categories of 'human' and 'non-human'".<sup>24</sup> Byatt shifts that border and presents a human body in transition. It is dressed in a fantastic shape but it is an ageing body coming to the point of death. Ines's body challenges the norm of the 'natural' in a different way than Mado's. It is not a uniform system but a combination of elements from different systems, merging human – organic – and mineral elements. It is perceived as grotesque as it disrupts the norm and the visual discreetness of the body. However, it is difficult to determine the dividing line between the human and non-human in Ines, to show the balance of the two aspects, as her body constantly changes. At the beginning the human aspect prevails but it diminishes gradually and towards the end Ines seems more

<sup>22</sup> Byatt, "The Pink Ribbon," 265.

<sup>23</sup> Antonia S. Byatt, "A Stone Woman," in *Little Black Book of Stories*, 127–183.

<sup>24</sup> Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 39–40.

mineral in all her aspects, not only in her body. Her body also changes in size as it grows bigger and bulkier, disrespecting its original boundaries. Ines finds herself in-between the two systems, neither one nor the other, or rather both at the same time, becoming object for the society and for herself.

The transformation of the body is accompanied by Ines's change of attitude to it. At the beginning she is in a state of inner abjection – she feels repulsion, fear and alienation towards her own body. Her initial rejection of her changed body, followed by fear and uncertainty, then turn into curiosity, acceptance and even admiration. The bedroom mirror in which she observes her body serves not only to reflect her appearance, but it allows her to see herself with the eyes of the human society, it shows her the disruption of the body norm. She is aware that her body is culturally unacceptable: "She saw clearly that she would be an object of horror and fascination, to be shut away and experimented on."<sup>25</sup> Her body is not only ageing and therefore not according to the norm of "beauty" but also deviant from what we understand as a norm of the human body. As a result, she consciously retreats from the society.

In her seclusion the only connection with humanity is an Icelandic sculptor Thorsteinn who is able to appreciate the beauty of her mineral body. In contrast with a generally adopted negative view of an ageing body the reader is offered a strongly positive attitude to Ines's "natural" body so different from bodies transformed by modern plastic surgery and other aids. Thorsteinn is the mirror which gives a positive reflection, as opposed to ambivalent James of "The Pink Ribbon". He considers Ines's body "natural", although it disrupts the norm of a human body. In his reaction we can also perceive the fascination with "the other". Apart from giving her acceptance Thorsteinn also relieves her of her worries concerning her future existence when he invites her to come with him to Iceland. She finds it a place where she is able to build a new autonomy for herself, the place where the mythical and the real meet, corresponding with her body which is fantastic and real, human and mineral, at the same time.

Ines's stiffness of the body corresponds with the change of her mental processes, with her thoughts and feelings "slowed to stone-speed, nerveless and stolid" .<sup>26</sup> Her mind adapts to the different rhythm of the mineral world. As an etymologist and a "dictionary-maker" by profession she becomes obsessed with the names of different stones she finds in her body. She explores her body as a dictionary of stones and minerals. However, later Ines loses words and her ability to speak deteriorates. Ironically, the woman who used to master words now has no words. It is yet another aspect of ageing and of her withdrawal from the human world.

The grotesque of Ines's body serves Byatt to show natural processes of ageing through the prism of fantasy. Although her body is dressed in a fantastic form, the symptoms of Ines's transformation are the reflection of reality. Among symptoms which Ines feels as a result of her transformation is, for example a certain stiffness of limbs and reduced mobility which we express in numerous idioms connected with stones.

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25 Byatt, "A Stone Woman," 140.

26 Byatt, "A Stone Woman," 139.

Ines sat on a stone bench, and occasionally did domestic things with inept stony fingers[...] She tried reading, but her new eyes could not quite bring the dancing black letters to have any more meaning than the spiders and ants which scurried round her feet or mounted her stolid ankles. She preferred standing, really. Bending was harder and harder.<sup>27</sup>

There are also allusions to the changing quality of the skin, hearing and eyesight, and to tiredness, all felt by the elderly. The consequence of the deteriorated senses can be perceived as a person distancing her/himself from other people. Byatt depicts it as Ines's reduced ability to perceive Thorsteinn who represents the human society. On the other hand, her perception of the other, the mineral, improves. In Iceland Ines is closer to "natural" than to "human" world. In the crevices of her body she grows grass and lichens hosting little creatures, taking them everywhere with her. Gradually, she merges with the environment. As Bakhtin states about the grotesque body, "[s]uch a body, composed of fertile depths and procreative convexities is never clearly differentiated from the world but is transferred, merged, and fused with it".<sup>28</sup> Although in parallel with Bakhtin's words, Ines's grotesque body merges with the world in an unusual way. Hers is not a maternal body giving birth to her own race, since she has no children, but offering her body to organisms of flora and fauna finding home in/on her mineral body. According to Bakhtin the grotesque body is "in the act of becoming";<sup>29</sup> like the cosmos, there are "no clear boundaries between the body and the world and no difference between birth and death".<sup>30</sup> It is possible to perceive Ines and her body within this frame, always in the act of becoming, always changing, with her death becoming her birth into another, different, form.

Entering the mineral world of Icelandic fantastic creatures symbolizes her passage to the other side, death. Although she cannot imagine the end so different „from her mother's fiery ash and bonemeal",<sup>31</sup> and she is scared of her transition from this to the other world, her final passage is perceived as liberation from her human self and society. Her acceptance of her new existence as a part of Icelandic landscape suggests the view of death not as the end of life but only as a change of form, as the existence on a different level. During her transformation Ines moves to the margin of the society and then outside of it. In spite of her bodily changes negatively influencing her life, in Ines Byatt offers a positive view of ageing as a natural process. Byatt seems to follow the discourse challenging the dominant ageist consumerist ideology<sup>32</sup> as her description of Ines's ageing is positive despite its grotesque form which stands against the category of "beauty" and which successfully subverts this category.

27 Byatt, "A Stone Woman," 174–175.

28 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 339.

29 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

30 Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 24.

31 Byatt, "A Stone Woman," 147.

32 One of the authors who speak about the "natural ageing" as an "emergent" discourse is Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005) 40–49.



## Conclusion

The two analyzed stories are examples of Byatt's dealing with the process of ageing, using grotesque bodies as poetic expressions of this process. She uses two different approaches based on different situations of her protagonists. In "The Pink Ribbon" Mado's illness affects her mind viewed as split, which has an impact on her body. On the other hand, in "A Stone Woman" Ines's illness affects her body primarily and her mind adapts to it. The lost ability to communicate with the human world of both Mado and Ines seems a crucial issue in the stories since to Byatt the language and storytelling are an essential aspect of human life. However, Byatt allows her protagonists to enter other stories and different "lives". While Mado has her alter ego in Dido, the mythological queen of Carthage who voices Mado's wishes, Ines who used to master words as occupation, becomes the part of Icelandic legends in the form of a wordless stone. The parallel between the protagonists who become parts of other stories can be seen in Ines's hybrid body which becomes part of the mineral world. Grotesque body as a reflection of ageing can be viewed as Byatt's answer to negative attitudes of the society to this natural process. By presenting the ageing body as "natural" Byatt subverts the norm of the static "beautiful" body in the classical sense.

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