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Women “beyond control”? —androcentric discourses in Victorian painting (towards reconstructing meanings)

ABSTRACT. From the perspective of feminist analysis, the painting is considered to be androcentric. It is believed that artworks were created by men, for men and from their point of view. One can even say that, men spoke through the bodies and identities of heroine images in the painting. From this point of view, painting has been accused not only of the lack of women as authors of works of art, but also of the lack of representations of the female experience. Logically, from this perspective, images of women on the canvas are often not simple reflection of reality, but they crystallize dreams, anxieties and feelings of their male artists. There is no doubt that they are also imbued with ideologies concerning gender. Three images that will be examined in this paper were created in the Victorian era (the dates of their creation are: 1887, 1890, 1896). They all reflect anxieties about womanhood in the late nineteenth century, primarily manifested in the creation of a new image of a woman—the femme fatale. On the other hand the women as objects of the painting are treated as a sexual object for male creator and viewer. Every woman in the paintings could be described as “being out of control.” There is a paradox here: the woman is simultaneously out of control and controlled by men. There is a worth to add that every painting has extremely suggestive impact on the viewer and amazing artistic value.

KEYWORDS: Victorian Painting, femininity, androcentrism, femme fatale, hysteria

The art of painting is considered androcentric in feminist analyses. It is thought that works of art were created by men, for men and from their perspective. It could be even claimed that men spoke through the female protagonists of the paintings, through the women visible in the paintings, their bodies (and identities). From this point of view, painting has been accused not only of the lack of female painters but also not depicting women in the paintings so that they reflect female experience. In this context, Charlotte Gilman Perkins, in her classic 1914 book entitled *Our Androcentric Culture or the Man Made World*, wrote:

But the main evils of a too masculine art lie in the emphasis laid on self-expression. The artist, passionately conscious of how he feels, strives to make

other people aware of these sensations. (...) If a man paints the sea, it is not to make you see and feel as a sight of that same ocean would, but to make you see and feel how he, personally, was affected by it; a matter surely of the narrowest importance. The ultra-masculine artist, extremely sensitive (...) uses the medium of art, which is unconscious, ingenuously (...) but as a form of expression of his personal sensations (Perkins Gilman, 1914, p. 85).

Logically, from this perspective, depictions of women on painters' canvases are not simple reflections of reality, but rather crystallise the anxiety and feelings of (male) painters. Without a shadow of doubt, they are also saturated with gender ideologies. An instance of extreme emotions, which can be triggered by art, is a 16th century painting by Diego Velazquez entitled "Rokeby Venus", which was chopped with a meat cleaver by a suffragist, Mary Richardson. It was intended to be (apart from a political manifesto, i.e. demand of freeing Emmeline Pankhurst) a symbol of resistance to the patriarchal norm of portraying attractive and sexual women's bodies (Nead, 1998, p. 72). Due to this, Mary Richardson—who is nicknamed "The butcher"—enters the historical annals as a manifestation of the not yet formed matter, a dreadful spectre of female sexuality which needs to be disciplined by men (Nead, 1998, p. 78) in opposition to the painted by the artist—calm and timelessly beautiful, though cut on the surface—naked Venus.

Velasquez's painting was created c. 1650 as an expression of the fascination with the beauty of the female body (the goddess of love, Venus, is depicted in the painting). In turn, the three paintings which will be subjected to analyses share the period when they originated—the Victorian era (dates of their execution are 1887, 1890, and 1896, respectively). All of them mirror the anxiety surrounding femininity at the close of the 19th century, which were displayed in the creation of a new image of the woman—*femme fatale*. The criteria for the selection of these works (apart from their immensely suggestive influence on the viewer and the artistic value) can be linked to a certain kind of frame: the woman as an object/subject of male executor and viewer inspection. In each painting, a woman is portrayed, one who can be seen as being "under the control" of a man—beyond control are her sexuality, emotionality, as well as her drives and instincts. This portrayal is a part of eternal beliefs about the polarised male and female anatomy. Here, the woman is the epitome of Nature—unpredictable and changeable; the man, in turn, is the symbol of Culture. And only culture can be tamed; however, the uncivilised, the female cannot be tamed completely (the

woman is identified with nature due to the peculiar physiology, her body is subject to a specific cycle of biological changes, strictly connected with nature "the menstrual cycle corresponds to the lunar cycle") (Moore, 1997, p. 60). The woman appears to be a threat to the man and to lead him astray.

