

***IN SEARCH FOR A FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS: ROMANIAN WOMEN ABOUT
THEIR GENDER'S IDENTITY AS REFLECTED IN THE JOURNALS EDITED
DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY***

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Abstract: The present study intends to reveal a feature of the process through which women developed a gender consciousness. The paper has at its basis the work of American researcher Gerda Lerner, the author of a well documented research on the evolution of the feminist consciousness in Western Europe and USA. We tried to reveal the extent by which Romanian women from Transylvania, during the second half of the XIXth century, had gone through a similar process of creating a feminist consciousness. The research is based on some of the most representative journals edited in Transylvania in an effort of identifying the public arguments women used for expressing their ideals and hopes.

Keywords: *women, feminist consciousness, journals, XIXth century, gender identity*

The studies on women's history have stressed the long way women had to cross from inequality and discrimination to gender equality. There is not any doubt that such an extended process cannot be understood unless Braudel's *longue durée* is applied to it. It is also true that we are not dealing with a homogenous, progressive-only process as it was marked by periods of stagnation or even regress. That is the reason why we wish to find an answer to a basic question - which was already asked by scholars - why did women take so long to reach that consciousness of being half of mankind and to require be treated as like.

The present paper intends to stress one of the main features of this process but using a different, particularly approach as it was inspired after the lecture of a fascinating book which brought to women's history a valuable contribution. The study we make reference to can also be considered, for the Romanian historiography, as a path opening for new research topics. We are talking about the work written by the American researcher, Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of the Feminist Consciousness. From the Middle Ages to the Eighteen Century*, Oxford University Press, 1993. What the author does is to expose, respecting a chronological point of view, this long process which led to the affirmation of the feminist consciousness. From her point of view, this gender awareness was shaped by five basic features: "1. the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as member of such a group, they have suffered wrongs; 2. the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural, but socially determined; 3. the development of a sense of sisterhood; 4. the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and 5. the development of an alternative vision of the future"¹. The author considers that the process of emancipation begun only when, and if, these five conditions were achieved.

Beyond the causes which explain the reasons why women history started to be written much later than the men's history was, Gerda Lerner tried to find some landmarks in the evolution of the feminist consciousness. The question she asked from the very beginning will

¹ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness. From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, p. 274.

be in fact the tenor of her entire study: “why the feminist consciousness did affirm so late?” The answer can be given only after a well documented study of the past. Indeed the explanations are no longer new in the historical field: the social, political, economical, cultural and religious contexts are to “be blamed” for this. The temptation to favor one of these factors is still present today. For instance, some argued that the religious factor is guilty for the gender inequity as well as for the delay with which women developed a gender consciousness. But religion is, as we argued before, just one piece of the puzzle. Indeed, it is a very powerful one, and at some periods it was the decisive one as long as religion and the Church dominated both the public and the private space of men’s existence. Likewise, the religious discourse (we refer to the Christina one) made women be considered as physically and mentally weak partners of their husbands’. Yet, beyond this formal discourse, the daily life of women was not so restrictive, and women found ways to express themselves, their thoughts and beliefs. If we refer to Middle Ages these women were rather the exceptions than the rule.

Their numbers will increase steadily, in the long run of the history: only by the modern period we can talk about the birth of a feminist consciousness. Religion, society, politics etc. were the reasons for this late development. We must also stress the fact that when women started to express a gender consciousness they seem to use the same arguments their antecessors used. Gerda Lerner talks about “individuality” – which is, from her point of view, the key feature of the affirmation of women’s consciousness – understood as an independent affirmation despite the works previously written². This individuality, as argued, was one of the explanations for the late affirmation of the feminist consciousness. Gerda Lerner says that women who found the right context for expressing the gender inequality, the inferiority of women compared to men, were doing nothing else but using the same themes, motifs like their forerunners, without knowing the conclusions reached by other women in previous centuries³. Gerda Lerner considered that what women did was to “reinvent the wheel” over and over again: women thought and wrote in the same manner without knowing the fact that someone, another woman, before them thought and wrote in the same way. Just this could explain why in different places and at different times women of diverse origins had reached the same conclusions. This situation is completely opposite to the men’s one: if the progresses registered by men’s thought - even in feminine matters - were favored by the fact that they were “standing on the shoulders of giants”. Women, instead, with few exceptions, were and remained isolated from one another. So, Gerda Lerner’s conclusion is forceful: not only that there were few women to write but they were also isolated thus forced to reinvent the wheel over and over again.⁴

