

## “Laughing in the Face of Patriarchy”: The Role of Gendered Humor in *Mafalda* by Quino

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**Abstract:** Comics for children have a unique ability to entertain and educate young readers. Often dismissed as comical or unserious, comics are actually an important form of literature that can have a profound impact on children’s beliefs and values. This article will examine various approaches to feminist humor in the context of cultural studies in *Mafalda*, a popular Argentine comic strip that ran from 1964 to 1973, created by cartoonist Quino. The comic features a precocious and socially aware six-year-old girl named Mafalda, who frequently comments on politics, philosophy, and social issues, criticizing societal norms and structures. She constantly grapples with and questions the societal, political, and moral landscapes of her time, making astute observations that prompt readers to reflect on the complex world she is navigating. Beyond the humor and light-hearted exchanges, *Mafalda* emerges as a significant cultural text. It seamlessly intertwines entertainment with critical reflection, offering its audience not just a moment of leisurely reading but also compelling them to reckon with the profound questions and critiques articulated by its young protagonist. The use of humor in *Mafalda* not only serves as a form of critique but also empowers young girls and challenges the dominant gender narratives, because the comic employs gendered humor as a means of challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. This article explores the role of humor in *Mafalda*, specifically in relation to gender and how it challenges gender norms and expectations, ultimately offering a new perspective on gender and power dynamics in comics and beyond.

**Keywords:** *Mafalda*; *Quino*; *Argentina*; *comic strips*; *humor*; *feminism*.



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## Introduction

In 1964, in the throes of a tumultuous global and Argentinian historical period, the world was introduced to *Mafalda*, the brainchild of the esteemed cartoonist Quino. The comic strip's resonance with readers was immediate and far-reaching, swiftly transcending local boundaries to touch international audiences. Mafalda's astute commentaries on the state of the world, alongside her inquiries into democracy, freedom, and societal norms, mirrored the era's collective consciousness, wherein a generation steeped in chaos sought answers.

The context and setting of *Mafalda* are paramount to grasping its multifaceted nuances. Published at a time when Argentina was ensnared in political turmoil, the comic strip echoed these real-world upheavals in the dialogues between Mafalda and her family and her friends. Despite their youthful ages, the characters grapple with hefty topics such as warfare, poverty, and political unrest, effectively mirroring the societal climate of the time. Beyond Mafalda, a cast of supporting characters like her mother, father, brother, Felipe, Manolito, Susanita and Libertad each contribute their unique perspectives, adding layers of depth and dialogue to the comic's narrative. Representing a spectrum of views, they enable the exploration of various societal and personal themes from diverse angles, enriching the comic's thematic terrain.

Mafalda herself stands as the comic's central figure, a six-year-old girl residing in a middle-class family in Buenos Aires. Her character, imbued with a depth of concern for humanity and peace, consistently reflects on the intricate nature of relationships, society, and global issues. Her exploration transforms the comic strip from mere entertainment to a potent platform for social critique and discussion, underscoring its enduring relevance. This blend of childlike innocence with profound wisdom renders her observations both endearing and evocative, resonating with readers of all ages.

## **Mafalda in context: the cultural and historical tapestry of the 1960s and 1970s Argentina**

Mafalda emerged in the 1960s, running from 1964 to 1973, reflecting the voice of an era marked by societal transformation and a desire for equality and rights. The 1960s and 1970s were pivotal decades in global history, echoed in Argentina's shifting political and cultural landscape. Within this dynamic backdrop, Mafalda was born, intertwining her story with the historical and cultural intricacies of the era.

The turbulent political context of Argentina in the 1960s was characterized by successive governmental changes and a heightened quest for civil liberties.

The country witnessed the forced resignation of President Arturo Frondizi in 1962, a brief interlude under José María Guido, and the election of Arturo Illia in 1963. However, political stability remained elusive, culminating in a military coup in 1966 that deposed Illia, setting a precedent for military intervention in political affairs (see Romero).

Amidst the political turmoil, Argentina, like many other nations, was undergoing significant societal shifts. The feminist movement gained traction, signaling a collective quest for gender equality. The establishment of the Argentine Feminist Union in 1970 and the inception of the Feminist Liberation Movement in 1972 marked the era's expanding feminist consciousness (see Trebisacce).