At the same time, there seems to be a "perennial belief" that the woman is always "hiding something", that she "will never expose herself completely", and that she possesses an "unfathomable secret" (of her femininity), which cannot be "torn out" (this approach alludes to the trend of the quest for finding the "essence" of femininity). As stated by Tseëlon: "In mythological and theological representations the woman features as synonymous with artifice, inauthenticity, and duplicity. She appears as made up, claiming false identity (...)" (Tseëlon, 1995, p. 34).

It needs to be added, however, that the woman who is left beyond control, quivering with her instincts and drives is at the same time tamed by the male androcentric discourse of the male meaning-making, forced into the binary template of interpretation.

THREE PAINTINGS

1. The hysteric

The title of the first painting is "A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière."¹ A question that comes to one's mind is: is it really a mere neurology lecture given by professor Jean Martin Charcot in the Salpêtrière Clinic? A woman in the second phase of hysteria, who is in the centre of the painting, is assuming the characteristic arc-in-circle posture. The reason why she has not fallen on the floor is that the doctor is supporting her with his arms. The painting seems to be reviving in my imagination. I take the liberty to characterise the event, which is depicted on the painting on the basis of a note taken by P.R. Bourneville during Charcot's performance on 25th November 1877.² It is Tuesday, the day of famous

¹ I analyse this painting, yet in a different context, in the book: *Kobieta epoki wiktoriańskiej. Tożsamość, ciało, medykalizacja* (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2013).

² A paraphrase of the description of the scene on the basis of Paul Regnard Bourneville's account, *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (p. 110), after: Foucault, 2000, p. 55.

lectures attended by the-then future big names in neurology Paul Richer, Pierre Marie, Gilbert Ballet, Maurice Debove, Józef Babiński. Charcot is showing his medium, a woman who does not control herself—she is in the state of hysteria. Her arms are bare, her neckline is low. Her dress brings about associations with cabaret singers, rather than a mental asylum patient. Her epileptic seizures make one think of sexual ecstasy; when Charcot lays his hands on her ovaries, the woman calms down for a moment. When Charcot places a walking stick on her womb, the woman falls silent. The hysteria attack wanders off just to come back the very moment the walking stick is removed. The woman demands the stick “in words devoid of any metaphor.” The doctor alternately uses ether to calm down the hysteric, and nitrate to speed up the attack.

For twenty-eight men in black suits and white shirts, looking calmly with interest, it is a spectacle of medicine and femininity. They epitomise knowledge and truth about medicine as well as psychiatry. They epitomise the power of masculinity over the body and identity of women. Charcot is the master of the ceremony. This is an exemplification and confirmation of the androcentric world. Without a doubt, the woman constitutes the main focus of the work—she is the spectacle, yet a spectacle which can be likened to female celebrities of never-ending beauty contests.

Who is “Blanche” Marie Wittman, the main character in the painting³? A patient who trusted her doctor? An object subjected to exploration? A puppet in the hands of the master? An epitome of (male) sexual dreams watching her ecstasy? A hypnotist consciously hypnotising the excited male spectators who have their eyes fixed on her? The queen of hysterics? (is it—one might want to pose the question—her artistic nickname?) It is not meaningless that Charcot was famous for photographing his (female) patients, thus immortalising hysteria attacks on

³ It is paradoxical that the main character of the painting under analysis—Blanche Marie Wittman—who has become a symbol of uncontrolled female sexuality manifested through hysteria, is also a protagonist in P. O. Enquist’s book entitled *Boken om Blanche och Marie* [The Book about Blanche and Marie]. The book was written on the basis of documents and sources (including Blanche’s diaries) concerning Blanche and Marie Skłodowska-Curie’s lives. They were friends, and Blanche assisted Marie in radium extraction. The novel reveals portrayals of two passionate women, ahead of their times, but also women riddled with disease (radioactive radium leads to disease and eventually death). These women are also unable to fit the female ideal. P.O. Enquist builds the narration around the insane love, which ends in tragedy—the love between Blanche and professor Charcot, and Marie and Paul Langevin.

a photographic plate, and also the public spectacles attended by hysterics. Together with his wife, they have presented these photographs during an art exhibition. Therefore, not accidentally, Georges Didi-Huberman uses the concept of Charcot’s iconography or “living pathological museum” (Didi-Huberman, 2003, p. 239), while his (female) patients are nicknamed “artists of the interior and paradoxically returned (...) to the status of decorative objects” (Showalter, 1993, p. 310;) (it is worth mentioning that the main character of the painting was Charcot’s lover of long standing).