Modern age starts to change the situation: the revolutions - the industrial as well as the democratic ones - will bring women more frequent in the public space. But we should not exaggerate facts as the “the cruel repetitiousness by which individual women have struggled to a higher level of consciousness, repeating an effort made a number of times by other

² *Ibidem*, p. 281.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

women in previous centuries”⁵ will still be present during the modern times. “Thus, even the most advanced feminist thinkers, up to and including those in the early 20th century, have been in dialogue with “the great men” before them and have been unable to verify, test and improve their ideas by being in dialogue with the women thinkers before them”.⁶ Indeed the modern age multiply the media used by women for expressing their thoughts. Thus, beyond the democratic and the industrial revolutions the communication revolution was also of great significance for women’s efforts in gaining the equal place in society. The press was one of the privileged media where women could fight and defend their sex. This is the main reason for choosing the printed press as the documentary basis of the present paper.

For the Transylvanian case it is the source which allows the researcher to identify the manners through which the feminist consciousness was affirmed. As we concluded in our previously studies, we can now strongly affirm that Romanian women from Transylvanian started to express a feminist consciousness during the XIXth century as well.⁷ The Transylvanian case is not at all different form the European one in the sense that Romanian women were also “independent thinkers”, expressing the same ideas and ideals as their contemporaries but without being always aware of the fact that someone else has already thought the same. This probably explains the presence of the common features of all the feminist movements, despite the space they emerged in.

For the time being, our intention is to reveal some of the aspects regarding the manner in which Romanian women from Transylvania publicly expressed their opinion on their sex’s condition. What is to be affirmed before any further analysis is the outstanding capacity women had for adjusting and integrating their discourse to the political, social and mainly national contexts of the age. By doing this, they tried in fact to gain men’s support. This is not only a Transylvanian particularity. Gerda Lerner also stressed the fact that women, when they found the courage to publicly express their opinions, felt the need to justify their actions; to explain their motifs. It is the so called “self-authorization” during the Middle Ages followed by the authorization through motherhood and through creativity during modern times.⁸ For instance, during the Middle Ages, women who dared to write use as an “excuse” the revelation or the Divine inspiration, which somehow forced them to express publicly their ideas, an argument that not even men could deny; during the modern times the arguments used by women become more rational as well as more “national”. Romanian women, for instance, will bring in the foreground their national duty. Indeed, compared with Western Europe, Romanian feminine voices are fewer but not less important. As well, they were also forced, by the private context dominated by men, to reach the level of self-consciousness later in history. It is only with the XIXth century that Romanian women in Transylvania will start to raise their voices fighting for a cultural emancipation in the first place. But the ones who speak loud are not common women. Only daughters and wives belonging to the middle class (bourgeoisie, intellectuals) reach that level of consciousness - given also the fact that they had access to a higher education - of belonging to a discriminated sex. We can state at least two

⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ Georgeta Fodor, *Women as Topic of “Intellectual Debates”. Case study: “Amiculu Familiei”*, in “Studia Universitatis Petru Maior. Series Historia”, 11, 2011, pp. 89-98.

⁸ Gerda Lerner, *op. cit.*, Chapters 3, 6, 8, pp. 46-192.

reasons for this fact: they belong to wealthy families prosperous enough for giving their daughters a good education and secondly, their parents were aware that education is very important. Moreover, the girls from these families could have access to the literature from the West. A prove for this stay the bibliographical references made in the press articles signed by women. The affirmation of feminist consciousness will thus be the result of a brainstorming process. But this consciousness will be adapted and profoundly influenced by the feminine model designed by men. Thus, we consider that a compared study should be made in order to see how the two feminine models - the one made by women and the one made by men, the latter having a longer history - influenced and interacted each other resulting in a common feminine portrait. It is this common feminine portrait we will analyze in what follows as it is the one who led to the emergence of the feminist consciousness.