In tandem with the global tide of change, women's access to higher education in Argentina burgeoned, fueled by the educational opportunities created during the Perón administration. This educational surge enabled a wider societal dialogue, contributing to the expanding pool of politically active women, reflecting a transformation in societal roles and expectations (see Barrancos; see Vasallo).

*Mafalda*, in Quino's adept hands, became a conduit for exploring these multifaceted themes of civil rights, gender equality, and political unrest. Despite the looming shadow of censorship, *Mafalda*'s narrative deftly mirrored the societal and global dialogues of the time, offering a humorous yet incisive perspective on the contemporary world (see Lindstrom; see Rommens).

The global civil rights movement and the broader fight for equality resonated within Argentina's borders. The media's burgeoning role, significantly influencing societal perspectives, acted as a catalyst, amplifying international events and perspectives within the Argentine societal context (see Mangano).

*Mafalda*'s character, embroiled in these diverse, intertwined narratives, symbolizes the era's collective consciousness. Her observations, questions, and interactions reflect the societal conversations, global movements, and the ongoing quest for equality and rights, offering a unique window into the complexities of the 1960s and 1970s in Argentina.

Quino's masterful integration of contemporary concerns, global discussions, and themes of equality and rights within *Mafalda*'s storylines endowed her character with timeless relevance, resonating across generations. *Mafalda*'s dialogues and interactions offer insights into the political and societal ethos of the era, mirroring the societal changes, debates, and the global dialogue for rights and equality.

Beyond political and societal shifts, the era also witnessed dynamic cultural expressions. Despite the constraints and censorship, creative avenues flourished, offering platforms for societal commentary and reflection (De Maio & Rodriguez 83). *Mafalda* stands as an emblem of this cultural vibrancy, navigating the era's complexities with humor, insight, and resilience.

## Feminist humor

Feminist humor, dating back centuries, has been a vital tool in highlighting and deconstructing the societal, political, and cultural limitations imposed upon women, seamlessly fusing satire, wit, and critical insight. From the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century to the comedic performances of contemporary figures, humor has played an instrumental role in feminist thought and activism, providing a platform for raising awareness, questioning norms, and advocating for gender equality.

The eighteenth-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft leveraged humor in her critical examination of society's treatment of women. In her seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft employed humor to bring attention to the stark gender inequalities of her time, brilliantly intertwining satire and critical insight to subvert patriarchal norms and highlight the intellectual potential and rights of women. Her work laid a foundation for the use of humor in feminist discourse, setting a precedent for future generations of women activists and thinkers to engage humor as a means of social and political critique (András 18).

Audrey Bilger's examination in *Laughing Feminism* delves into Wollstonecraft's utilization of humor, further expanding on the notion of humor as a mode of feminist expression and critique. Bilger's insights delve into the contrast between the empowering humor Wollstonecraft employed, which sought to ridicule and undermine misogynist perspectives, and the complacent, conforming humor often expected from women in patriarchal societies.

In the twentieth century, Hélène Cixous emerged with her theory of *écriture féminine*, advancing the conversation around feminist humor by interweaving it with the idea of a unique, women-centered language and writing style. Cixous's work, notably in "The Laugh of the Medusa," highlighted humor as a powerful form of expression for women, allowing them to articulate their experiences, critique societal structures, and advocate for their rights beyond the limitations of patriarchal language and expression. Her theoretical framework bolstered the role of humor as a significant element in feminist discourse, further solidifying its place within the broader feminist movement.

The suffragette movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries amplified the use of feminist humor, with prominent figures such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony (1881-1922) employing it to generate awareness and support for women's rights. Their use of humorous slogans, cartoons, and speeches helped to make the movement more accessible and engaging, reaching a wider audience and fostering a sense of solidarity and community among women activists.

As the world transitioned into the interwar period, figures like Dorothy Parker emerged, wielding humor as a weapon to spotlight and critique the pervasive gender inequalities of their time. Parker’s work, laden with wit, satire, and incisive commentary, resonated with the sentiments of Wollstonecraft and aligned with the emerging theories of Cixous, underscoring the ongoing relevance and power of humor in the feminist movement.

