

“As Good As Anything I Ever Did”:  
Bits of Brilliance in *Crampton Hodnet*

Kathy Ackley

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*Crampton Hodnet* came at the end of a series of novels that Barbara Pym wrote from 1935 to 1941 when she was in her twenties and not yet published. She had written *Some Tame Gazelle* in 1935; *Civil to Strangers* in 1936; *Gervase and Flora*, her “Finnish novel,” in 1937-38; and an unfinished novel, *The Lumber Room* in 1938. During the period of 1939-1941, she was at work on three novels: the never finished *Home Front Novel* (1939); her spy novel, *So Very Secret* (begun in January 1940 but not written in earnest until 1941) and *Crampton Hodnet* (winter of 1939-40). Pym became too busy with her home front work, her war work in the Censorship office, and then her duties as a Wren in the Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRNS), and so these novels were put aside. *Crampton Hodnet* was not published in Pym’s lifetime but became the third posthumously published novel in 1985.

Critics vary in their opinions of the novel. Janice Rossen, in *The World of Barbara Pym*, is almost dismissive, calling it “unconvincing” because, she believes, Pym “strain[s] for comic effect” and is “apparent[ly unable] to suggest the possibility of strong emotion” (32). Diana Benet also believes that the novel is unconvincing, especially the character of Stephen Latimer. Acknowledging that there are some good parts, she is ultimately disappointed in it, accusing Pym of “slip[ping] into ... clichés” (32), of “overplotting,” and of “lacking focus” (29). In contrast, Frances H. Bachelder, admitting that the novel is “perhaps lacking depth and subtlety,” considers it “as exciting and well done as her later ones” (191-92). Similarly, Robert Emmet Long, writing in 1986, calls the novel “as fresh as when it was first written” and says that Pym is especially good at recreating the academic milieu of Oxford University. Although he feels that the novel is anticlimactic, he asserts that it “sparkles with amusing romantic complications” (61-62).

Most readers would agree that the novel is amusing. Who can help laughing, for instance, when Mr. Latimer, trying to get away from the Sale of Work, asks Miss Morrow hopefully: “Are there no sick people I ought to visit?” and she observes: “There are no sick people in North Oxford. They are either dead or alive. It’s sometimes difficult to tell the difference, that’s all” (32). Another of my favorite moments occurs when Miss Morrow, feeling exuberant as Mr. Latimer drives off for his holiday and filled with joy at the lovely summer morning, impulsively hugs a monkey-puzzle tree—“Dear monkey-puzzle,” she thinks—and is of course discovered by Miss Doggett, who sternly tells her that she “must find some other time to indulge in [her] nature worship” (156). Pym herself wrote in her diary on 18 November 1939 that the [North Oxford] novel she had begun to write “is rather funny” (qtd. in “Note” v), and Hazel Holt regards it as the most “purely funny” of all of Pym’s novels, noting that “everyone who [had] read the manuscript [had] laughed out loud—even in the Bodleian Library” (“Note” vi).

Besides thinking it rather funny, Pym felt that at least some parts of the novel were well done. In a letter to Robert (“Jock”) Liddell in 1940, she wrote that the North Oxford novel that she was “getting into shape” was the sort that some people might like to read “at a time like this.” She went on: “It has some bits as good as anything I ever did. Mr. Latimer’s proposal to Miss Morrow, old Mrs. Killigrew, Dr. Fremantle, Master of Randolph College, Mr. Cleveland’s elopement and its unfortunate end... I’m sure all these might be a comfort to somebody” (*A Very Private Eye* 100). I would suggest that not only are those scenes and characters as good as any that she had done at that point in her early writing career,

but that they are bits of brilliance that “sparkle,” to use Long’s word, with humor and wit and with the gentle irony and astute insight into human behavior that we see in her best work.

The first in Pym’s list of well done “bits” is Mr. Latimer’s proposal to Jessie Morrow, which is unquestionably one of the funniest in all of Pym’s novels, with Jessie at first completely misunderstanding Stephen and then offering sensible advice. The exchange between them is delightfully amusing, as when Mr. Latimer gets her name wrong:

“Oh, Miss Morrow—Janie,” he burst out suddenly.

“My name isn’t Janie.”

