

論 文

The Threatening Angle in *Bleak House*: Contradictions in Dickens's Characterization of Esther Summerson and Victorian Domestic Ideology

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ABSTRACT

Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53) deals with a number of contemporary Victorian social issues. They include the "woman question," a topic of great public interest at the time of its publication. Dickens engages in this debate about the nature and proper social role of women via his female characters, mainly the novel's heroine, Esther Summerson, and philanthropists including Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle.

Whilst previous criticism has often considered these two sets of female characters as conflicting, this essay demonstrates that they are similar in that they have the potential to seriously threaten masculinity. This essay examines how Esther, the novel's epitome of femininity and domesticity, emerges as threatening and damaging to masculine identity and authority. In doing so, it further reveals that Dickens's characterization of Esther discloses an unsolvable contradiction inherent in his views on the nature and role of women. This same contradiction is also present at the heart of Victorian domestic ideology.

1. Introduction

Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53) is a social problem novel which deals with a number of important contemporary social issues, including England's inefficient legal and political systems, unsanitary urban conditions and the condition of the poor. The novel also engages with the so-called "woman question," another topic of great interest at the time. Dickens discusses the question via two sets of female characters: the novel's heroine Esther Summerson, and the philanthropists as exemplified by Mrs Jellyby and her fellows.

These women have often been seen as conflicting in previous studies. For example, Robbins points out that Esther expresses "the opposite philosophy of social action" to Mrs Jellyby when she concentrates her efforts on the near rather than the far (214). Carens more fully explains this opinion by arguing that Esther represents the feminine model of social reform by devoting herself to her domestic duties. He claims that she articulates "the novel's antidote to such varieties of 'telescopic philanthropy'" as performed by Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle, who try to carry out their duties at the fringes of the domestic sphere, the periphery of the home or the homeland (122-129).

As these critics suggest, the novel's paragon of domesticity contrasts with the female philanthropists who ignore their domestic responsibilities in favor of their public duties. However, she is also similar to these women because she emerges as a potential threat to men. This essay will examine why she is threatening and damaging to the other sex. In doing so, it will also reveal that the paradox in the way Dickens characterized Esther mirrors a contradiction inherent to Victorian domestic ideology.

2. Philanthropic Women out of the House

Davidoff and Hall note in their famous study on English middle-class culture that domestic ideology became "the common sense of the English middle class" by the 1830s and 1840s (149). This ideology emphasized and idealized women's spiritual and moral capacity; moreover, it identified the home, the realm superintended by these spiritual and moral beings, as a microcosm of society and the foundation of social stability and order. This is explicit in Samuel

Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859):

The home is the crystal of society – the very nucleus of national character; and from that source, be it pure or tainted, issue the habits, principles, and maxims, which govern public as well as private life. The nation comes from the nursery. Public opinion itself is for the most part the outgrowth of the home; and the best philanthropy comes from the fireside.... From this little central spot, the human sympathies may extend in an ever-widening circle, until the world is embraced; for, though true philanthropy, like charity, begins at home, assuredly it does not end there. (330)

This middle-class ideology allowed and encouraged women to become involved in philanthropy at a time when female participation in activities outside the home was considered inappropriate. In order to justify their public charity, as Steinbach points out, women themselves maintained that "in their purposeful engagement outside the home they were not leaving the domestic sphere for the public one; rather they were widening the domestic sphere – through bringing its softening influence to others in need – or feminizing the public one" (45). Many charitable activities likewise operated on "the assumption that the home was an inherently moral and stable venue, and that charity was a matter of bringing domesticity – in which the moral and the material were inextricably intertwined – to those in spiritual and physical need" (ibid. 55).

