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## ***Othello* as a Tragedy of Interpretive Models**

### Abstract

This article argues that *Othello* dramatizes the struggle between two characters to control the interpretive possibilities of their world. These two characters are Othello and Iago. They both try to bring the inherent polysemy of the play under their control. This enables them to control the destiny of the other characters and their actions. The play cannot have two dominant interpreters. This is why the general and his ancient can only vie for supremacy. Each of them is ready to destroy anyone — including himself — to win over the other. To explain their strategies, I will make use of certain terms invented by the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco. Eco's semiotic categories will help us highlight the way in which Iago and Othello direct the processes whereby the different elements of drama are imbued with signification.

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OTHELLO  
Not I; I must be found.  
My parts, my title, and my perfect soul  
Shall manifest me rightly. Is it they?

IAGO  
By Janus, I think no.  
(1.2. 30–33)

Heaven (doth) truly Know(s) (It/that thou art False as Hell)  
(4.2. 37/8)

When Othello leaves for Cyprus, he entrusts his wife to Iago to keep her safe. He takes Cassio with him and leaves Iago behind. It is difficult to determine whether this shows that Othello does not trust Cassio to leave him with his wife or whether it reveals that the general does not believe that Iago is fit for the front lines. The motives of Othello are quite ambiguous. His actions and decisions are open to a myriad of interpretive possibilities. The same applies to Iago whose actions raise several questions. His hunting for motives makes them fluid. It appears that no single approach can demystify the ambiguous dramatic action. This may seem quite natural since “literature is, after all, a heterogeneous field” (Veivo, Ljungberg 2009: 2) that is open to different readings. Moreover, theatre does not rely “on one person’s voice” (Ubersfeld 1999: 192). A play therefore, is an open text that can be approached from different perspectives. However, “more than any one of Shakespeare’s major tragedies, *Othello* resists interpretation” (Greenberg 1994: 1). This resistance is led by the two major characters of the play, Othello and Iago. These two characters struggle to control and channel the interpretive possibilities of dramatic action. For readers, audiences and characters, it is impossible to decide whether we should believe Iago or whether we should trust Othello.

Iago never allows anyone to trust Othello. His sceptic attitude towards the latter is viral. Characters, readers and audiences cannot help questioning the decisions of the general and his choices. Whether the roles Othello assigns to his subordinates fit them or not is undeterminable. For instance, one cannot answer the question: Why did Othello choose Cassio

as his lieutenant in the first place? What merits does the new lieutenant have? What makes him a better soldier than the other candidates? It is impossible to answer these questions. The theme of martial merit, therefore, is shrouded in mystery. It represents a challenge to interpreters. Indeed, it is quite difficult to decide whether any character is warlike or not since there are no battles fought onstage. Even the Turkish threat is removed by a storm. As a result, Othello, the famous general of Venice, does not get any chance to participate in battles and prove his professed prowess throughout the play. This makes his staged actions seem unwarlike. Nevertheless, his martial merits are never questioned neither by characters nor by critics. This is due to the control he imposes on the polysemy of the dramatic action. This control aims at preserving his warlike image.

His rival, Iago, also endeavors to bring the polysemy of dramatic action under his control. Iago also claims to be warlike. This is the reason why he attempts to bring the multi-dimensional action of the play under his control. For instance, the villain lures Roderigo into believing that he is “bypassed for military preferment” (Bartels 2008: 167) by Othello. According to Iago, the general has chosen a “bookish” (1.1. 24) theoretician who knows nothing about war as lieutenant. He is unhappy because he is replaced by someone whose martial merits are inferior to his. Indeed, he asserts his own merits and questions the judgment of the Moor:

But he, sir, had the election,  
And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof  
At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds  
Christian and heathen, must be lee'd and calmed  
By debtor and creditor; this counter-caster,  
He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,  
And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient.