“Well, it’s something beginning with J,” he said impatiently. (92)

The comic effect continues with his bumbling efforts to propose to her and her offering various suggestions to him in response—first that he cannot be serious, then that he’s not quite himself, and finally that he may be overtired and in need of Ovaltine. The humor of the scene grows out of the juxtaposition of Jessie’s no-nonsense replies to Stephen’s increasingly frustrated attempts to be taken seriously.

But there is more to this proposal chapter than the actual exchange between the two: it has a depth to it that shows how really skillful a writer Pym already was at this stage in her young life. For instance, her use of two key words—“respect” and “esteem”—in the title of the chapter in which Mr. Latimer proposes serves to illustrate her intuitiveness as a writer, for she recognized their importance in conveying a theme that runs throughout her work, the desire for love and the reluctance to settle for marriage when there is no love. Pym had used a similar phrase in a similar scene in her earlier novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, when Belinda Bede receives an unexpected and unwelcome marriage proposal from Bishop Grote: “I’m afraid I can’t marry you. ... I don’t love you,” she says, to which he responds: “But you respect and like me. ... We need not speak of love—one would hardly expect that now” (224). In *Crampton Hodnet*, having been told that Jessie Morrow will not marry him and that he’s not himself this evening, Latimer retorts “in an angry tone”: “You might at least give me the credit of knowing my own mind! ... I respect and esteem you very much” (93). These words carry a negative connotation for Jessie, who thinks: “For, after all, respect and esteem were cold, lifeless things—dry bones picked clean of flesh. There was nothing springlike about dry bones, nothing warm and romantic about respect and esteem” (94).

The degree to which Pym trusted her instincts as a writer is evident in her subsequent use of the words “respect” and “esteem” in a pejorative sense in *Excellent Women*. The words clearly resonated for Pym, when, not knowing that *Crampton Hodnet* would ever be published, she used them in the scene in which Everard Bone and Mildred Lathbury discuss the sort of woman who is marriageable. Mildred is disgusted by Everard’s suggestion that excellent women, whom one esteems and respects, make good wives. “Oh, respect and esteem. ... Such dry bones! I suppose one really can have such feelings for somebody but I should have thought one would almost dislike a person who inspired them” (190). The words “respect” and “esteem” thus become standards for judging the merits of a marriage proposal: if a man says that he respects and esteems a woman in a Pym novel, she knows he is not in love with her.

Besides showing Pym at her comedic and creative best, the proposal chapter also shows how well she understood people’s motives and longings, a sympathetic understanding that grew out of her practice of close observation of others. As writer Martha Dunfee expresses it in her 1985 review of the novel: “[T]he rare charm of *Crampton Hodnet* is in the glimpse it offers of Pym’s imagination as it pauses for a moment in perfect understanding of a character. That sympathy stretches beyond the

horizon of comedy.” This “perfect understanding of a character” is demonstrated especially well in both Jessie Morrow and Stephen Latimer in the proposal chapter.

Jessie Morrow is an early and fine representation of the kind of central female character that Pym favors. She is described as “a thin, used-up-looking woman in her middle thirties” (2) and “a comforting neutral thing, without form or sex” (160). Miss Doggett views her as one who knows nothing of the world, cannot possibly have an opinion that counts, and has no more importance than a piece of furniture or some other blank, anonymous thing. But despite her lowly position in Miss Doggett’s view and the narrator’s description of her, readers know that there is something extraordinary about Jessie Morrow. For one thing, she knows far more than Miss Doggett gives her credit for. She is sharp, level-headed, and likable. She has self-knowledge, is at ease with herself, and sees the world with “a kind of cheerful irony,” to use the phrase that Hazel Holt uses to describe Barbara Pym herself during the period when she was writing *Crampton Hodnet* (*A Lot to Ask* 105). In fact, Jessie Morrow may be the most content character in the novel. As she tells Stephen Latimer: “I’m a paid companion and as such I expect gloom; it’s my portion. But on the whole I’m lucky, and I really enjoy life” (91). Furthermore, the narrator tells us that “in spite of her misleading appearance, [she is] a woman of definite personality, who was able to look upon herself and her surroundings with detachment” (2). Her detachment manifests itself in her ability to make wry and accurate assessments of those around her. Her personality is thus revealed in her private thoughts, in her comments and asides, and in her handling of Stephen Latimer’s marriage proposal, all of which deeply enrich readers’ understanding of her, a skill in character development that we associate with and appreciate in all of Barbara Pym’s novels.

