

Paradox & Disguise: The Homosocial Ending Of *Lady Audley's Secret*

D. A. Miller, in his article *Cage aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collin's The Woman In White*, offers an exceptional close reading of Collin's novel, sensation novels in general, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. Collin's novel is broken down in terms of gender and issues of sexuality in a way that is both articulate and engaging. Miller also uses the sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* to offer points about sensation novels and whether they offer cures for the homosocial desires in their Victorian characters. In her influential book about homosocial desires in Literature, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* argues that homosexuality falls on a line of “male bonding and power” called “male homosocial desire.” Homosocial desire “consists of an 'emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero and homosexuality’” (qtd in Kushnier 67).

When this paper was first published in the spring of 1986, surely it was very relevant to the growing field of Queer Theory and the incorporation of sensation novels into the Literary Canon, which should be commended and celebrated. Alas, twenty one years have passed, however, and other ideas, books, and theorists like Sedgwick and others in a variety of fields have come along to advance what Miller began in his article.<sup>1</sup> Miller argues rather passionately that sensation novels like the ones in which Collins and Braddon wrote end up, by the end of their novels, offering happy, hetro-normative endings:

What the narrative must most importantly get straight is, from this

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1 Lynn M. Voskuil, in her 2001 article *Acts Of Madness: Lady Audley and The Meanings Of Victorian Femininity*, lists other important literary critics working with Victorian England such as Mary Poovey, Catherine Hall, and Elizabeth Langland (612).

perspective, as much certain sexual and gender deviances as the obscure tangles of plot in which they thrive. In short, the novel needs to realize the normative requirements of the heterosexual menage whose happy picture concludes it. (118)

For the purposes of this paper, Collins will be put aside. Miller's discussion of Collins is vividly detailed and a rather excellent close reading. The scholarly critique of that can be done, however, in another paper by people with a more intricate knowledge of the novel and surrounding scholarship pertaining to it. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* requires much more close reading and examination. Miller's argument that sensation novels have to, at the end of the novel, meet a heterosexual, "straight" ending is wrong. There is certainly merit in what Miller is saying, and other sensation novels, which others believe the success of is due "to the fact that they touched upon one of the hidden ills of Victorian society: the repressed and unfulfilled lives of women" may adhere to their proscriptions, but *Lady Audley's Secret* is filled with disguises which build upon each other (Schroeder 87). The "straight" ending Braddon writes, in which Lady Audley is exiled to Belgium, dying in an asylum under the name Madame Taylor, and Robert Audley marries his childhood friend George Talboys' sister Clara, is far removed from any sort of celebration of gender normative behavior. Rather, it is another disguise to shield the reality of her characters. Of her characters who are, for the most part, all very interesting and deserving of close reading, Robert and Lady Audley are the most useful for a further close examination of the use of disguises in *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Due to the nature and standards of Victorian society, the “straight” ending that Miller is arguing exists does not, and most likely cannot, exist in Braddon's novel. Braddon's nuanced ending was even troublesome for her contemporaries in the theater. Theatrical productions of *Lady Audley's Secret* drew comparisons to Lady Macbeth. In her book *Shakespeare and The Victorians*, Adrian Poole describes the sentiment of a contemporary reviewer of a stage production of *Lady Audley's Secret*:

The nerves in which Lady Audley could meet unmoved the friend of the man she had murdered, are the nerves of a Lady Macbeth who is half unsexed, and not those of the timid, gentle, innocent creature Lady Audley is represented as being...her manner and her appearance are always in contrast with her conduct. All this is very exciting: but it is also very *unnatural*<sup>2</sup>. (111)

Lady Audley's behavior is something that has to be neutered and brought under patriarchal control. Voskuil writes that she “looked the part' of Victorian woman and wife but refused to 'be' it inside” (613). In the final volume of the novel, when Robert takes Lady Audley to see Dr. Mosgrave in Belgium, he concludes that she is not mad. Similarly to Lady Macbeth, Audley works for her own gain. However, since she is not mad, like Lady Macbeth, her unladylike, *unnatural*, behavior cannot be accounted for and must be contained. She is then kept in the asylum until her death.