(1.1. 28–33)

He believes that he deserves a better place. He objects to Othello's decision and represents himself as a worthier lieutenant than Cassio. This image seems to be very powerful that it has not been questioned by critics. Some of them even adopt and defend it. For instance, Harold Bloom (1998: 434) maintains that Iago has “a sense of injured merit”. He believes that Othello has overlooked the services of Iago and his martial merits. This attitude is shared by Bartels who sees in this enough reason to make Iago vengeful. For her, as for Bloom, Iago's claim to martial superiority may justify his actions.

However, it is possible to prove that Iago is not as warlike as he professes to be. It is he that threatens Emilia with a sword to prevent her from uncovering his conspiracy. Gratiano is filled with contempt towards this unsoldierly act. He condemns Iago's cowardice saying: “Fie/Your sword upon a woman” (5.2. 223–24). The act of Iago is deemed deplorable by the Venetian envoy. By the Venetian standards, Iago acts cowardly. Another evidence of the ancient's lack of martial merit is his covert attempts to kill Roderigo. The first attempt is a case in point. Of the entire “host” raised by Brabantio, he chooses Roderigo to be his opponent. He knows that the latter will not fight him in earnest. Yet, he wants to kill him to cancel his debts.

Othello frustrates his plans when he answers the Magnifico's threats saying:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.  
 Good signior, you shall more command with years  
 Than with your weapons.

(1.2. 59–61)

The general is not afraid of men who do not know how to wield a sword properly. The conduct of Othello towards civilians is, therefore, different from that of Iago. Indeed, while the latter wants to kill the unsuspecting Roderigo, the former does not stoop to fight in street brawls. As a servant and representative of the Venetian state, Othello condemns the use of swords against civilians. According to him, the sword only becomes the battlefield.

Yet, even on the battlefield, Othello does not need to use his sword. "Heaven" intervenes to prevent him from fighting the Turks. On the way to Cyprus, the Turks are destroyed by a storm. Their destruction is witnessed from the shores of the Island by three gentlemen. One of them describes how the storm defeats the enemies of Othello:

News, lads! Our wars are done:  
 The desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks  
 That their designment halts. A noble ship of Venice  
 Hath seen a grievous wrack and sufferance  
 On most part of their fleet.

(2.1. 20–24)

The Turks will never appear after that. Cyprus seems to be sheltered from them by the elements. Othello is the last person to come Cyprus from the sea. He seems to close the watery gates leading to the paradisiacal world of the Island. Indeed, after his arrival, the Island remains outside the geographical until he succumbs to Iago's temptations. The Turks, therefore, are not the only ones that have lost their way to the Island. The Venetian too cannot reach it. The general is now the supreme ruler of the Island. His rule is absolute since his superiors in Venice are totally absent.

Despite being outside the geographical, Cyprus is an island of plenty. On the Island, there is an abundance of wine and sex. Cut off from the world and from trade, the Island is still able to satiate the appetites of its Italian masters. The Cypriots, however, are reduced to servitude and invisibility. They hardly play any role in the plot. They are nameless (first gentleman, second gentleman, etc.) and they have no distinctive features. Cyprus itself seems to be marginalized. The Moor of Venice no longer shows any interest in the affairs of the Island. The war preparations are abandoned and no watches are set on the shores. The General does not seem prepared for anyone coming from the sea be they allies or enemies.

This peace does not last. Indeed, as soon as the general accepts to put an end to the lives of Cassio and Desdemona, a trumpet resounds to proclaim a new era. Othello loses the government of Cyprus as the invisible shield that hedges the Island from the determinants of the real disappears. He is removed from office by the Venetian who come to Cyprus at the very moment he accepts to follow the instructions of Iago. Indeed, in Act Four Scene One, Iago takes control of the general. He determines the manner in which both Desdemona and Cassio should die. He instructs Othello to "strangle [Desdemona] in her bed" (4.1. 195) instead of poisoning her. He also asks him to allow him to kill Cassio.

Even before he reads the letter that commands him to return to Venice, the general seems to have lost his power. Othello starts to totally depend on Iago. Indeed, he is no longer able to understand what happens around him without the help of his new lieutenant. In Act four, Othello is startled by the trumpet that announces the arrival of Lodovico from Venice. Surprised, he asks Iago: “what trumpet is the same?” (4.1. 201). The latter readily answers: „I warrant something from Venice” (4.1. 202). The villain, then, instructs the general to look to the harbor. He looks to the direction of Lodovico to see his wife “with him” (4.1. 203). Iago has become the only source of knowledge for Othello. The general turns to Iago to find explanation for everything. The latter answers his questions and directs his senses.