In contrast, in *Bleak House* Dickens views female charitable workers as abandoning and neglecting their domestic duties. Mrs Jellyby, the most dominant, professional philanthropist in the novel, "devotes herself entirely to the public" and "has devoted herself to an extensive variety of public subjects" (49), and so has no time to fulfill her domestic role. This disregard for her proper role and responsibilities ironically transforms her home into a wilderness with "a marshy smell" (55) reminiscent of the African settlement of Borrioboola-Gha, whose development she busies herself with. This is also the

case of another charitable lady whose “neglected home” is “like a filthy wilderness” (482). Moreover, these women demonstrate their rejection of conventional feminine responsibilities, whereas real-life female philanthropists tended to show their loyalty to them. According to Esther, the paragon of femininity and domesticity, Mrs Jellyby always talks about her charitable projects “with a serene contempt for [Esther’s] limited sphere of action, not to be disguised” (772). Her friends believe that “[s]uch a mean mission as the domestic mission, was the very last thing to be endured among them” (482). Among others, Miss Wisk claims with great indignation that “the idea of woman’s mission lying chiefly in the narrow sphere of Home was an outrageous slander on the part of her Tyrant, Man” (482).

Moreover, Dickens represents women’s participation in charity as a means of transgressing the gendered boundaries of work. Mrs Jellyby boasts that she herself is “a business example” (381). Her companion, Mrs Pardiggle, also proudly calls herself “a woman of business” (127) and describes her visits to the poor as “charitable business” (126). Dickens censures their intrusion into the male, public world of business by describing Mrs Pardiggle’s visits as “much too business-like and systematic” (130). According to Prochaska, “[t]he charitable experience of women was a lever which they used to open the doors closed to them in other spheres, for in its variety it was experience applicable to just about every profession in England” (227). If so, Dickens correctly recognized that active female charity workers of his time would be pioneers for women entering the job market.

In order to claim that women’s charitable work violated the gender ideology of the separate spheres, Dickens also associated charity work with the women’s rights movement. They are most clearly connected when Mrs Jellyby took up “the rights of women to sit in Parliament” (987) after the failure of her Borrioboola-Gha project. Dickens also articulates the connection by highlighting the charitable women’s election campaigns, deridingly stating that charity ladies appear to be “always excited about canvassing and electing” and “constantly polling people by tens of thousands, yet never bringing their candidates in for anything” (123-124). In the same way, he depicts Mrs Pardiggle as engaging in “an exciting contest which

she had for two or three years waged against another lady, relative to the bringing in of their rival candidates for a pension somewhere” (129). He goes on to say that the contest involves “a quantity of printing, and promising, and proxying, and polling” (129). These descriptions are suggestive of the charity system termed “voting charity,” which Kanazawa explains was “prevalent throughout England during the early to mid-nineteenth century” (357). By highlighting the excited and vigorous involvement of women in this kind of charity, which was characterized by “following the general methods of a political election and, at the same time, allowing the right to vote to women as well as men” (ibid. 363), Dickens showed that these female charity workers were trying to break down gendered boundaries.

These portrayals of female philanthropists have often been understood as a sign of Dickens’s anti-feminism since John Stuart Mill, a defendant of women’s rights and future author of *On the Subjection of Women* (1869), showed his disgust with *Bleak House*. His aversion was evoked because he felt that Mrs Jellyby and her ilk revealed Dickens’s “vulgar impudence in this thing to ridicule rights of women” (298). Butt and Tillotson also state that the female characters are Dickens’s reaction against the contemporary trend towards female emancipation, as exemplified by Bloomerism (193-196).

However, the charity women instead seem to embody Dickens’s anxieties in the mid-Victorian period, “the heyday of female charitable activity” (Prochaska 37). As for worries of this sort, Elliott explains that philanthropic work inevitably brought women into conflict with male professionals “whose claim to authority came from their supposed expertise in diagnosing and treating society’s problems” (5). Among these professionals, she includes political economists, bureaucrats, parliamentary reformers and novelists such as Dickens, as well as doctors and clergymen (5). Moreover, Elliott argues that the satires of female philanthropists reiterated in Victorian writing reveal male professionals’ anxiety about “competition for authority in a newly conceived social sphere” and “the challenge that systematized female philanthropy posed not only to accepted gender roles and class relations but also to their own position as experts on social relations” (5). As a reformer who

endeavored to analyze and cure social ills mainly with his pen, Dickens felt the competition and challenge, and believed that female philanthropists threatened his social authority and identity.