The straight ending which Braddon incorporates into *Lady Audley's Secret* is yet another disguise in a novel filled with disguises. Lady Audley's decision to attempt to advance herself in society via deception is shrugged off by the psychologist Robert takes her to see in

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis mine.

Belgium. Her violent tendencies are what leads to her being put away in an asylum until her death under, yet another disguise, an assumed name. Robert, to become a masculine, heterosexual, and social, male has to solve his friend's George disappearance; he has to eliminate the double identity, the masked disguise, that Lady Audley hides underneath. Along the way other disguises, like Lady Audley's bigamy, the faux murder of her husband, and the illusionary inheritance of madness from her mother, will also be destroyed. To "cure" his homosocial desires, Robert marries George's sister Clara, who bears a striking similarity in appearance to him. The "cure" to his boyhood longing for George is a ruse. Robert has just projected his love to George to his sister. The fact that she is female and their relations are acceptable is irrelevant. This is another disguise, a facade wrapped in patriarchal fallacy in a novel filled with disguises.

In Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret*, a lot can be said of the way in which disguises are used. *Lady Audley's Secret* was "a popular, best selling novel of the Victorian era and a major example of the naughty sensation genre" (Felber 471). Lucy Graham, Lady Audley, is portrayed by Braddon as the "perfect" Victorian woman; a blond, childlike, doll. Despite her portrayal and appearance, Lady Audley is an opportunist and, for the majority of the novel, appears to be a murderer. She abandons her own child for a new life. A woman like the former Lucy Graham, according to Victorian norms, is supposed to be working hard in the private sphere to support her husband's work in the public sphere. Even someone with seemingly progressive, for the period at least, views about the role of women like John Ruskin thought women belonged in the private sphere. While arguing for the education of women, to benefit, of course, their spouses, in a lecture about the role and proper education of women, Ruskin states:

I believe, then, with this exception, that a girl's education should be nearly, in its course and material of study, the same as a boy's; but quite differently directed. A woman, in any rank of life, ought to know whatever her husband is likely to know, but to know it in a different way. His command of it should be foundational and progressive; hers, general and accomplished for daily and helpful use. (10)

Of course, in 2007, we find this view to be rather flawed, especially when appraised next to contemporaries like John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. While Ruskin should be praised for desiring the education of women, it is only as a means to an end for a patriarchal society bent on keeping women in the private sphere. Ruskin lectures about education for women, but it must be “differently directed” (10). A quick witted, engaging, woman like Lady Audley would have felt trapped by the place she had in society. On one hand, she was to be a perfect, doll like, submissive wife. On the other hand, men like Ruskin argued for her education to benefit their husbands. With this education, a woman like Lady Audley would become confused and disenfranchised with their place in society. The chaotic paradox women like Lady Audley surely would have felt is exemplified by Ruskin's patronizing lectures.

Lady Audley's ending cannot be “straight” because her ending involves the complete loss of identity and self. As the novel moves forward, it becomes plainly clear that there is only one person Lady Audley works her: herself. Instead of using her intellect to help her husband thrive like Ruskin desires women to do, she abandons him for a new life. The only way to stop her is to accuse her of madness, but not for the crime of selfish self assertion, but for the unexplainable unladylike behavior. At one point in the novel, as Kerry Powell notes, Robert

even refers to Lady Audley “as the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle” (Powell 112). Nevertheless, when Robert takes Lady Audley to Belgium to see Dr. Mosgrave, he believes that she is not mad:

...There is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that....She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position...When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that. (377)

Lady Audley is put away in an asylum not because of her wit or cunning, but because she is *not* insane. There is no explanation available to Victorian society for the behavior of a woman like Lady Audley. Dr. Mosgrave sees no problem with her actions up until he finds out about the violence, which is when he is able to diagnose her as insane and recommend her prompt removal from society. He changes his mind only after Robert fills him in about George and as Jonathan Loesberg, in his article *The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction*, puts it, “only after Audley adds his account of the disappearance of Talboys, and his own suspicions, is the doctor willing to diagnose insanity” (Loesberg 132). Miller agrees with this rationale as well: “Lady Audley is mad, then, because she must not be criminal. She must not, in other words, be supposed capable of acting on her own diabolical responsibility” (122).