The mid-twentieth century marked another pivotal era for feminist humor, aligning with the second wave of feminism and the rise of comedians like Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers. Their breakthrough into the male-dominated world of comedy mirrored the broader feminist struggle, as they used their platforms to deliver humor infused with feminist perspectives, offering not just laughter but enlightenment, empowerment, and critique of the societal structures that continued to limit women’s rights and freedoms.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen the continued evolution and impact of feminist humor, with figures such as Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Mindy Kaling pioneering new paths in comedy and entertainment. Their work, spanning television, film, and literature, brings forth a multifaceted exploration of gender, society, and feminism, contributing to the ongoing dialogue and movement toward gender equality.

### **Methodology: analyzing gendered humor in *Mafalda***

The analysis of gendered humor in the comic series *Mafalda*, volumes 1–12, is underpinned by an engagement with feminist theories of humor. In delving into the series, it is crucial to apply these theoretical frameworks to discern the nuanced ways in which humor confronts and navigates gender issues. The corpus of the first twelve volumes of *Mafalda* will offer a comprehensive canvas upon which to explore the dimensions of gendered humor embedded within the narratives and character interactions.

The analytical process is initiated by a textual analysis of selected strips from the corpus, wherein specific attention is given to language, visual elements, and comedic devices that highlight or intersect with gender themes. This analysis is not isolated but is intertwined with a rigorous application of feminist theories on humor, which serve as lenses to provide depth and insight into the understanding of the comic strips.

One such crucial feminist theoretical perspective applied is that of Audrey Bilger, who explored the concept of “laughing feminism.” According to Bilger, humor can be a medium for feminist thought, serving as a tool for critique and the subversion of patriarchal norms (see Bilger). This theory guides the

exploration of how *Mafalda* employs humor to both subtly and overtly challenge traditional gender expectations and norms.

The contextual analysis is infused with the insights of Hélène Cixous, a feminist theorist who associated women's laughter with liberation and freedom of expression (see Cixous). This perspective aids in examining how "Mafalda" uses female characters and their engagement with humor as a form of expression, autonomy, and resistance against patriarchal constraints.

In addition to these theoretical frameworks, the methodology embraces an intersectional approach, informed by Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive exploration of gender and humor in *Mafalda* (see Crenshaw). This intersectional lens allows for an examination of how gender intersects with other identities and issues within the comic strips, providing a multi-dimensional view of humor's role in portraying and challenging gender dynamics.

Alongside these feminist theories, the historical and socio-political context of Argentina during the 1960s and 1970s is woven into the analysis, offering additional layers of understanding regarding the external influences on the comic series' use of gendered humor.

### **Analysis of the selected volumes**

Taking a closer look at the comic strips, Mafalda, the main character, frequently embodies a form of feminist humor that challenges the status quo. Her character is imbued with a wisdom and perspective that far exceeds her young age, and she often uses humor to voice concerns about societal issues, including gender inequality. The character of Mafalda resonates with Bilger's "laughing feminism," as her humorous remarks and observations serve as a critique of patriarchal structures, revealing the absurdities and injustices of gender norms and expectations.

The comic strips frequently utilize everyday situations to humorously expose and critique the entrenched gender norms and expectations, providing a platform for questioning and challenging these societal constructs. The humor serves not just as a source of entertainment, but as a powerful tool for social critique and change, reflecting the potential of humor to contribute to the feminist discourse and movement. It's noteworthy to emphasize the comprehensive way Quino managed to intersect humor and gender critique, weaving them seamlessly into the fabric of the comic strips.