We can see also Dickens's anxiety reflected in his depictions of the husbands of charity women. Dickens does not manifest his fears, but instead subtly implies the feeling by making their husbands struggle against them at home, which represents a microcosm of the larger domain. For example, Mr Kenge the lawyer portrays Mr Jellyby ironically: "He may be a very superior man; but he is, so to speak, merged – Merged – in the more shining qualities of his wife" (50). The legal term "merge," used here emphatically, means "to sink or extinguish (a lesser estate, title, etc.) in one which is greater or superior" (*OED*) and serves to sarcastically depict Mr Jellyby as inferior and submissive to his wife. In the house of the Jellybys, moreover, "Mrs Jellyby sat at the head of the table, and Mr Jellyby at the foot" (483). Their places suggest that the patriarchal order is reversed and in a state of collapse. A similarly female-dominated marital relationship is revealed when Mrs Pardiggle proudly says that in charity subscription lists, "[she] put[s] down [her] name first" while "Mr Pardiggle brings up the rear" (126) and that the husband throws in "his limited donation, under [her] direction" (126). Mr Pardiggle, like Mr Jellyby, is subordinated to his wife and lacks male authority.

Dickens believed that female philanthropists threatened the social authority and identity of male professionals who treated social diseases, including social novelists such as himself. He therefore rejected the idea that charity was an expansion of women's gendered duties and it meant taking domesticity outside of the home, the idea being to justify their participation in public charity. In doing so, Dickens was attempting to defend male authority and identity in the public sphere against "professional" female philanthropists like Mrs Jellyby.

3. To "Suffer, and Be Still" at Home to Be the Ideal Woman

At the time *Bleak House* was published, the "woman question" saw the role and nature of women vigorously debated by a variety of Victorian authors. One way Dickens answers this question is by

censuring the philanthropic women who actively engage in the public sphere. Another is his characterization of Esther, through which Dickens presents a version of ideal womanhood.

Interestingly, Esther's characterization seems to be based on contemporary conduct books, especially those by Sarah Stickney Ellis. Ellis, "one of the first and certainly one of the most influential contributors" (Twycross-Martin 110) to the debate on the woman question, confined women exclusively to domestic roles in her works, which included *The Women of England* (1839), *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Mothers of England* (1843) and *The Wives of England* (1843). Dickens refers to these volumes when he calls crazed philanthropic women "the Women of England [and] the Daughters of Britain" (123). This ironic denomination sounds like Dickens approves of Ellis's ideas about female domesticity. He also seems to support her definition of true womanhood in the way he portrays Esther.

Ellis defines true womanhood via her series of conduct books. Above all, she asserts that it is a woman's duty to serve for the happiness of others. This female duty is carried out when women faithfully perform domestic duties such as nurturing and caring, which are ennobled by "the self-sacrifice, the patience, the cheerful submission to duty" of women (*The Women* 42). The feminine duty also stems from "the disinterested kindness of a generous heart" (*ibid.* 16). Serving and trying to make others happy is not only the purpose of women's lives, but the natural and best way to make themselves happy. Ellis thus argues that women have the nature of "seeking [their] own happiness only in the happiness of others" (*ibid.* 91) and they become still happier by "increasing the happiness of those around [them]" (*The Daughters* 54). A similar argument is used with regards to love: "To love, is woman's duty – to be beloved, is her reward" (*ibid.* 12). Notice that while underscoring kindness and self-sacrifice as components of true womanhood, Ellis repeatedly stresses the virtue of selflessness or self-denial. In her opinion, it is the true woman "whose highest duty is so often to suffer, and be still; whose deepest enjoyments are all relative; who has nothing, and is nothing, of herself" (*ibid.* 126).

Esther, as Graver argues, mirrors the ideals of womanhood as promulgated by Ellis in a bid to

“compensate for the fault of her birth” (6-7). As a young illegitimate child, Esther questions her godmother Miss Barbary about her origin. She is told, “Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers” (30), and she is brought up to believe that “[s]ubmission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it” (30). Esther instead vows to “be industrious, contented and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to [her] if [she can]” (31). At many points in her life, especially when she is in crisis, Esther reminds herself of this resolution. She also sometimes admonishes herself by telling herself that it is her duty “to act with a cheerful spirit and a grateful heart” (103) shaking housekeeping keys. She strives to live up to the image of the kind, self-sacrificing and selfless domestic angel celebrated in Ellis’s conduct books. By modeling herself on this example of perfect womanhood, she transforms herself from a child born with “a shadow” to a woman praised as “a pattern young lady” (958) and a “bright example” (964), that is, a woman with desirable, exemplary womanliness. Importantly, although Esther’s oft-repeated resolutions and admonitions are less self-destructive and more positive than Miss Barbary’s precepts, what underlies them is the same anxiety over Esther’s inherited sin as a bastard. For Esther, Ellis’s books are tantamount to manuals on how to rectify her inheritance of stigma.