In the case of the spectacle in the *Salpêtrière* hospital, we deal with a peculiar “theatralisation of hysteria.” A. Corbin casts (female) hysterics’ behaviour into two categories: exhibitionism and voyeurism. Here, the woman assumes the role of a simulator or an actress, while men tend to identify her behaviour with “orgasm delirium” or the provocative behaviour of street prostitutes (Corbin, 1999, p. 604, 607).

Driven by the traditional question: “what was the artist’s attention?” by immortalising a spectacle of hysteria on a canvas, I now turn to the incredibly impressive two huge windows, through which sunlight is bursting into the room. This light appears to symbolically separate this scene from the darkness of the Victorian bedroom, a place where—as it was believed—female passion and excitation was out of the question, as every sensual and desiring woman was considered to be a pathological deviation from the norm. The Victorian darkness of the lecture hall was substituted with bright sunlight, while the main character of the scene is a (female) hysteric along with her spectacle of ecstasy.

Nevertheless, the painting is saturated with the classic gender binarism—the woman represents the nature, while the man epitomises the culture. It is a comeback of the Victorian gentleman who is a symbol of rationality, self-control, authority, and power. In this context, “Blanche” Marie Whitman constituted another confirmation of the legitimate idea of a woman devoid of rationality, who lost her control over the body and senses, who allowed herself to be deceived by her instincts, primordial drives and unsuppressed desire.

Disciplining female identity and body is clearly visible in the painting; it constitutes the essence of the Victorian construal of women, as does the unhindered medicalization of the female body through the power of micro practices of everyday life (these bring about Michel Foucault’s narrations concerning the birth of the clinic in the second half of

the 19th century). And thus the gathered men are casting an analytical and disciplining look at the woman-hysteric, a look which includes the entire system of power/knowledge. The scene from the “A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière” epitomizes the synoptic gaze of the male eye, since only the man can describe what he sees. “(...)[L]ooking in order to know, to show in order to teach” is after all “a tacit form of violence, all the more abusive for its silence (...)” (Foucault, 2003, p. 84). The lunatic (body and verbal) language of Blanche Marie Whitmann becomes an example of a madman discourse, who—referring to Foucault—can be ascribed the ability to tell the untold truth, the ability to perceive, in one’s naivety, what the wise cannot perceive (Foucault, 2002, p. 5). This character embodies the entire truth and anxiety surrounding femininity, the entire theory and practice of the socio-cultural repression of women. It is worth referring to historical descriptions of similar spectacles, which fascinated the Paris community of those days. Let us have a look at a piece of the memoirs *The Story of San Michele*:

The huge amphitheatre was filled to the last place with a multi-coloured audience drawn from tout Paris, authors, journalists, leading actors and actresses, fashionable demimondaines [...]. Some of them smelt with delight a bottle of ammonia when told it was rose water, others would eat a piece of charcoal when presented to them as chocolate. Another would crawl on all fours on the floor, barking furiously, when told she was a dog, flap her arms as if trying to fly when turned into a pigeon, lift her skirts with a shriek of terror when a glove was thrown at her feet with a suggestion of being a snake. Another would walk with a top hat in her arms rocking it to and fro and kissing it tenderly when she was told it was her baby (Munthe, 1929, pp. 302-303).

The author of these words—Axel Munthe—a Swedish practicing doctor in Paris, describes Charcot’s lectures as an “absurd farce” having nothing to do with medicine, a game of lies and appearances. Munthe considers the phases of hypnosis conceptualised by Charcot, i.e. “lethargy”, “catalepsy”, and “somnambulism” as designed only by him and not utilised beyond the walls of the *Salpêtrière* clinic. A few decades later, Roger Bastide contends that the great Charcot’s hysteria was more of a construct of doctors than patients. In his opinion, hysteria assumed forms of unconscious stimulation, whose symptoms were triggered by means of suggestion and subsided by means of persuasion (Bastide, 1972, p. 364).