The former Lucy Graham, Lady Audley, now is given the false identity of that of

Madame Taylor, another disguise, and spends the rest of her life in the asylum. At this point, Lady Audley is so completely disguised that the Lady Audley at the beginning of the novel has ceased to exist. At the end of the novel, after having played the role of villain for most of it, Audley becomes a sympathetic character because she has been diverted from the Victorian, ideal, disguise of childlike, dutiful, aristocrat, who even a supposed progressive like Ruskin would find to be unsightly, to a “fictionally named occupant of an insane asylum” (Loesberg 120).

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Section four of Miller's article discusses homosocial relations in sensation novels. Miller is particularly interested in *The Woman In White* again, but his argument can be applied to *Lady Audley's Secret* as well. He argues that there is a homosocial “cure” for male characters desires for other male characters in the endings of sensation novels:

Rather, as we will see, the novel puts its homosocial pathology in the service of promoting a homosocial cure: a cure that has the effect of a renunciation of men's desires for men only because, in this treated form, and by contrast, such desire exists in a “normal” or relatively silent state.  
(131)

It is easy to understand where Miller is coming from here, especially with his excellent close reading of *The Woman In White*. In regards to *Lady Audley's Secret*, however, his argument about a cure for homosocial desires being present in the text cannot be applied.

Without closer examination, it would very easy to apply Miller's argument to *Lady*

*Audley's Secret*. At the end of the novel, Robert Audley<sup>3</sup>, arguably asexual<sup>4</sup>, long thought to have homosocial desires throughout the text, marries Clara Talboys, George's sister. The final chapter of *Lady Audley's Secret* describes their future two years hence. Clara and Robert are married, Robert has become a popular lawyer in the public sphere but George lives with them and is “very happy” to do so (446). Robert may have cashed in his heterosexuality by marrying Clara, but George is still fresh in his mind and heart. Without violating contemporary norms, Braddon has allowed Robert to wear the disguise of heterosexual husband while also continuing his homosocial relationship with George. His marriage to Clara, a way to “purchase<sup>5</sup>” heterosexuality, is just another disguise for his true desires for her brother, and his friend since his school days at Eton College, George.

Applying Miller's argument to *Lady Audley's Secret* would be very short sighted. Braddon does not offer a cure for Robert in the final chapter of the novel. Robert enjoys German pipes and French novels. As Jennifer S. Kushnier notes in *Educating Boys To Be*

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3 Kushnier offers information on other scholars who have written about Robert include Richard Nemesvari. Lynda Hart has written about “the examination of the homosocial and homoerotic bond between men” (61). Ann Cvetkovich includes a chapter on *Lady Audley's Secret* in her book *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* which “investigates Robert's development from aimless son of the aristocracy...to full fledged member of the patriarchy” (61).

4 Schroeder notes that an argument could be made that in fact Lady Audley, mirroring Robert, is also asexual or even a lesbian. Schroeder uses Lady Audley's pronouncement to Sir Michael and Robert that she is not sexually interested in men (91). She also offers the example of Lady Audley demanding a “caress” from Phoebe “suggests both masturbation and lesbianism” (92).

5 Gayle Rubin's *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex* could be useful in offering more insight into the use of Clara as a means for Robert to “cash in” and become heterosexual.

*Queer: Braddon's Lady Audley's Secret*, Robert Audley marries George's sister Clara, who is a “near-identical” match of George (Kushnier 61). He wears a silk handkerchief around his neck.