Moreover, Esther emulates Ellis’s ideal woman as part of her strategy to persuade Victorian middle-class society to accept her. If we study Esther with a psychological approach, as Zwerdling demonstrates, Esther can be said to dramatize “a detailed life pattern that records both the long-range effects of this childhood trauma and the stages of an attempt to triumph over it” (430). However, focusing on the cultural and social context allows us to read Esther’s life as a process whereby a social outcast secures entry into middle-class society. Esther’s mother Lady Dedlock rebels against Victorian middle-class gender and sexual norms by engaging in extramarital sex, and represents a sort of fallen woman who ideologically acted as the direct opposite to the angel in the house. Her bastard is the legacy of her social and sexual deviation, and therefore unacceptable to members of Victorian middle-class

society. However, Esther finally succeeds in escaping her status as a social outcast when she becomes the wife of the middle-class physician Woodcourt and the mother of his children. Revealing his love for Esther, Woodcourt says, “when I returned [to England],...[I] found you newly risen from a sick bed, yet so inspired by sweet consideration for others, and so free from a selfish thought” (937), and compares her to “the Angel” (938). These words imply that Esther is able to obtain the desirable position of a middle-class woman because she behaves like an angelic woman who is to be “suffer and be still” by sacrificing herself for others. Esther exemplifies the ideal of womanhood as propagated by Ellis, and Dickens espouses this ideal by giving Esther the most stable and idealized feminine social status despite her mother’s social and sexual deviation.

4. The Subversive Influence of the Angel in the House

Esther, an example of Ellis’s womanhood, is referred to as “the very touchstone of responsibility” who is “intent upon the perfect working of the whole little orderly system of which [she is] the centre” (603). This “little orderly system” is constructed and maintained by her self-sacrifice within the domestic domain. Esther herself describes this system as the “circle of duty”: “I thought it best to be as useful as I could, and to render what kind services I could, to those immediately about me; and to try to let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself” (128). Importantly, as many critics have claimed, *Bleak House* argues that this circle of feminine duty expands itself beyond the restricted domestic sphere and has the potential to remedy social ills and regenerate society. For example, Dunn states that Esther succeeds in her challenge to “transcend her rôle as efficient housekeeper and bear the task of revitalising a moribund society,” finally emerging as “the focal point of the only redemptive hope [Dickens] can foresee in the *Bleak House* world” (165). Campbell likewise believes that Dickens presents the domestic happiness generated by Esther as “the only hope for salvation in what was looking to [Dickens] increasingly like a dark time” while Esther herself serves as “the benevolent principle and the motive power for the round of domestic existence” (152-153).

Esther’s widening circle is reflective of her moral

influence, the exertion of which Ellis sees as a significant part of the female mission and responsibility. Ellis tells English women that it is up to them to improve the moral worth of the nation: “You have deep responsibilities, you have urgent claims; a national moral wealth is in your keeping” (*The Women* 13). In her opinion, this mission can be carried out when women use feminine moral influence on others within “the familiar scenes of domestic life” (ibid. 2). In short, this mission is conducted inside the feminine domestic sphere. However, it is also defined by its expansion beyond the sphere: “the present state of our national affairs is such as to indicate that the influence of woman in counteracting the growing evils of society is about to be more needed than ever” (ibid. 55).