2. The prostitute

Another painting *¿Y tenía corazón?* (Did she have a heart?) or *¡Y tenía corazón!* (And she had a heart!) was painted by a 20th-century Spanish painter—Enrique Simonet y Lombardo in 1980.⁴ It is also known under the following titles *Anatomia del corazón* (The anatomy of heart) or *La autopsia del corazón* (Autopsy of the heart). In the painting we can see a mortuary with a dead body of a woman. Next to the body, there is a man with the woman’s heart in his hand. The décor is very austere—there are two simple tables, and a pair of knives and a bowl of water on one of them. Invariably dark walls are lit by modest light coming from a wall lamp. Sunlight is bursting into the room through the small unsophisticated window; its intensity contrasts with the darkness of the mortuary swathing the dead body. The contrast between the background and the foreground: the dark figure of the old man and the bright body of the deceased woman is the most striking oppositions in the painting. On the windowsill, a few bottles—with various liquids most probably used for preserving organs or disinfecting hands—have been placed. The lamp dispersing darkness, placed behind the man’s back, is to symbolise the enlightening power of science. However, without a doubt, the low light is of outmost importance—as if the artist wanted to say that science is not able to address all questions, and in particular the one posed by the man performing post-mortem examination and—at the same time—the one expressed in the title of the painting. By juxtaposing the relationship between shadow and light, an inversion of the traditional way of thinking is presented: it is the shadow which seems to refer to science, while the light refers to phenomena eluding rational thinking.

The title of the painting is ambiguous *per se*; it can be both a question and an answer: “Did she have a heart?”, “After all, she had a heart.” In the work of Simonet, though most critics compare his work to other paintings from this period depicting death and autopsy, we do not find the expected props: skulls, medical books or anatomy atlases. Instead, we can see an old man representing the medical wisdom, who at the same time is deprived of the access to the truth. The title of the painting, although apparently including medical connotations, undoubtedly takes up issues of morality. The painter seems to be asking existential ques-

⁴ I analyse this painting, yet in a different context, in the book: *Kobieta epoki wiktoriańskiej. Tożsamość, ciało, medykalizacja* (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2013).

tions in this context. And so, who has the right to judge a woman's morality, a young prostitute who committed suicide by drowning herself?—it surely does not suffice to take out her heart in order to learn who she really was. Is it enough to be a medical authority to become an oracle in the domain of morality (del Pozo García, 2011, p. 23) (it needs to be reminded that back then medicine was intruding on the domains traditionally left to religion by determining norms and pathologies).

Why did the young Simonet choose a mortuary in order to pose a question about the human nature/the female nature/the nature of a prostitute, a question about the ambiguity of what is moral and what is devoid of morality; and finally in a brilliant flash of intuition, a question which seems to question the primacy of science and medicine? It is worth adding that the mortuary, in the second half of the 19th century, ceased to be a symbol of functional space, becoming the place of anonymous, unsystematised and alienated death, and at the same time, a place accessible for viewers. Mirel Ferre Alvarez calls the mortuary an echo of new mentality, which makes the intimate (death, paranoia, disease) the public. Here, the mortuary represents “the new scientific conception of death, a conception linked to the premises of positivism which saw in science a paradigm of social evolution” (Ferre Alvarez, 2009, pp. 164, 166) (undoubtedly, it is inscribed in the developing medicalization of social life).

And it is in this “positivism temple” (as Allan Mitchell calls it) designating the growing prestige of science (after: Ferre Alvarez, 2009, p. 173), that we see the body subjected to dissection. It is a body of a young, beautiful woman. Her luxuriant, glossy, wavy red hair falling towards the floor. Her skin is delicately cream-coloured, which does not make one think of a dead person. Noticeable is the lack of any bruises, traces of decay, the lack of subtlest allusion to the fact that she was recovered from a river. This is a beautiful, half-uncovered body caught in the anticipation of the lover. Without a doubt, it is a body full of eroticism, which has become “an integral part of the fascination with death” (Jordanova, 1989, pp. 174, 183). The naked drowned body, as depicted by Simonet, refers to the topos of the insane and obsessed with love Ophelia, but also to the representation of women as the untamed nature—sexuality which cannot be controlled and repressed. In the case of this painting we are not dealing with the perennial binarism present in the culture of the West. The naked body of the young woman is con-