For instance, Mafalda's resistance to societal expectations of femininity and her continuous questioning stance reflects the burgeoning feminist

movements of the era. Her character uses humor as a form of resistance, turning seemingly ordinary conversations into profound critiques of societal expectations and norms related to gender. Her playful yet pointed questions serve to unsettle the adults around her, causing them to confront the often-unexamined gendered aspects of everyday life. For example, Mafalda masterfully employs irony to further its critique of gender norms by asking her mother if “*the ability to excel or fail in life inherited?*” (Fig. 1). In that comic strip, her mother is shown doing the housework. Mafalda’s innocent question is laden with a profound critique. The visual depiction of her mother engaged in domestic chores while Mafalda questions the inheritability of life success or failure subtly underscores the limited opportunities available to women and the societal expectations for them to conform to domestic roles. This strip uses both textual and visual elements to highlight the constraints placed on women, and the societal expectations that perpetuate gender inequality. The humor in this scenario stems from the innocence of Mafalda’s question juxtaposed against the serious implications of her inquiry. The irony lies in the child’s curiosity clashing with the adult world’s unspoken and accepted norms about gender roles and expectations. Mafalda’s question humorously and subtly brings to the forefront the issue of gender inequality in opportunities and expectations, illustrating the ingrained societal structures that perpetuate these disparities. Here, the comic strip utilizes humor as a vehicle to question and confront gender norms, resonating with Wollstonecraft’s critique of misogynistic laughter by utilizing humor to expose and ridicule gender stereotypes rather than perpetuate them. Moreover, Regina Barreca’s assertion that humor serves as a catalyst for social change finds a strong resonance with Mafalda’s thematic expressions (see Barreca). Quino’s portrayal of Mafalda is a clear depiction of a character who employs humor as a tool for confronting and criticizing the societal environment around her, reminiscent of Barreca’s emphasis on women’s humor as a form of resistance to societal expectations and limitations.



Figura 1

Mafalda: Mom

Mom: Mmm...

Mafalda: Mom, is the ability to excel or fail in life inherited?

Various strips depict everyday scenarios where gender roles and expectations are humorously brought to the forefront, allowing for an exploration of the pervasive and often subtle ways in which gender norms permeate daily life. Through these everyday situations, Mafalda humorously highlights the absurdities and inconsistencies of societal gender expectations, allowing readers to engage with these critical issues in a relatable and accessible manner. Moreover, an additional enriching layer of the gendered humor analysis in “Mafalda” is observed in the visual elements of the comic strips. The visual cues, such as the characters’ expressions, gestures, and positioning, augment the textual narrative, enhancing the delivery and impact of the humor. For example, in Mafalda’s monologue, expressing her eagerness for education as a pathway to avoid becoming an “oppressed and insignificant woman like” her mother, is reinforced by her earnest facial expressions (Fig.2.). This visual portrayal amplifies the humor and heightens the impact of her words, providing a potent visual and textual juxtaposition that underlines the critique of gender expectations and societal roles. Mafalda’s expressiveness in the strip enhances the humorous critique of gender norms. Her sincere and direct comments, paired with a determined face, underscore the importance she places on education as a tool for female empowerment and liberation from societal expectations and limitations. This visual depiction reinforces the critical message of the strip, highlighting the significance of education in altering gender dynamics and offering a pathway for women’s independence and autonomy. Furthermore, the situational humor in the given strip effectively underscores Mafalda’s challenge to patriarchal norms. Her straightforward discussion about her future, layered with humor, brings to light the grim realities of societal expectations for women and their often-limited roles. The humor here not only provides a light-hearted and accessible medium for readers to engage with these critical issues but also serves as an essential tool for Mafalda to voice her critique and aspiration for a different future for women, utilizing humor as a catalyst for societal reflection and change in gender perceptions and roles.





Figura 2

Mafalda: Poor Mama! She's worried because I'm starting Kindergarten tomorrow and she's afraid I won't like it!

Mafalda: In fact, I could reassure her by telling her that I am eager to go to kindergarten and school and high school and university, etc.

Mafalda: You know, Mom? I want to go to kindergarten and study a lot. That way tomorrow I won't be an oppressed and insignificant woman like you!

Mafalda: It's nice to be able to comfort a mom.

Taking the analysis, a step further, it is essential to acknowledge the comic strip's illustration style and its contribution to the gender narrative. The minimalist and expressive drawing style in *Mafalda* allows the readers to focus on the characters' dialogues and interactions, thereby emphasizing the gendered messages embedded within the text and character dynamics. Quino's choice of visual representation plays a significant role in communicating the comic's themes, amplifying the impact of the gendered humor and making the content more accessible and relatable to a wide range of readers.