In 1878 "*Amiculu Familiei*" published in the Social Studies section of the journal an article quoting a public speech given by Paulina Zaharescu, the headmaster of a professional school for girls in Bucharest. The speech was held on an award giving ceremony. It represents in fact a short feedback on the evolution of the women's right to education. The author reminds the public that during the ancient times women were refused access to knowledge. Opposed to Antiquity, the author underlines the virtues of Christianity thanks to which women started to be considered as human beings. As a consequence, women gain respect but they still remained ignorant. She continues then with the modern times, the end of the XVIIIth century, during which women began to raise their voices.⁹ The entire speech underlines in fact that the education of women is necessary and fruitful for the society. This is one of the leitmotifs of the debate around women's role and place in the society. But she is not very feminist as we might think as the author considers, as her cotemporaries did, that education will not divert women from the roles they had by nature (or/and) by God: of being a good mother and a devoted and pious wife.¹⁰ If the author's point of view is clear, a plea for women's right to emancipation, although a limited one, we cannot say the same thing about the editor's specifications published before quoting the speech. He says that the reason for publishing the speech is exclusively a literary one: "it is the literary value of the speech which made us publishing it".¹¹

But the speech has more than a literary value. It testifies the existence of a feminine if not a feminist consciousness. Even if the author comes from the Romanian kingdom, by being published in a Transylvanian gazette and with specific reference to Romanian women from Transylvania who should follow the example, it proves that Romanian women started to share a common feminist consciousness. That we talk about such a consciousness in the case of Paulina Zaharescu is backed by her historical analysis of the evolution of women's condition. It is also truth that she is not revolutionary in her ideas as she does not stay outside the pattern of the age: women should still remain daughters, wives and mothers. But even if she is traditional in thought, this is also a proof of a common destiny shared by all women of the age and this is another feature of a feminist consciousness. She is the voice for all Romanian women influenced by the European progress. The "she" pronoun is generally used for all

⁹ „*Amiculu Familiei*”, No.1, 1/13 August 1878, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

Romanian women who have aspirations and dreams of progressing through culture and gaining a higher status in life.¹² We must also stress that she does not refer to a national identity of women but a more general, universal one as Romanian women are put side by side with women from the more civilized countries of Europe.¹³ The same consciousness of belonging to a discriminated group, a sense of “sisterhood”, is obvious from the appeal she makes for giving women a chance to education: “Romanian women want progress and deserve to have the right to education”. Although the speech is thematic as it talks mainly about women’s education, the fact that Paulina asks for gender equality is another key element for revealing the patterns of the feminist movement.

There are plenty of articles on this subject. Some of them are to be noted for the fact that the authors prefer to sign by using pseudonyms. How should we understand this practice? Does it say something about society’s permissiveness or opposition to women? This anonymity can be seen in the West also. There were women who choose not to reveal their identity, or to use a pseudonym or to sign their works (Gerda Lerner refers mainly to literary works) with men in order to avoid criticism or for gaining more credit for their papers.¹⁴ But this practice could also be a sign that women felt insecure, or even afraid that they dared to step into a men’s only domain. One of these reasons could explain why the author of the article published in issue 7 from 1/13 November 1878 of *Amiculu Familiei* chose to sign it as *Hygea*. This pseudonym could be a woman’s one, and of an educated one, as it was taken from Greek mythology. The subject of the article is, at the first sight, a neutral one: it discusses the “traditional habits of some European women”. But it is in fact a feminist one. This fact is obvious from the very beginning. *Hygea* wrote the article for women. The gender, feminist consciousness is affirmed by the plural pronouns she uses: “our women”; “we are”; “my ladies”; “women of the civilized world and of the progress” who are opposed to the women from the East. Romanian women are thus included among the civilized and advanced women from the west - once again the community of the destiny is affirmed. This shared destiny is well argued as the author proves herself to be a well educated one given the quotes she uses: Michelet, Huxley, Wallace, Rousseau, and Darwin. She seems more relaxed by using the pseudonym as she somehow gained the courage to end the article with an ironical remark towards men: “the men could still remain the masters of the creation and we, women ... their perfect half ... their most sincere and faithful friend ... I salute you fantasy’s dreams! I salute you masters of Creation!”¹⁵