trasted with the dressed body of the old man. One might even go on to claim that the female body is contrasted with the intellect of the man. The woman in an epitome of nature to which she has a greater affinity due to the female physiology and anatomy. The man constitutes a personification of culture and science. Looking at the painting, one could say that only the man can proceed to dissection—also the metaphorical one—of the woman. This painting, however, which is obvious for the viewer, does not relate to the realism of dissection. The simple activity of taking the heart out of the body—I will repeat once again—adds to the philosophical and moral symbolism of the work.

The anatomist, as suggested by L. Jordanova, who comments on Simonet’s painting, assumes the attitude of the Shakespearean *Hamlet* (Jordanova, 1989, pp. 174, 183), and his question regarding the existence of the heart—although undoubtedly ironic and saturated with hesitation—becomes an unexpected enlightening of the mind by the heart; both the literal one (one in the hand) and the transcendental one (symbolising spirituality and the extrasensory cognition). The voluntary death, in the current of the river, appears to purify the prostitute, as the baptismal water frees from sins. And despite the fact that—as Neil Holmstrom claims—the death of the (female) character is a consequence of individual, moral degradation of the subject,⁵ it also constitutes salvation and redemption.

This painting can be, then, described in a typical—for this period—dialogue of discourses. One of them was connected with the “scientific conception of death, based on the premises of positivism,” for which science becomes “a paradigm of social evolution” (Ferre Alvarez, 2009, p. 166). The second discourse was inscribed in the typical for this trend taste for mysticism and decadence as inherent in the reflection over the mystery for the body. Simonet’s painting constitutes a representation of “the antinomy of a society in which life and death, perdition and redemption defined the contradictions of the positivist crisis” (Ferre Alvarez, 2009, p. 181). At the same time, it constitutes a symbolic representation of (the ambivalence of) the relationship between men and women in that era.

⁵ Neil Holmstrom, *Exquisite corpses: The Depreciation of Female Health in Artistic Representation*, p. 1, a talk delivered during Making Sense Of Dying and Death conference, session 5b: Philosophies of Death on the 11th November 2012, Salzburg, Austria, available at www.inter-disciplinary.net/probing-the-boundaries.

3. Pandora

Pandora is a painting by John William Waterhouse (1986). It is a „cultural text” in a direct way, where the categories of knowledge, cultural gender and power are leitmotifs running through the whole painting and determining its significance. Let us take a closer look at the painting.

Night. A black wood. A beautiful woman with a calm expression is kneeling at the foot of the stone plinth. A grand beautiful golden box is standing in front of her. The glow of the box is illuminating her face and the alabastrine skin of her naked arms. On the right there is a flowing stream, an often-encountered symbol of the evanescence of life. The woman is no one else but mythological Pandora. In subsequent interpretations and rewritings of the myth, the box given to her as a dowry would transform from a simple clay vessel into a box which is presented as a fine piece of craftsmanship by Waterhouse. This box looks nothing like the clay bottle described by Hesiod. Pandora is opening the box in the thick wood which appears to be dense with meanings. The wood is a symbol of concentrated and unforeseeable difficulties and it is a recurring topos in fairy tales. However, there is nothing disturbing about the wood in the painting. The stream flowing next to Pandora and blue lights coming from the distance are showing that the bright day is nearby and that regular life is going on. Pandora has not lost her way. Just a few steps away, the wood ends. She can be seen at the moment of opening the lid of the box. The time has stopped and nothing augurs the approaching misfortune. However, those who are familiar with the myth know that all the evils of the world are about to escape. Pandora, similarly to biblical Eve, symbolizes the betrayal of one's will and trespassing against the ban which results in the end of calm and happiness. Mythological Pandora is the first woman created by Zeus out of earth and fire. She was sent to the world full of harmony and homogeneity which was populated solely by men.