Iago is usually described as an equivocator. According to R. M. Christophides (2009: 1), in the Renaissance, “equivocation was a way of lying by holding part of the truth”. He gives the example of Father Henry Garnet’s “equivocations before the King’s privy council in 1606” (1). Father Garnet does not give the entire story. He confesses something only to deny another. Iago’s equivocation follows the same principle but in a more complex manner. He plays on the interpretive possibilities of the narrative and of the theatrical. Indeed, he successfully channels the polysemy of the actions — and the other elements of the play. The Venetian villain dismisses certain interpretations in favor of others. His “ability to see the seemingly solid structures of a culture and identity — marriage, the authority of the Venetian state, what Sinfield might call ideology — as fictions that can be manipulated” (Wood 2009: 2) enables Iago to enmesh his victims. He manipulates them by directing their attention to a single side of the diamond by stimulating “the lattice of the modeling of consciousness which converts the random into the regular” (Lotman 2004: 150) through the power of narratives. This organizes the interpretive possibilities of what can be seen and heard into layers whose degrees of visibility and plausibility are not the same. Certain aspects of the dramatic action will, therefore, be more visible than others.

This can be detected in some critical readings of the play. Critics follow Iago when they endeavor to read *Othello* as a religious allegory. Like him, they try to impose a hierarchy on the different layers of the (possible) meaning(s) of dramatic action. This interpretive decision misses the complexity of allegory. According to the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, allegory is “a story or image with several layers of meaning” (Cuddon, Habib 2013: 21). Accordingly, “behind [the so called] literal or surface meaning lie one or more secondary meanings, of varied degrees of complexity” (Cuddon, Habib 2013: 21). Allegory, therefore, necessitates a model of interpretation that can account for the multifarious nature of the play’s interpretive possibilities.

In his book *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Umberto Eco distinguishes between two models of interpretation, the dictionary model and the encyclopedia model. According to Eco (1986: 2), “the current opposition ‘dictionary\encyclopedia’ is traced back to the classical models of the tree and the labyrinth”. For Eco (1986: 2), an encyclopedia is “a network” that does not have a beginning or an end. This does not mean that it differs from the dictionary model in terms of finiteness. Indeed, Eco (1986: 49) maintains that in the dictionary model, “[i]t is not strictly necessary to assume that the set of *definienda* be a finite one”. Still, “the meaning of linguistic expressions should be represented through a finite number of semantic primitives” (Eco 1986: 49). Therefore, adopting a dictionary model of interpretation usually entails that a hierarchy will be established between the different nodes of meaning.

As a matter of fact, to argue that in *Othello*, “religious ideas translated into apparently secular forms” (Gilbert 2001; 4), is to attempt to impose a tree model on the labyrinthine play. The play may certainly be read as a religious allegory. First, being an island of plenty, Cyprus may be read as an allegory for the Biblical heaven. Second, Iago is sometimes described as the “truest *diabolos* in all literature” (Bloom 2010; xv). Finally, the parallels between Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*<sup>1</sup> evince that the religious undertones (or overtones) of the play are both so obvious and so inspiring. However, to consider the secular as secondary to the religious is to give it the status of the semantic primitive. This status overlooks the importance of the secular in determining the interpretive possibilities of the play.

The role of the secular cannot be underestimated. For example, Political considerations play a crucial role in shaping the characters’ attitudes to religious issues such as the legitimacy of a marriage. Indeed, Edward Pechter (1999: 2) explains that “*Othello* focuses on marriage as a domestic relationship, where the most intimately private experience is nonetheless shaped by the pressures of society and political power”. According to Pechter, in *Othello*, the private is shaped by the public. For instance, the Turkish threat makes the voice of Othello louder than that of Brabantio in the Senate. His marriage with Desdemona would not be accepted and legitimized under different circumstances.