If the previous quoted articles reveal the emergence of a feminist consciousness at the Romanian women from Transylvania only by reading “between the lines”, the articles signed by Emilia Lungu are a clear affirmation of it. She was one of the most active female publishers of the researched period. Her statements are clear from the titles: they are all a powerful testimony of a feminist consciousness, fighting for emancipation. She asks such basic questions about the future: “What are women and what would their mission be?”¹⁶ This

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Gerda Lerner, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Emilia Lungu, *Femeia română*, in “Amiculu Familiei”, No. 8, 13/25 November, 1879.

encompasses the essence of all debates on the feminine profile of the time¹⁷. The question is answered in a series of articles under the title: “Romanian Woman” (“*Femei’ă Română*”) published in “*Amiculu Familiei*”, issues 8-11 from 1879.¹⁸ Of great relevance is that we have, for the first time, a woman using the noun “consciousness” with a feminist signification. It is to be found in the motto: “give woman the consciousness of what she is and she will soon learn how she should be”.¹⁹ The articles are in fact a plea for the feminine gender, for its dominant influence in private and social domains, as well as a violent criticism against the dominant sex. Emilia Lungu insists, as Paulina Zaharescu did, on how important is, for family and society too, to give women access to education. Education is also understood as a basic condition for women’s emancipation. Emilia Lungu considers that education is no longer a men’s privilege but a natural right of women as well. The tone is as feminist as it could be during that age as the author considers that her claims are meant to correct an injustice women were forced to suffer for centuries. She fights for women’s cause with the most traditional argument women had: the motherhood. As Gerda Lerner also argued, motherhood is the most frequent argument women used to support their claims.²⁰ From her point of view, authorization through motherhood was the major argument used by women all over Europe and USA. In fact, alongside the women mystics and those motivated by religious impulse, there were always others, writers who sought a different source of female authority which they found in the most basic and common experience of women - motherhood.²¹ They were perfectly right in using the motherhood as a main “weapon” for claiming their rights. But how was this argument put into practice? Very easily we might say: women used it to argue that as mothers, they had to be able to educate their children. And how could they be teachers if they weren’t taught? The educational aspect is the key feature of the process of creation the feminist consciousness at the Romanian women from Transylvania too. By using it women could expand their claims for improving their social status. It is exactly as Gerda Lerner argued: “as mothers, their duty to instruct the young provided them with the authority to express their ideas on a broad range of subjects. Armed with such authority, they could give advice, instruction in morals”.²² This will happen only from the modern times onwards. During this period of time, women would reason their way to claims of equality based on motherhood and later even to group consciousness²³. The Central-Est European space is no different from this point of view. Women in this part of Europe will use the same argument. But we must also stress the fact that not only women “abused” the concept but men also. Those involved in the debate around women used motherhood as an argument for or against, women’s emancipation as well.

Among Romanian women who used this argument we have already mentioned Emilia Lungu. She is just one of many voices who used it but she did not limit her arguments to this

¹⁷ Georgeta Fodor, *Women as Topic of „Intellectual Debates” Case Study: „Amiculu Familiei”*, in “*Studia Universitatis Petru Maior. Series Historia*”, 11, 2011, pp. 89-98.

¹⁸ Emilia Lungu, *Femeia română*, in “*Amiculu Familiei*”, No. 8, 13/25 November, 1879; No. 9, 20 November/2nd December, 1879; No. 10, 27 November/7 December, 1879; No. 11, 4/16 December, 1879.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*. No. 8, 13/25 November 1879.