As so far described, throughout the novel Robert is characterized as having effeminate tendencies and seeks to be in George's company quite often. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, he completely fails, which Kushnier points out, to notice his cousin Alicia Audley's interest, who “by no means despised” him:

It might have seemed to other men, that the partiality of a young lady who was sole heiress to a very fine estate, was rather well worth cultivating, but it did not so occur to Robert Audley. Alicia was a very nice girl, he said, a jolly girl, with no nonsense about her—a girl of a thousand; but this was the highest point to which enthusiasm could carry him. The idea of turning his cousin's girlish liking for him to some good account never entered his idle brain. (33)

Robert is not just uninterested in Alicia, but in women in general. He even harbors misogynistic feelings about women, remarking “savagely” at one point that he “hates women” (207). Sir Michael finds it “extraordinary and unnatural” for Robert to not fall in love with such a “pretty...and amiable girl” like Alicia (331). The only time Robert shows interest in anyone but George is when he begins to become involved with Clara. In regards to Clara, Robert “find(s) myself driven into a corner by another woman, of whose existence I had never thought until this day” (208).

The flaw in applying Miller's homosocial “cure” to *Lady Audley's Secret* lies in the historical context in which Kushnier describes the novel. During the Victorian period, many

schools condoned homosexual relations between its' students as long as the students came out of school “cured” of their homosexual desires. In the novel, Braddon designs Robert and George so that they are graduates of Eton College, a real college in England, where homosexual relations were prominent. An anonymous former student at Eton<sup>6</sup> from the 1850's could recall “a long list of childhood 'perpetrators' who would later run the country or become country gentlemen” (63). Homosexuality, for this anonymous child and, apparently, many of the high ranking figures in the British public sphere, is temporary and “cured” by the end of childhood. Robert may have left Eton many years before, but he has not left it entirely behind. He will do whatever is needed to return to his boyhood homosocial love.

Braddon's placement of Robert and George at Eton College is, as Kushnier writes, “central to the homoerotic issues” in the novel (61). In the novel, after Lady Audley pushes his friend George into a well, Roberts take it upon himself to search for the truth about his disappearance. His search to find George is a quest for the right and privilege of wearing the heterosexual disguise so he may “become” heterosexual like so many before him and during his lifetime (62). Like the mixed messages Lady Audley would have felt being a member of both the public and private spheres as a Governess and manager of her husband's household, Robert would have been confused by his homosocial childhood and the requirement to live a heterosexual lifestyle once in the public sphere. Braddon's use of Eton College as Robert and

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6 Eton was a real college in England. Kushnier cites Tim Card's book *Eton Renewed* to make her claims about Eton. Tim Card writes “...this homosexual phase...little matters provided heterosexual attitudes are later established....if heterosexual attitudes are later established....a homosexual 'phase' was condoned among school boys and in schools.” Educators did not seem to have any problems with homosexuality in their students as long as they “snapped out of” it when they entered the public sphere (qtd in Kushnier 63).

George's alma mater is clearly an attempt on her part to associate homosocial desires with her main male characters.

Even at the end of the novel, Clara has replaced George only because of her similar appearance. The more that George can be seen via Clara, Robert falls more in love with her. She has “brown eyes, like George's” (197). Kushnier points out that George and Clara's handwriting is even similar. She continues to argue that, because of Robert's desires for Clara, he has not given up on finding out what happened to George (68). Robert may have “purchased” heterosexuality by becoming involved with Clara, but their relationship is a ruse, a mask, to hide his ever present longings for George.

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In the Victorian novel, disguises were an essential part of the writing process. Due to the more prudish<sup>7</sup> contemporary standards in regards to all things of a prurient nature, and the elaborately constructed public and private spheres, writers like Braddon had to mask sexuality behind disguises. Dennis W. Allen, in his book *Sexuality In Victorian Fiction*, writes in a chapter about Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*:

The nineteenth century novel must always seek to speak the sexual “truth,” but this “truth” cannot be directly spoken. This is not only because, as we have seen, the sexual is linked to the chaotic or because it is intrinsically unrepresentable, disrupting attempts to textualize it.