Moving to the characters' conversations, we could argue that often reveal a profound disconnect between societal expectations for gender roles and the characters' desires and identities. This ironic disconnect is highlighted through humorous exchanges, wherein the characters express unconventional desires and perspectives that clash with societal expectations, thereby using irony and humor to lay bare the absurdity and limitations of rigid gender roles. Quino's employment of a child's perspective in *Mafalda* allows for a unique and refreshing examination of gender issues. The child characters, unencumbered by societal conditioning and expectations, offer raw and honest insights into gender dynamics, unearthing the often-subtle ways in which societal gender expectations are ingrained and perpetuated. The innocence and honesty of the child characters,

coupled with their humorous observations and questions, serve to amplify the critique of gender norms, making the comic strips both engaging and thought-provoking. Quino also utilizes the diversity of characters to explore a wide spectrum of perspectives and experiences related to gender. Each character brings a unique viewpoint, allowing for a multi-dimensional and holistic exploration of gender dynamics. This diversity of perspectives enhances the depth of the gender critique, enabling a comprehensive and nuanced examination of the multifaceted issues related to gender norms, roles, and expectations.

In comic strips, the character Susanita, Mafalda's friend, represents the traditional female stereotype, obsessed with marriage and domestic life. However, Mafalda, with her sharp wit and critical perspective, often counters Susanita's remarks with humorous comments or facial expressions that expose the limitations and problems of such a narrow viewpoint (Fig. 3). Susanita's character, while seemingly perpetuating gender stereotypes, is used as a foil to Mafalda's progressive views, highlighting through humorous contrast the need for a shift in societal expectations and attitudes towards women. In the realm of comic strips, the lively interaction between Susanita and Mafalda echoes elements of Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional theory. Both characters starkly delineate two divergent paths within the debate surrounding gender roles and expectations. Susanita's alignment with traditional female stereotypes, her fixation on marriage, and domesticity may be seen as a representation of a singular, limited perspective on womanhood, a notion critiqued by intersectional feminism.

Crenshaw's theory highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing the multiple facets of identity, including gender, race, and class, in understanding and combating systems of oppression. In contrast, Susanita's character, being confined within traditional roles, lacks this intersectional perspective, portraying a restricted and narrow vision of women's roles and aspirations. Mafalda, however, embodies elements akin to Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* or women's writing. Cixous advocates for a new language, a mode of expression that breaks from patriarchal structures, allowing women to articulate their experiences and desires freely. Mafalda's witty and critical remarks utilize humor as a form of this new language, subverting societal expectations and offering a fresh perspective on women's roles and rights. Her humorous, yet poignant questions and observations work to dismantle traditional gender roles, revealing the limitations and confines they impose on women. The feminist humor theory that emphasizes the function of humor to challenge and disrupt societal norms is manifested vividly in these narratives (see Walker).



Figura 3

Mafalda: Last night, I dreamed that my mother had a degree.  
 Susanita: And she was going to University and etc.?  
 Mafalda: Sure  
 Susanita: And she found a fiancé and etc.?  
 Mafalda: A fiancé? No!  
 Susanita: Ah, so she was going to University and nothing else!

Quino’s characters come from different backgrounds, embodying various aspects of society, and presenting a mosaic of perspectives that intersect with gender. For instance, the character of Libertad, introduced later in the series, is a personification of the revolutionary ideas of the time. Her interactions with Mafalda bring forth humorous yet insightful commentaries on gender within the broader context of political and social ideologies. The intersection of gender with political beliefs in Libertad’s character offers a multi-dimensional analysis, revealing the complexity of navigating gender roles and expectations amidst diverse and often conflicting societal contexts.