Comic as the proposal scene is, its aftermath is narrated with heartfelt poignancy, as we glimpse the thoughts of both Jessie and Stephen. In Jessie Morrow, we see the kind of complexity that we see in other Pym heroines: her desire for someone to love, her unwillingness to settle for an unsuitable relationship, and the inner strength that keeps her from compromising herself. For Jessie, it is not just the insult to her desirability as a woman and wife but also that she wants more than a Mr. Latimer:

A man had asked to marry her, but did a trapped curate count as a man? ... It had been such a half-hearted proposal ... poor Mr. Latimer! She smiled as she remembered it. ‘I respect and esteem you. ... I think we might be very happy together ... ‘ *Might*. Oh, no, it wouldn’t do. Even Miss Morrow’s standards were higher than that. ... For she wanted love. (94)

What Mr. Latimer proposes does not come close to what she wants.

To give him credit, Stephen Latimer’s proposal grows out of his really liking Jessie and feeling comfortable in her company. But his motives are wrong: at 35, being “a man of private means, good-looking and charming,” he feels that “he could never expect to have much peace until he was safely married” (63). And, besides, he likes

the idea of having a wife, a helpmeet, somebody who would keep the others off and minister to his needs. ... Some nice, sensible woman, not too young. ... It occurred to him that he might do worse than marry Miss Morrow. (64)

Having his proposal turned down is of a piece with the feeling of being trapped that has plagued him that day. This sense of doom had begun at evening service, when he looked dispiritedly at his small congregation consisting of “a collection of old women, widows and spinsters, and one young man not quite right in the head” and wondered if he is to spend his entire life with such a group (86). Later, a deep sense of despair comes over him that only intensifies as he sits in the drawing-room with Miss

Doggett, waiting for dinner, feeling that “he wanted to make some loud noise, to roar, bellow or scream at the top of his voice ... but all that came out of him was a weak, faltering, bleating sound” which Miss Doggett reads as a sign of fatigue and the need for Ovaltine before bedtime (87). This leaves him feeling like “a creature without bones, a poor worm of a man,” but he is bolstered by the appearance of Miss Morrow in her new leaf green dress, and when Miss Doggett unexpectedly leaves to visit a friend, he is determined to propose marriage to her.

Although Latimer’s proposal is absurd, Pym makes him not just a comic figure but also a rather lost human being questioning himself. He seems genuinely to feel despair, not because Jessie has turned him down but because of that “fierce and elemental” (96) feeling of being trapped that he had felt earlier in the drawing room. Pym implies that even the silliest individuals deserve some compassion, which we must surely feel when reading of his emotional state following Jessie’s rejection of his proposal and his dashing out of the house. Having walked aimlessly for a long time,

suddenly he felt tired and rather silly. He no longer wanted to do wild things. He crossed the road and got on the first bus that came. And so there he was, he who had strode out into the night with the idea of escaping from it all, taking a twopenny bus ride home, letting himself in through the stained-glass front door, and creeping quietly up the ecclesiastical pitch-pine staircase so as not to wake anybody....

The walls had closed round him again. There was no escape. (96)

Admittedly, these morose, doomsday thoughts may be slightly more pathetic than deserving of sympathy, but they do imply that Latimer is not unfeeling nor even superficial, in the way that, say, Bishop Grote is when he proposes to Belinda Bede in *Some Tame Gazelle*. Stephen Latimer’s flight into the night and his sad, resigned tiptoeing back into the house surely invite our understanding and make him a less ridiculous figure than he might have been. This funny and touching proposal chapter has the classic features that make Pym’s work instantly recognizable and eminently enjoyable. Her ability to convey both humor and sympathy in this early work is as sharply realized as it is in the best of her later novels.