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<sup>7</sup> Allen argues that Victorian society is not as prudish as it is stereotypically personified as. He notes early in his book that the disguises Victorian writers use are due to much more “than the impact of Evangelical Christians” and threaten larger standards and values of contemporary Victorian society (Allen 4-5).

Finally, the direct representation of the sexual would empty the text of meaning, for the text's significance, its "truth," depends precisely on a sense that "truth" remains hidden. (58)

Sexuality cannot be "directly spoken," therefore disguises like those Braddon creates in *Lady Audley's Secret* are required. Miller writes that sensation novels, to assimilate themselves with other forms of Victorian literature, offer so-called "straight" endings because of "its ultimately fulfilled wish to abolish itself" (118). While Miller is wrong about the ending of *Lady Audley's Secret* and other sensation novels, Miller might not be incorrect about other contemporary Victorian media. In regards to the previously mentioned theatrical performances, in Kerry Powell's *Women and The Victorian Theatre*, Powell writes about a few different 1863 theatrical productions of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Each production, one by Colin H. Hazlewood<sup>8</sup>, another by William Suter, and the other by George Roberts, offers a drastic interpretation on the novel, particularly Braddon's ending and the ultimate fate of Lady Audley. Powell writes of Hazlewood's interpretation:

In Colin H. Hazlewood's script for the Royal Victoria Theatre, where *Lady Audley's Secret* was staged in 1863, the diagnosis of Lady Audley's insanity is irrevocable-the Dramatis personae encircle her in the final scene, crying "Mad!" as the title character sinks to the boards, holding her head and emitting a death groan. (112)

In Suter's production, Lady Audley comes to the conclusion on her own that she is mad and "according to the stage directions, *laughs wildly, tossing up her arms-and then dashes herself to*

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8 More can be found about Hazlewood's production of *Lady Audley's Secret* in Rachel Fensham's article *On Not Performing Madness*.

*the ground*” (112). Robert's version has Lady Audley “swoon” and “declare herself at the final curtain to be 'a mad woman!'” (112).

None of these endings even comes close to acknowledging the nuances of Braddon's novel or Lady Audley in general. There is no mention of Lady Audley's sympathetic redemption at the end of the novel, or Dr. Mosgrave's diagnosis that she is *not* mad. Miller's argument about sensation novels could rather successfully be adhered to theater productions from the period of *Lady Audley's Secret* like the ones that Roberts, Hazlewood, and Suter produced. While Miller may, perhaps, be right about the theater, Miller is still wrong about sensation novels and specifically Braddon's novel.

Based on this evidence, it should be clear as reading the descriptions of theater productions produced of *Lady Audley's Secret* that the ending, with its masks and disguises, was not only needed but required. For anything that Braddon is saying in the novel to be apparent: the lack of insanity in Lady Audley, the mask and misogyny of the supposed inheritance of mania from her mother, Robert's lack of a “cure” for his homosocial desires for George, Braddon had to end the novel the way she did. Robert had to marry Clara, while losing his French novels and other frivolities. Without a concise diagnosis of insanity for Lady Audley, she has to be vanquished from the novel completely, and literally, by taking away her name, identity, and place in society.

Miller writes of the conclusion of *Lady Audley's Secret* that the novel “portrays the woman's carceral condition as her fundamental and final truth” (122). Lady Audley may have been imprisoned until her untimely death from a long illness, a *maladie de langueur*,<sup>10</sup> but she

9 Emphasis coming from Powell.

10 Even this diagnosis could be considered a disguise. According to a footnote in the Oxford edition of *Lady*

*Audley's Secret*, *maladie de langueur* is “an old term for anaemia; but the name could also be suggestive of

has not been tamed. Lady Audley continues throughout the text to work for only one person; herself. By denying her the excuse of mental illness, Braddon is allowing Lady Audley to have made the choices she made due to her own decisions and free will. She has a choice: she can acquiesce and become a good, feminine wife, much like Clara and Alicia do at the end of the novel, or she can work for her own private gains. An important detail in the novel that shouldn't be overlooked is the fact that Braddon even goes as far as to discredit Lady Audley's belief that she is mad because of the legacy of her lineage.