²⁰ Gerda Lerner, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

one. In fact, and this is one of the features of the debate around women from Transylvania, the authorization through motherhood was doubled by the “authorization” through nation. In fact, for Romanian women from Transylvania during the second half of the nineteenth century motherhood and nation went hand in hand. We can easily explain the reason why: through motherhood women were presented as compulsory parts of the nation, as the ones holding the keys for the nation’s progress and future. Thus, the national perspective is understood as a facet of the motherhood. Gerda Lerner considers that the concept of “motherhood” itself contains a broad range of meanings: there is the physical aspect, both as the ability to give birth and as the practice of nurturance, then there is the “motherhood as an institution, or “the social construction of motherhood” and there is the ideology of motherhood, its symbolic meaning as defined in particular periods and under different circumstances²⁴. By studying the Romanian case, we could complete this list of meanings with the national one. For the Romanian case the theme of educated women as more effective and more virtuous mothers, as Gerda Lerner argues²⁵, will be doubled by this national perspective subordinated and to the national goals Romanians from Transylvania were struggling for. Emilia Lungu is once again a valid proof on this symbiosis of motherhood with nationality. The woman, she argues, is first of all a mother, creator of the whole nation - the supreme argument actually standing for women’s right to education - hence the need to grant her right to rise above ignorance and lack of knowledge.²⁶

The creation of feminist consciousness will be also favored by the reunions organized by women for charitable purposes. They were a perfect ground for the emergence of a “sisterhood” identity. And this new side, a feminist one, is a novelty of the age considering that for many centuries some, the majority we might add, women found their identity primarily in motherhood, long before they begun to conceive the possibility of “sisterhood”.²⁷ The Romanian women reunions²⁸, as they were called, set among their primary objectives, the charity. For most women, the involvement in this kind of activities for the poor and the oppressed had turned into the forerunner stage and the media for their commitment to their sex’s cause.²⁹ The charity was indeed the most “gentle” way women had for entering in the public space. It also represented the best tool for their efforts of improving the women’s condition. On the other hand, this philanthropic goal was imposed by the Romanian’s statue in the dual monarchy and in order to get the legal approval for the reunions, women had to assume this main goal whereas their primary objective was the national one.³⁰ Besides this, as we had already argued, they represented a prolific ground for developing a sense of sisterhood as all the events they organized appeal to a gender’s solidarity. The organizers of the

²⁴ Gerda Lerner, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 212.

²⁶ Emilia Lungu, *art. cit.*

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

²⁸ On this subject see Georgeta Fodor, *Following The Charity Line: Echoes upon the Activity Developed by the Women’s Reunions from Transylvania Reflected in the Romanian Transylvanian Press (the second half of the XIXth century)*, in *Culture, Elites and the European Integration, Culture, Elites et Intégration européenne*, Volume 3 – History, Sigmirean, Cornel, Paris, Editions Prodifmultimedia, 2011, pp. 18-30.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 144

³⁰ Ștefania Mihăilescu, *Din istoria feminismului românesc: antologie de texte: 1838-1929*, Iași, Ed. Polirom, 2002, pp. 22-23.

charitable events appeal to “all Romanian ladies”³¹, to “honorable ladies...kind sisters”³² whose noble mission in life was to help the poor and the needed.³³ They also insist on the national duties women have (once again motherhood and nation go hand in hand): “a real Romanian woman takes as sacred her duty of raising her girls in the national spirit in order to become good wives and mothers ... the woman of our generation is to become a human being in its complete sense: a human being among the human beings, a delight maybe, but not a toy, being modest but thoughtful, a woman subject to her husband but not a slave”.³⁴

A last question is still to be asked and answered: to what extent this feminist identity was shaped by the feminine model created by men? A simple, quantitative evaluation proves how important the debate was for Romanian people. Thus, it is obviously that the impact men’s point of view had in shaping women’s gender identity was huge. Both articles signed by women and men testify this fact. In the most cases, the ideal pattern created by women resembles up to perfection with the one created by men. They have in common the motherhood and its virtues, the stress on the importance of education as well as the national duty of women which derives from it. One of the most complete portraits of Romanian woman was “designed” by B. P. Hașdeu. He is the author of a plea for motherhood³⁵. The article, “The Mother” (*Mum’a*) is a praise of mothers and their role as teachers. According to B. P. Hașdeu, the mother is the one to set the basis for children’s education; she was in fact their first, and perhaps, their most important educator.³⁶