In her list of “bits ... as good as anything [she] ever did,” Pym next mentions old Mrs. Killigrew and Dr. Fremantle, Master of Randolph College. Her handling of Mrs. Killigrew shows how talented a writer she was: she builds readers’ impression of Mrs. Killigrew by degrees, having others speak of her several times before she appears onstage, as it were. In the early chapters, she is mentioned by Francis Cleveland, Margaret Cleveland, and of course her son Edward Killigrew in ways that convey her controlling personality. For instance, she is first mentioned by Francis Cleveland in his cold retort to his wife’s suggestion that he go along to the Bodleian until tea time and perhaps see someone to talk with: “Very nice to listen to Arnold Penge droning on about Virgil, or to Edward Killigrew saying that Mother doesn’t like him to be late to tea” (49). In fact, *everyone* in North Oxford knows that Mother doesn’t like him to be late to tea.

We get to know Mrs. Killigrew best through Edward; his thoughts seem always to be about his mother and her potential reaction to things. Our impression that she is a strong force is firmly established by such passages as when Edward tells Francis that Mother is “full of beans as usual” and the narrator adds: “He knew it was wicked and unfilial of him, but he sometimes wished that Mother was not quite so full of beans” (74). Perhaps most telling is the narrator’s observation when Miss Doggett remarks on his mother’s good health and Edward replies that she is likely to see them all into their graves: “Behind his joviality there lurked a fear that it might be true. Of course Mother was his

whole life and he would be quite lost without her, but he occasionally wondered if it might not be rather pleasant to be quite lost” (121).

We do not meet Mother in person until halfway through the novel in the chapter “Edward and Mother Give a Tea Party”, by which time we are fully prepared for her almost perverse eagerness to impart the shocking news of Barbara Bird’s and Francis Cleveland’s declaration of love in the British Museum. Although we are told here that Mrs. Killigrew “had always been in Oxford, first as a domineering wife and mother and then as a mother” (21), Pym has already made her domineering nature clear by the way in which other characters talk about her. Not only that, but Mrs. Killigrew is also downright mean about other people: for instance, she asks only her old friends to tea because “I cannot be bothered with young people now... . It gives me more pleasure to see how much older my contemporaries look than I do” (121). This nasty aspect of her character is strikingly emphasized when she calls on Mrs. Cleveland to tell her about her husband and Barbara Bird. Mrs. Killigrew is described in that scene as “sinister, even alarming” (141), “smug” (142), and “sardonic” (143). The news she relays has the effect of making Mrs. Cleveland “hot with anger,” not, as we might think, because of her husband’s deception but because “he had put her in such a humiliating and ridiculous position. She shot a glance at Mrs. Killigrew ... and there came over her a desire to squash down her stiff straw hat, to tear the bird off it and fling it into the unseasonable fire” (142). Her anger seems justifiably aimed at this woman whose motive in imparting her news borders on the malicious.

It is also in the chapter “Edward and Mother Give a Tea Party” that we get a fuller impression of Dr. Fremantle. Though we have met him earlier, it is the scene in which he and Mrs. Killigrew appear together that gives us a glimpse into a character that could have been a mere stereotype. His cool reception of the news about Bird and Cleveland enhances our interest in him: we might expect a College Master to disapprove and even condemn a faculty member’s cheating on his wife, especially with one of his students, but instead, he accepts it as natural and advises the others not to make too much of it:

“There will be no disgrace. Nothing need come of it ... and I prophesy that nothing will. ... There was something of the kind in the eighties—old Dr Baldwin—but he was in Orders, which made it rather a scandalous affair. But, of course, we mustn’t forget that a man’s a man however he wears his collar, must we?” (126)

Certainly this opinion is at odds with the way the rest of the party takes the news, especially Miss Doggett, who is shaken, and Mrs. Killigrew, who is so disappointed that she calls on Mrs. Cleveland to impart the news to her directly.

Mrs. Killigrew and Dr. Fremantle are similar in some ways, so it is not surprising that Pym would mention the two together in her list of “good bits.” Both are critical and controlling of those who should be dearest to them—Mrs. Killigrew of her late husbands and her son—and Dr. Fremantle of his much put-upon wife, “a small, insignificant woman, who had always been overshadowed by her husband” (121). Mrs. Killigrew also recognizes Fremantle’s authority over his wife, who, she tells her son, is “*very dodder*” (121). We see an example of Dr. Fremantle’s treatment of poor Mrs. Fremantle when he walks in on her talking to Mrs. Cleveland about her shocked reaction to his having said that “man is by nature polygamous” (121). Calling anything his wife has to say “idle gossip,” he tells Mrs. Cleveland: “You must not take any notice of what Olive says ... . She always gets hold of the wrong end of the stick” (149). Dr. Fremantle’s disparaging and belittling his wife is a firmly fixed pattern in their marriage.