Lady Audley, no one can deny, is working out of her own free will. She has had choices all through the novel and consistently she chooses her own needs over everyone else. The carceral condition which Miller refers to may involve the bigger, patriarchal, misogynistic, society that Lady Audley belongs to, but even when imprisoned in Belgium, Lady Audley is still free. The contemporary reaction to her in theatrical adaptations of the novel show how troubling the ending may be for Victorians. Voskuil quotes a Victorian reviewer<sup>11</sup>, W. Fraser Rae, who “vehemently objected” to what he referred to as “unnatural embodiment of femininity” (614). This reviewer attacked Braddon “for not knowing that 'a woman cannot fill such a part'” (614). If Braddon had allowed Lady Audley to somehow escape capture or be victorious in the novel Victorian society might not have reacted well. She had to literally be removed from the text, the country, the manor, to rid the novel of her freedom. Once she is gone, Clara and Robert get mental distress and pining” (455).

11 A female reviewer, Margaret Oliphant, ridiculed sensation novels, but especially Lady Audley's Secret, for what she referred to as “a mismatch of 'conventional coverings'” and scolds Braddon “for creating an impostor” (615). Voskuil directs readers desiring more information on Victorian responses to sensational novels to *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883* by Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder.

together and Alicia, sadly, acquiesces to becoming the future Lady Towers. Lady Audley's freedom forces her to be so far removed from the text in the final chapter that her fate is only briefly mentioned, under her guise as Madame Taylor (445).

Also, when Robert is leaving Lady Audley at the *maison de sante*, in the aptly titled chapter *Buried Alive*, after her accommodations are explained to her, she asks to speak to him before he leaves. As they talk, Robert tells Lady Audley:

I have brought you to a place in which you will be kindly treated by people who have no knowledge of your story—no power to taunt or to reproach you. You will lead a quiet and peaceful life, my lady; such a life as many a good and holy woman in this Catholic country freely takes upon herself, and happily endures until the end. (391)

Lady Audley will have to “endure,” as Robert puts it, the quiet, uneventful, life that other women do in England. Her independence and quick wit has lead her to being punished by not only being removed from society, but also being forced to live the quiet life she was trying to escape.

There is nothing “straight” about the ending of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Miller does make a great point about Lady Audley's incarceration when he notes Lady Audley's secret “let out at the end of the novel is not, therefore, that Lady Audley is a madwoman but rather that, *whether she is one or not*<sup>12</sup>, she must be treated as much” (121). This is very true as evidence has shown.

This, nevertheless, is not a “straight” ending. There is no cure for Robert at the end of the novel. He may have become a lawyer and a father, but George also lives with him and

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<sup>12</sup> Miller's emphasis.

Clara. His desires for George may not completely surface, but there is no explainable way that a man with homosocial desires for another man can marry the man's sister, live with the man, and not still have longings for him. George still has a part at the front of Robert's heart, their days at Eton not entirely left behind. The ending of *Lady Audley's Secret* is a paradox: neither Lady Audley or Robert has been given a "straight" ending without a variety of repercussions. The constraints of Victorian society requires Lady Audley to either assimilate like Clara and Alicia do, or have oblivion. When Robert takes her to the asylum in Belgium, she tells him that "You have brought me to my grave, Mr. Audley" (391). Lady Audley is such a threat to Victorian society that she has to be removed from it. A straight ending cannot exist when a woman like Lady Audley is obliterated not because she is mad, but because she has freed herself from traditional Victorian gender norms.

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