Nevertheless, the Pandora myth can be also interpreted in a different way, especially in the context of the painting by Waterhouse. His Pandora seems to be opening a box full of knowledge, prompted by curiosity. This knowledge is tantamount to different discourses which introduce anxiety and chaos into the one-sided and ordered world. The world based on simple and binary schemes. Even though this knowledge

brings anxiety and is frequently unwanted, it allows for showing diversity and complexity of reality while not necessarily facilitating its understanding. Pandora's box symbolizes knowledge. It can be the knowledge about 'a woman,' but also about 'a man' which is not always uttered by a female voice in the discourse of femininity. Pandora is also a symbol of unconstrained woman's power. The beautiful Pandora is led by emotions—curiosity and desire—but at the same time she acts very logically: she makes a choice, opens the box which was given to her as a dowry. Is it possible to imagine someone who would not open it? This curiosity is dangerous but life-giving in nature—it gives rise to comprehension and transgression (what is more, if Pandora had not opened the box, then who would remember her a thousand years later?). The content of the box would always change according to the wishes of the authors of the myth's subsequent versions. However, anxieties and hope have always remained on the bottom of the box. The opening of the box is an act of losing control over what will happen, while the locked box used to give a feeling of stability and safety.

Several decades ago, American feminists started to claim that history had been written by men, about men and for men. As a result, they believed that the English word 'history' is nothing more but 'his story.' Thus, they put forward an idea of writing history by women, about women and for women—her-story. This might be the case with the myth about Pandora which so far could have been rewritten and reinterpreted by men. But how about reading it differently?

The opening of the box can symbolize new breakthroughs in science and social life, which initially might appear to be disastrous and appear to question the social order in a destructive way. However, such breakthroughs via numerous transgressions and (re)interpretations can give rise to different emancipating discourses of knowledge and power. Who knows, maybe after opening the box one of the thoughts born out of it led to the idea that even though femininity and masculinity are always inherently biological, they can give rise to a number of social constructs. Cultural gender, which is still considered by many as a plague and misfortune, for others opens the door to freedom, equal rights and empowerment. What seemed to be a disorder or even a misfortune from the perspective of old stereotypes is transforming into its opposite, namely, into the ability of defining a woman and a man and the ability of expressing the freedom to creating one's biography. Undoubtedly, this interpre-

tation of the Pandora myth is much closer to the intention of the authors. In the gender discourse we are often presented with the knowledge which is difficult, ambiguous and prone to multiple interpretations. This knowledge is inextricably connected with power, especially the power of understanding. Thus, the curiosity of researchers who frequently open the proverbial 'Pandora's box' leads to pluralism of discourses and to transgression. The knowledge offered in the myth about Pandora and Pandora herself are contradictory, ambiguous and incoherent. We need to bear in mind that Pandora literally means 'the all-gifted' or 'the all-giving'. She was endowed with beauty and sensuality by Venus, and with the gift of intelligence, eloquence and the power of seduction with words by Mercury.

Conclusions

Laura Mulvey introduced the idea of the "controlling male gaze,"⁶ which objectifies women depicted in art, to the conceptual apparatus of feminist critique. The woman as presented in art is a sexual object depicted by men and in adherence to male standards. Here, the active viewer—the man—is contrasted with the passive "object" subjected to inspection—the woman. This gaze is often associated with scopophilia understood as deriving pleasure, also the erotic one, from looking at naked female bodies presented in paintings (cf. Metz, 1982, p. 58). In the three analysed paintings, the gaze is of paramount importance: the curious look of Pandora, and the look of Charcot epitomising composure and authority, the look of the twenty men fixed on the patient writhing in hysterical convulsions or, finally, the penetrating look of the anatomist fixed on the heart taken out of the women's chest. (Blanche Marie, Pandora and the deceased prostitute remain passive objects of the gaze). There is also one more gaze, it is my gaze into the "women beyond control," one saturated with the knowledge about the era and the discourses of knowledge and power, one deprived of naivety of the random viewer; at the same time, however, fully aware of the fact that it is more ephemeral (momentarily solidified in this text) than the gaze of the artists, who immortalised the immensely suggestive and—to a great extent—

⁶ Laura Mulvey's essay is devoted to the cinema, however, I am convinced that her analyses are also applicable to painting. Mulvey, 1999.

timeless representations of femininity in their paintings. Sometimes looking at the old paintings, I have the feeling that their authors had a brilliant enlightenment of seeing through a mirror of time into the present day.

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