The political certainly plays a role in determining certain private relations in *Othello*. However, the private also shapes the public. When Othello, the guardian of civil tranquility, decides to allow Iago to have his way, the entire order collapses. This decision emanates from private considerations but it has political as well as cosmological consequences.

The decision of Othello is multifarious. It is private and public, religious and secular, “bestial” and “civilized” and microcosmic and macrocosmic. Othello assumes different roles when he declares his decision. His line “Good, good! The justice of it pleases; very good!” (4.1. 196) encapsulates the different roles simultaneously played. He acts as a husband, as a judge, as a general and as a governor. He wants to punish his wife for cheating on him as a husband. He approves the plan of his new lieutenant as a general. He also calls killing his wife an act of justice. He even gives it a cosmological significance when he says: “yet she must die, else she will betray more men” (5.2. 6). In this line, the general presents himself as the defender of mankind against what he believes to be the deceitful nature of womankind. The line also indicates that Othello has already decided to end his life. He will commit suicide whether he kills his wife or not, for he will no longer be the man she may betray. In other words, he will cease to be her husband. Before the plot of Iago is discovered, Othello believes that he knows the meaning of what he does. The virtuous nature of his acts are taken for granted by the general. In spite of their multidimensionality, the general sees his acts as emanating from his unwavering sense of justice and his justifiable anger.

When he discovers that he has been duped by Iago, Othello is thrown in a state of utter confusion and helplessness. Indeed, the Moor of Venice seems to be trapped. He screams in despair: “where should Othello go?” (5.2. 269). Othello seems lost both physically and meta-

<sup>1</sup> Apart from the affinities between Shakespeare’s Iago and Milton’s Satan which spilled much ink, Harold Bloom also points to the similarities between Othello and the God and Adam of *Paradise Lost* in his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998). There are other parallels that are quite significant such as the parallel between trumpet that declares the arrival of the Venetian envoys and the trumpet that announces that God will punish Adam and Eve in Milton’s Poems. The paradisiacal setting (Cyprus) that is sheltered from external violence is echoed in Milton’s paradise which Satan cannot conquer by force.

physically. He can neither know the nature of what he has done to Desdemona nor predict its consequences. His image is shattered. He can no longer enjoy the illusion of knowing what he is and what he does. To him, committing suicide is the only path to salvation.

The general kills himself in the middle of a story:

And say besides that in Aleppo once  
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog  
And smote him thus.

(5.2. 348–352)

He narrates how he killed a Saracen in Aleppo. He breaks the narrative with a word whose “ways of being” (Gadamar 2007: 134) are generically problematic. The word “thus” belongs to two generic orders, narration and performance. Before he utters this word, the military exploits of Othello seem to be kept offstage. They are confined to the Moor’s lengthy narratives and meta-narratives<sup>2</sup>. In the last scene, however, the storyteller breaks the boundaries separating genres and times. He links the narrative to the theatrical and the past to the present.

The suicide of Othello is an act of heroism. The Moor kills the one person who deserves to fall to his blade, the invincible Othello. His suicide, therefore, is a martial act. Othello’s stage actions may seem unwarlike but they are by no means unmilitary. He is comparable to other Renaissance legendary warriors like Tamburlaine and Hector whose swords are forever sheathed onstage. Indeed, we never see Othello fighting his inferiors on the stage. On stage, no one can match Othello’s skill. Therefore, he does not have to use his sword against anyone.

As a legendary warrior, Marlowe’s Tamburlaine also never fights onstage. We only see his enemies preparing for war then we see him celebrating his victories. He despises his unworthy rivals. Indeed, in the final scene of the second part of *Tamburlaine the Great*, the Scythian conqueror describes the flight of his enemies:

Thus are the villain cowards fled for fear,  
Like summer’s vapours vanish’d by the sun;  
And, could I but a while pursue the field,  
That Callapine should be my slave again.  
But I perceive my martial strength is spent:  
In vain I strive and rail against those powers  
That mean t’ invest me in a higher throne,  
As much too high for this disdainful earth.  
Give me a map; then let me see how much  
Is left for me to conquer all the world,  
That these, my boys, may finish all my wants.