Another way that Mrs. Killigrew and Dr. Fremantle are similar is that both inspire discomfort in others, no matter the social or domestic setting. We see evidence of this in several places, such as in the

uneasy feeling that Mrs. Cleveland has when Mrs. Killigrew visits and in the words of poor Mrs. Fremantle when she confides to Margaret Cleveland “in an aggrieved tone”: “He thinks I don’t know anything of what goes on in the world... I may be an old woman and not very clever, but I have some experience of life. I’m not blind. I knew all about that time in Florence” (148). Finally, both Mrs. Killigrew and Dr. Fremantle believe that men’s nature makes them prone to stray.

But while Mrs. Killigrew and Dr. Fremantle are similar in certain respects, they differ significantly in the way they view this propensity of men. While Dr. Fremantle dismisses it as an almost innocent and innate part of men’s nature, Mrs. Killigrew thinks it a wife’s duty to check that impulse in their husbands: “Husbands need to be watched. I have seen two of them go to their graves. I have attended both their funerals. ... One must be watching them always when they are alive” (143). Thus, when Pym names in her letter to Liddell these two characters as among her best bits, she is again on target. Both stand out as well defined minor characters whom we remember long after we finish reading the novel.

Interestingly, it is Fremantle who is instrumental in moving Francis Cleveland’s affair of the heart forward and into the final “bit” that Pym believed was as good as anything she had ever done—Mr. Cleveland’s elopement and its unfortunate end. When Fremantle hears the news of the declaration of love in the British Museum, he thinks:

A few words of advice from a man of the world, that was what Cleveland needed. He ought to have been more discreet about this little affair. ... Dr. Fremantle flattered himself that he had ordered his own life a little more skillfully. “They are not long, the days of wine and roses ...” but he had certainly enjoyed them where he could. (128)

Dr. Fremantle’s advice takes the form of telling Cleveland that he ought to go to Paris with *someone*, and Cleveland understands exactly what he means: “In another minute, he thought, noticing the twinkle in the old man’s eye, we shall begin quoting Limericks to each other” (179). Taking the advice to heart and having been told by Barbara that she prefers a romantic setting, he determines to take her to Paris: “What city in the world was more romantic than Paris, provided one didn’t lose one’s luggage?” (180). And what a comic scene the elopement turns out to be: narrated with a slightly bemused tone, it is a misadventure overlaid with an element of farce, with just a hint of a nod toward screwball comedy, popular in films of the day.

Pym is excellent at building up to such a scene as the elopement of Francis Cleveland and Barbara Bird. While little endearments and stolen kisses have set the stage, the scene is prepared for in earnest the evening before with what was to have been a romantic moonlit punt ride, complete with wine, but that ends with them both in the water. That bottle of wine is a wonderful touch and is another example of Pym’s skill as a writer, for it is a small thing that comes to represent different things to different people and ultimately stands for the unfortunate end of the elopement. For Jessie Morrow, the bottle of wine suggests unusual and suspicious, though amusing, behavior when she sees Francis dashing from his home with it: “[R]ather Crampton Hodnet, was how she put it to herself. Oh, yes, distinctly Crampton Hodnet” (181). For both Francis and Barbara, it is the promise of something romantic, the potential that both of them feel, at least at first. Yet it remains unopened, just as the proposed tryst is never realized. For Francis himself, it is not only a promise but also a worry, as he wonders how to carry the thing to the river and later when he ruefully remembers that he’d forgotten to bring a corkscrew. For Barbara Bird, it is an unfulfilled yet intact part of the idealized romanticism of her relationship with Francis. To Ellen, the maid, it is of a piece with Cleveland’s weirdness: “She glanced at him but without interest. Evidently she saw nothing unusual in the fact that he was carrying a

bottle of wine and had evidently fallen into the river. She had always thought him a bit touched anyway” (183). Finally, to Mrs. Cleveland, who sees the unopened bottle of wine on their bedroom dressing table, it is just another thing to wonder about: “Whatever had Francis been doing with himself during her absence?” (208).