Hașdeu is not the only one who took part in the debate around women. We must also mention G. Barițiu, who can be considered as the spokesmen of a generation that understood woman as being half of the nation. He made his point in several lectures and press articles. We mention the lecture form 10th of August 1869 which had as main topic the problem of women’s education. The article represents an actual program regarding the principles according to which the education for Romanian women should be organized.³⁷

Due to the fact that some of the most prominent personalities from Transylvania discussed publicly women’s question it is no surprise that women shaped their ideals and claims according to the men’s point of view. It seems that Romanian women and men (with some exceptions of course) wished the same things in what women were concerned³⁸: women were seen as key elements for the nation’s progress; women were the first educators a nation

³¹ *Apelu catra tote damele romane*” in “Amiculu Familiei”, No. 1, 1/23 January 1881.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ “Amiculu Familiei”, No. 1, 1/23 January, 1881, p. 11.

³⁴ “Transilvania”, No. 4, 1911, pp. 410-456.

³⁵ “Amiculu Familiei”, No. 1, 1/13 August 1879, p. 1.

³⁶ „*In crescerea copilului, care incepe cu nascerea seau mai bene cu conceptiunea, influent’a mumei este cea de antaia in privinti’a tempului, cea mai de aprópe in legaturile firesci. Betranulu profetu arabu avea dreptate: Omulu nasce din femeia mai multu decâtu din barbatu...in braçiale si la anim’a mumei, copilulu primesce educatiunea s’a primordiala*

³⁷ “Transilvania”, No. 17, 1 September, 1869, pp. 199-202.

³⁸ Georgeta Fodor, *Toward a Women’s Intellectual Profile during the Second Half of the XIXth Century. European Patterns*, in Carmen Andraș, Cornel Sigmirean, Corina Teodor (coord.), *Itineraries beyond Borders of Cultures, Identities and Disciplines*, Sibiu: Editura “ASTRA Museum”, 2012.

had. Denying this, forbidding women the right to education was perceived as a danger for the entire process of nation's emancipation.³⁹

It is more than obvious that the debate around women which involved men also had a major impact in the creation of the feminine identity and the feminist consciousness. That they share a common point of view is proved also by the fact that sometimes women will take *ad litteram* men's point of view. Such was the case of Sofia Bria, a school teacher, who published an article which reiterates almost exactly Vasile Pop's conclusions. What Sofia did was to change the title only. But she did not change the content.⁴⁰

Thus, once more, Gerda Lerner's conclusions can be extended to the Romanian case too: "the right to learn, the right to teach, the right to define"⁴¹ are the essence of the process of the creation of the feminist consciousness. Original is the synthesis Romanian women made between the feminine ideal created by men and the one created by women themselves. It is the age during which the feminist consciousness emerges by adapting itself to the men's vision on women. Moreover if we refer to the five patterns the feminist consciousness consists of⁴² we will find that the Romanian women from Transylvania underwent the same stages (reinventing the wheel as well) in the creation of the feminist consciousness: the awareness of belonging to a subordinate group; the recognition of the fact that their condition of subordination is not natural but socially determined; the development of a sense of sisterhood; setting an agenda with their goals and strategies for changing their condition and the development of a distinct vision of the future. The latter is, for the studied period, not an alternative vision of the future but a synchronized with the men's vision of the future: reaching the national goals.

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³⁹ "Transilvania", No. 17, 1870 and No. 4, 1911. "femei'a care domnesce preste barbatu, nasce si cresce tirani si tirane pentru natiune: era popoarele care'si tinu pe femeile loru in conditiune de sierbitute neciodata de serbitute nu voru scapa pentru ca din femei'a calcata si apasata in sclavia, numai prunci cu simtieminte de scalvi se potu nasce".

⁴⁰ "Transilvania", No. 3-4, 1883, p. 21.

⁴¹ Gerda Lerner, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

⁴² Gerda Lerner, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

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