(5.3. 115–25)

<sup>2</sup> Othello describes the effect of his war narratives on Desdemona and her father as he narrates how the former fell in love with him.

These lines show that Tamburlaine sees himself as part of a higher order. In fact, he sees the afterlife as another world that he should rule. Death will “invest [him] in a higher throne” (5.3. 121). His speech emphasizes his kingliness. He never ceases to be a conqueror. After death, he leaves the entire world for his sons to conquer. Accordingly, his legacy is the unfinished conquest of the world. It is an ambition rather than an achievement.

Similarly, Hector, the legendary warrior of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, does not lose his martial superiority even in death. The “unarmed” (5.8. 9) Champion dies at the hand of Achilles’ bodyguards. His death is not a defeat. It shames the murderer not the slain. Indeed, it puts the legend of Achilles in question. Hector dies leaving his legend untarnished. No one can defeat Hector. Indeed, it needs more than one man to kill the mighty Hector even if he is weaponless.

Othello follows in the line of Renaissance legendary warriors. Like the deaths of Tamburlaine and Hector, the death of Othello serves to foreground his warlike nature. Yet, the case of Othello is more complex than that of earlier Renaissance legendary warriors. Indeed, Othello’s martial merit should be seen through different standards. The Renaissance witnessed dramatic changes that affected the military domains. New organizational and operational techniques were implemented. This affected the nature of the Renaissance armies and their relationship with the state and the people. Indeed, “By the second half of the 17th century troops were beginning to be hired on a [...] permanent basis” (Gush 1975: 8). Therefore, the focus seems to have shifted from number and ferocity to organization and discipline.

As early as 1520, Niccolo Machiavelli capitalizes on the importance of training in the time of peace. According to him, “[a] well-ordered state should use military training in times of peace as an exercise, and in times of war as a necessity and for glory. The state alone should be allowed to use it as a profession, as Rome did” (2011: 13). This evinces that there is an inclination towards military professionalism in the 16th century. Machiavelli even recommends the creation of a national army. In *The Prince*, the Florintine political theorist advises Lorenzo De’ Medici thus: “if your illustrious house wants to follow those excellent men who redeemed their countries, it is necessary before all things, as the true foundation of every undertaking, to provide itself with its own arms; for one cannot have more faithful, nor truer, nor better soldiers” (Machiavelli 1998: 104).

Therefore, the recruitment and maintenance of standing armies became crucial in the seventeenth century. Their loyalty to the sovereign and the state and their professionalism were all that mattered. This shows that the age of medieval irregulars had come to an end. Professional soldiers who had no other business than war started to replace them. As a result, the realms of the civil and the military started to become separated.

In the play, this separation is ensured by Othello’s emphasis on discipline. The general forbids any kind of fighting between his soldiers and the civilians. He also punishes any lack of discipline among his subordinates. The punishment of Cassio is an example of this. The Lieutenant is dismissed for engaging in a street fight. Othello, therefore, plays the role of the gatekeeper who ensures the separation between the realm of the military and that of the civil. He is the janitor that keeps the temple of Janus closed to avoid bloodshed.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology*, Janus is “a Roman god of doorways, gates and entrances”. He belongs to the early Roman pantheon. Indeed, “Janus is a rare instance of a god who has no Greek counterpart” (2010: 289). He is the god of transition. Indeed, according to Roman legends, “Janus [...] presides over transitions from

one space to another and from one segment of time to another” (2010: 289). In the Imperial period, the closure of the temple of Janus “became a propagandistic symbol of peace and security” (Roman, Roman 2010: 289).

“The Janus prosopopoeia” dominates *Othello*. Indeed, there are many overt and covert allusions to the Roman god in the play. Iago’s reference to Janus in his “By Janus, I think no” (1.2. 33) is an interesting example of this. His “allegiance to Janus” (Dorval 2000: 2) can be understood in the light of the doubleness inherent to his language. In his introduction to the Cambridge updated edition of *Othello*, Norman Sanders (1994: 31) comments on the language of Iago and explains that “the parallelisms and antithesis, the symmetrically balanced sentences and phrases are an exact measure of the cool self-awareness that typifies all Iago says and does. It is synthetically the style of Janus the two-faced god by whom he swears”. Iago is aware that he is an incarnation of Janus. Like the Roman god, he is double-faced. Moreover, his words and acts have different significations.