The insistence upon the importance of women’s influence culminated, as Newton states, in Ellis’s declaration in *The Women of England* that “women’s influence is social in nature and that it is in some ways more socially significant than the power of men” (3). It was also elaborated in a never-ending series of tracts and books in the 1830s and 1840s, especially those written by women. One example of them is *Woman’s Mission* (1839), a conduct book popular among the Victorian middle classes written by Sarah Lewis, another influential domestic ideologue. Stressing the differences between men and women, Lewis argues that women are the moral center of the household and their moral influence has its effect on the wider domain. She thus asks her female readers to work as moral agents: “That the sex, characterized by such noble moral development (sic), is destined to exercise no unimportant influence on the political and social condition of mankind, we must all believe” (10).

The repeated claims about a feminine mission and associated influence stimulated considerable discussion, which was often satirical and hostile. For example, an article entitled “A Hard Problem” in *The Satirist* (1844) introduces a book called *Can Woman Regenerate Society?* and states that the book’s title puts forth a “pithy question” (18). The article then satirizes assertions that women can contribute to the regeneration of society:

A rather doubtful problem is involved in this query, and until the powers of women

are fairly tried in the way of “regeneration,” no very decided answer can be given. The world understands so much more about the “generating” qualifications of the other sex, that considerable scruples may be entertained respecting any other kind of generation. It is at any rate an easier job to populate than to improve society, which is, we presume, the desideratum glanced at. (18)

Punch’s article “Woman and Her Interrogative” (1844) likewise complains that the question “Can woman regenerate society?” is “one of the queries which have now beset us for months past” (129). It sneers at the pretensions of women’s influence as social redeemers: “as Woman will continue to put forth her interrogatories, and that in a manner sufficiently indicative of her own confidence in her powers, we know not whether Mrs. Eve ought not to have a trial” (129).

Like the writers of these articles, Dickens seems to have objected to the valorization of women’s influence, as seen in his satire on female philanthropists. As discussed above, Dickens rejects women’s demands to participate in the field of social reform with the purpose of expanding their feminine virtues and domestic duties. This suggests that it was hard for Dickens to accept Ellis’s claim that it was the woman’s mission to regenerate society.

Nonetheless, Dickens favorably depicts Esther fulfilling this mission. There is thus a contradiction in the way Dickens treats this issue. Moreover, this contradiction leads to another contradiction in the characterization of Esther. Esther follows Ellis’s conventional ideal womanhood, which Dickens endorses by granting Esther the greatest reward possible for a middle-class woman, that is, the position of wife and mother. On the other hand, she undertakes women’s social mission of expanding influence as advocated by Ellis, which is problematic and to some extent provocative towards Victorian gender ideology. Esther embodies both of these ideas of Ellis, even though one is creditable and conservative and the other unacceptable and subversive.

These contradictions arise largely because

Dickens was an advocate of Victorian gender ideology as a middle-class man and a moralist as a social reformer. As many critics have claimed, Dickens espoused the Victorian ideal of angelic womanhood (Blain 146; Slater 301-338). This enabled him to validate feminine exclusion from the public sphere, but at the same time required him to acknowledge women's moral superiority which upheld the ideal image of women. On the other hand, Dickens was a social reformer who offered moral solutions to social problems. George Orwell wrote that "[i]t seems that in every attack Dickens makes upon society he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure.... [It is] [u]seless to change institutions without a 'change of heart' — that, essentially, is what he is always saying" (728). As a natural result of this moralistic perception, Dickens was driven to give women a vital and central role in reforming society in his social problem novels as he ideologically defined them as possessing moral authority. The nearer a woman reaches to the ideal of the domestic angel, the more she seems needed and the more pivotal she becomes in the larger sphere of society. The paradoxical nature of the relationship between women's domestic seclusion and their social significance led Dickens to contradict himself when he characterized Esther.

Interestingly, the same paradox is discernible in Victorian domestic ideology, which was codified by Ellis as "the great exponent" (Gleadle 51). Davidoff and Hall demonstrate that the domestic ideology was "riven with contradictions" (450). One of these contradictions was inherent in the way the ideology prescribed women's nature and their role. The ideology emphasized women's spiritual and moral capacity, which was then tied with their incapacity to deal with the rough-and-tumble public sphere. This legitimized the circumscription of the women's sphere to the home. On the other hand, the home guarded by domestic angels was identified as the basic unit of social stability and order. This notion prompted the insistence that women should have power over social issues, which reflects Ellis's claims regarding the social significance of expanding feminine influence. While Ellis did not adopt the idea of the feminine influence as a further claim to the rights of women, mid-Victorian feminists used the idea as a means of

arguing that "women needed and were entitled to a larger public role" and "[t]heir qualities and merits...were such as were vitally needed in public organizations and in the state" (Caine 89).