The comic series *Mafalda* also tactically employs the characters of Felipe and Manolito to further explore the theme of gendered humor. These male characters, with their own idiosyncrasies and perspectives, add a different dimension to the discourse on gender within the comic strips, further enhancing the exploration of societal expectations and norms. Felipe, the dreamer, and Manolito, the capitalistically minded character, both interact with Mafalda and the other characters in ways that humorously highlight and challenge societal expectations of masculinity and femininity. Their characters, while providing comic relief, serve as a mirror to reflect the deeply entrenched gender norms within society, contributing to the ongoing dialogue on gender roles within the comic series. For instance, Felipe’s interactions with Mafalda often highlight the contrast between societal expectations for boys and girls. Felipe’s escapades and

daydreams, often seen as typical boyish behavior, are humorously juxtaposed with Mafalda's more critical and socially aware perspective. This contrast serves to critique and question traditional gender roles, underlining the need for a broader understanding of gender that transcends societal stereotypes. Manolito, on the other hand, embodies the entrepreneurial spirit, obsessed with money and business. His character is a satirical representation of capitalist values and masculinity (Fig. 4). His interactions with Mafalda and Susanita often bring to light the gendered aspects of capitalism and societal expectations, further emphasizing the need for a shift in perspective regarding gender roles and expectations. The comic strips often utilize a humor style accentuating irony and absurdity, subtly illustrating feminist concerns.



Figura 4

Mafalda: Do you believe in human equality, Manolito?

Manolito: Of course not!

Manolito: This equality thing is a dumb thing!

Manolito: No two people in the world are the same. No one is the same as anyone else! Who told you that nonsense about them being the same?

Mafalda: My father.

Manolito: As usual! These parents are all the same.

This approach is remarkably in sync with the work of humor scholars who emphasize the role of irony in feminist humor (see Barreca). For instance, Mafalda often uses sarcasm when interacting with male characters, highlighting the absurdities in their assertions or beliefs about gender and in general the humanity. This not only challenges the perspectives of the male characters but also subtly invites the readers to rethink their own assumptions. Joanne Gilbert's arguments concerning humor as a terrain of resistance are mirrored in the "Mafalda" strips as well. The comic series effectively utilizes the subversive potential of humor to undermine patriarchal norms and expectations, aligning with Gilbert's theoretical framework (see Gilbert). The strips leverage the

innocence and curiosity of young characters to offer humorous yet sharp critiques of gender constructs.

The exploration of humor’s interaction with other forms of identity and societal issues in *Mafalda* aligns with Cixous’s idea of women’s laughter as a form of liberation. Her laughter and wit become acts of defiance, echoing Cixous’s association of women’s laughter with freedom and autonomy. The historical and societal context in which *Mafalda* was created and is set, further enriches the analysis. Quino’s commentary on the political turmoil and societal shifts in Argentina is intricately woven into the narratives, and this backdrop influences the portrayal and exploration of gendered humor within the series. The societal transformations and the rise of women's activism during this period are reflected in the characters’ dialogues and scenarios, highlighting the intersection of gender with the broader societal and political dynamics. For example, in one strip, Mafalda is shown questioning gender roles and expectations. The humor employed in this strip serves as a mechanism to probe deep societal questions, reflecting the societal tumult.



Figura 5

Woman: Is there any effective way to lose weight?

Mafalda: I know a lot of ways, but I'd rather not get into politics right now.

An analysis of *Mafalda* would be incomplete without acknowledging the impact and reception of the comic strip. The comic's enduring popularity underscores its relevance and importance in discussions related to gender equality, demonstrating the potential of creative mediums like comic strips to contribute meaningfully to societal dialogue and change.

## Conclusions

As a conclusion after the exploration of gendered humor in *Mafalda*, it's imperative to underline the comic strip's instrumental role in enhancing the understanding and critique of established gender roles and stereotypes. *Mafalda* laughs in the face of patriarchy, utilizing a subtle humor imbued with irony and unexpected insights to challenge societal gender norms. The broad-reaching implications of this study go beyond the comic domain, enriching contemporary dialogues on gender and humor. It exemplifies the comic strips' influential role in mirroring and propelling societal transformation. By revealing and breaking down ingrained gender norms, *Mafalda* serves not merely as a source of amusement but as a catalyst for critical gender role reflection. In the present global milieu, where the dismantling of patriarchal systems is paramount, insights from *Mafalda* are profoundly relevant. The comic strip stands timeless, reflecting the significant potential of humor as a force for impactful reflection, critique, and societal change regarding gender norms. In the quest for a more egalitarian world, let the laughter of *Mafalda* echo as a reminder of the transformative power of humor intertwined with insight and reflection.

## Disclosure statement

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