The elopement itself is brilliantly described, as Pym portrays the uneasiness and apprehension of both parties on the day of the planned event: Francis in a panic over it, but determined to carry through after reading Barbara’s note saying how wonderful it will be; and Barbara, trying to convince herself that their sojourn in Paris will be the ultimate romantic expression of their love (still thinking only of the daytime activities, that is, not the dreaded nighttime!). Both wish desperately to back out, but each carries on nobly—Barbara, to show Francis that she’s not a “cold fish,” and Francis to show that he is “something more than a doddering old man whose head had been turned by the admiration of a pretty young woman” (187). But, when they miss the boat from Dover and are suddenly faced with a night in a hotel together, it proves too much for Barbara and she flees to her friend’s home with a feeling of enormous relief:

I’m free, she thought; there won’t be any going to Paris. There won’t be any more love, or at least not that kind of love. I’ve run away from Francis. Not run away, I’ve left him, I’ve given him up. I’ve *renounced* him. (190)

Her thoughts are in keeping with her preference to love Francis from afar and to share a beautiful Platonic love, not a sordid, physical one.

Francis, too, is relieved, as we see him sitting comfortably in the lounge with the older folks. Pym’s description of that lounge ranks among the best written passages in all of her novels. Having just arrived, and waiting while Francis arranges for a room, Barbara

saw that the room was decorated with stiff palms in brass pots and that, grouped in a corner, as if for artistic effect, were a number of old people reading the newspapers. They looked as if they had been left there many years ago and abandoned. Or perhaps they were people who at some time long past had intended to go abroad and had then either not wanted to or forgotten all about it, so that they had stayed here ever since, like fossils petrified in stone.

In a nice touch the episode of the doomed elopement concludes with one of the people in the lounge recalling Dr. Fremantle as a young man having “something to do with a ‘lady of the town,’ a rather notorious person” (191), which prompts Francis to reflect on the folly of having tried to recapture his youth by embarking on what he sees now as “this ridiculous escapade” (191). Pym’s telling of Mr. Cleveland’s elopement and its unfortunate end is indeed a fine “bit” of writing.

There are more “bits” than the ones that Pym mentions that readers might identify as being especially well done. I find Miss Doggett priceless, and Mrs. Cleveland interests me. Even Anthea has her moments, especially in the final chapter when she articulates a theme of the novel in a rather clever way. Simon’s friend Christopher, having just kissed her, says, “You’ve always got me, darling,” and Anthea thinks philosophically: “Yes, ... and if I hadn’t got you I’d have Freddie or Patrick or somebody else. Everything went on just the same in Oxford from year to year. It was only the people who might be different” (212). This statement is reinforced by the novel’s ending, which is almost a mirror reflection of the opening.

Written ten years before the publication of her first novel and 45 years before *Crampton Hodnet* made it into print, Barbara Pym’s comment to Robert Liddell about her work on that novel was as true at

the end of her life as it was when she was developing as a writer. The scenes and characters that she felt good about in 1940 are brilliant bits of writing as well done as anything that she was to write by the time of her death in 1980; these “bits”—and more—are written with the same confidence in her abilities that we see in her mature works. Her distinctive style and voice are well established in *Crampton Hodnet*, and the novel as a whole is uniquely Barbara Pym.

I have a further observation: when Pym wrote that she thought these bits “might be a comfort to someone,” she was most likely using the word “comfort” in its sense of easing a burden or of taking one’s mind off one’s problems, particularly as the comment was written when Britain was at war and daily life was unsettled and anxiety-ridden. For many readers today, especially those who know and love her novels, the “comfort” we get in reading or re-reading *Crampton Hodnet* is in the good feeling that comes from revisiting the familiar or the ease one feels in the company of an old friend. Reading this—or any of her novels—takes us away from everyday concerns as we step into the world of Barbara Pym.

As it happens, perhaps not unintentionally, Jessie Morrow uses that word in the opening chapter when she comments that student clubs must be a comfort, to which Miss Doggett snorts a typically dismissive remark. Jessie protests that “surely there is no person alive who doesn’t need it in some way” (6). I feel certain that Pym’s comedic skill, her gently ironic voice, and her insight into human nature that we find in deliciously funny scenes and quirky characters in *Crampton Hodnet* have given countless readers the kind of “comfort” that Pym sought to give and that Miss Morrow feels we all need.

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