Yet, he channels their interpretive possibilities to deceive the other characters. His conversation with Cassio in Act Four Scene One is a case in point. He manipulates the interpretive possibilities of the semiotic signs that accompany the conversation. He describes his scheme to the audience:

As he smiles Othello shall go mad  
And his unbookish jealousy must construe  
Poor Cassio’s smiles, gestures, and light behaviours  
Quite in the wrong [...].

(4.1. 98–101)

He prepares Othello to misread Cassio’s gestures by playing on his “frame of reference” (Eco 1986; 93). The “universe of discourse” (Eco 1986: 93) Iago creates through fantasies and equivocal (meta)narratives (dis)orients Othello’s reading of the visual. Manipulating the interpretive possibilities of the theatrical elements of the play through the power of the narrative and metanarrative enables Iago to fully control his victims. He controls their senses and their judgment and provides them with (false) interpretations to control their future actions.

In *Othello*, therefore, interpretation is a controllable act. Not anyone can assume control of this act. It requires power and art. Therefore, only the most powerful character and the most artful character of the play, Iago and Othello, can vie for control over the interpretive possibilities of the play. They both want to be the gatekeepers of interpretation but only one of them may assume this position. In the final act, the general has to lose his own life to redeem his self-image from the free play of interpretive possibilities imposed by Iago’s silence. This pyrrhic victory secures Othello’s interpretive superiority over Iago. He regains control over his self-image and his story. In his final speech, he instructs the Venetian envoys to give fair report about him saying:

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;  
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,  
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
 Drops Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
 Their medicinable gum.

(5.2. 337–47)

The repetition of the word “one” four times in these lines is an attempt to reconcile the opposing features of Othello’s character. The general endeavors to create the effect of a unified self. He also attempts to reposition himself within the dominant world view. Indeed, he refers to himself as an Indian who does not know the value of the pearl (probably Desdemona) he throws away. This image underlines his essentialist adherence to the European value system. He tries to emphasize the disparity between what he is and what he is made to do by Iago. According to these lines, Othello is essentially European but may act like “a heathen barbarian”. For example, he describes himself as someone who is “not easily jealous” but may be driven to the extremes of jealousy. Accordingly, his evil deeds do not emanate from his essence but from the malicious temptations of Iago.

As he moves from the narrative domain to the realm of dramatic action, Othello tries to reconcile his ‘essence’ with his acts to regain his illusionary sense of unified selfhood (his illusionary oneness with himself). His final act restores the sense of unity between Othello’s different modes of being. Yet, this sense of unity is based on the supremacy of the narrative. Indeed, this supremacy channels interpretation. By emphasizing his martial merits through narratives and metanarratives, Othello redefines his acts. This “narrative resolution of antagonisms” (Žižek 1997: 11) re-channels the interpretive possibilities of his actions. It reconstructs the image of Othello and helps him to restore his reputation. In order to achieve this restoration, Othello has to impose a dictionary model of interpretation on the play. This interpretive model gives him control over the play. Controlling and directing the interpretation processes determines the dramatic actions and their significance.

To conclude, *Othello* may be called a tragedy of interpretive models. Indeed, it dramatizes the struggle for interpretive supremacy between Iago and Othello. Each one of them tries to assume total control over the processes whereby dramatic action acquires significance. Accordingly, they vie for the role of the gatekeeper of interpretation. They both are ready for sacrifice in order to remain the sole generators of meaning about themselves and their world. Othello gives his life to (re-)establish the unity of his self-image while Iago chooses silence to protect his mystery. Both characters try to control the processes whereby they are interpreted. The hero and the villain use the power of narrative and metanarrative to create discursive universes that facilitate the imposition of a dictionary model of interpretation on the play. This is what the play dramatizes through the depiction of the struggle between the two major characters.

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