Esther's influence has the potential to expand beyond the domestic sphere, as argued by Ellis, Lewis and others, and so has the ability to seriously threaten men. As Moers states, every woman in the novel is "a figure of force" whatever her moral or social role, and Esther is no exception (16). Although Moers does not clearly explain that Esther's influence is damaging, it does victimize men, especially Woodcourt, Esther's future husband.

Woodcourt first appears in the novel as a young surgeon who observes a dead body "not unfeelingly" and with "professional interest" (168). He is then described as a medical gentleman "with much solicitude and compassion" (232) as well as "[t]he kindest physician in the college" (233). Esther's evaluation is that "he was, night and day, at the service of numbers of poor people, and did wonders of gentleness and skill for them" (277) and that "he seemed to be very clever in his profession...[and] his kindness and gentleness to Miss Flite were above all praise" (471). These descriptions stress Woodcourt's spiritual and moral merits, as well as his professionalism. The merits are essential components of Dickens's ideal of manhood, so Woodcourt can be put in "the social category of the gentle man," which, according to Furneaux, Dickens tried to expand using gentle, nursing male characters (185).

However, Victorian gender ideology prescribed that in terms of the affective merits, women were authoritative and superior to men. Dickens accepted this ideological view on women and integrated it into the novel. So when Dickens as usual proposes a moral solution to social problems described in the same novel, Esther — the novel's paragon of feminine virtue — appears to be positioned as the sole center of power able to heal a diseased social body. This is the case even if Woodcourt is as generous, compassionate and self-sacrificing as Esther. Indeed, previous studies have designated Esther as "the focal point of the only redemptive hope" (Dunn 165) or "the only hope for salvation" (Campbell 153). In these interpretations, Woodcourt is deprived of his authority by Esther and subjugated to her. In this way Woodcourt reflects

aspects of Mr Jellyby, who is “merged – Merged – in the more shining qualities of his wife” (50).

5. Conclusion

In *Bleak House*, Esther conforms to the ideal version of womanhood presented by Ellis, a representative of Victorian domestic ideologues. When Esther displays aspects of the ideal womanhood, she contrasts with female philanthropists including Mrs Jellyby who overtly ignore their domestic duties and reject the notion of gendered separate spheres. At the same time, Esther is similar to the women as she also has the potential to seriously threaten men. As with Ellis’s idea about feminine influence, Esther’s expanding circle of duty turns out to be the power needed to remedy social ills and regenerate society. Similarly to the female philanthropists, Esther can thus emerge as a threat to the authority and identity of men who diagnose and treat social problems.

Dickens was concerned about the feminine social influence as asserted by Esther. The middle-class world of Dickens’s time was dominated by domestic ideology. This ideology endorsed the idea that it was women’s mission to expand their feminine influence and regenerate society, and consequently justified women’s participation in public charitable activities which embodied this mission. As a result, men who devoted themselves to curing social ills were forced to face the danger of being deprived of their masculine identity and being subjugated to the domestic angels. As one of these men, Dickens keenly realized the danger and tried to defend his male identity and authority. He therefore condemned female philanthropists, and rejected the idea that their public activities had any legitimacy. In other words, Dickens’s denunciation of charitable women reveals his anxieties about the influence of women.

However, it was beyond Dickens’s ability to convincingly invalidate and reject the social significance of women as a threat to masculinity. Dickens espoused the gender ideology of the domestic angel and idealized women as spiritual and moral beings to circumscribe them within the home on one hand. On the other hand, he was a social reformer who believed that morality was the key to the improvement of society. The more faithfully women exemplified the domestic angel, the more Dickens was

forced to see their influence as being needed in the larger sphere of public society. This paradoxical view of women’s nature and role is reflected in the characterization of Esther as the heroine of his social problem novel, and limits his opinions when it comes to resolving the challenge the feminine threat posed to men. Moreover, the contradiction was a formidable issue. This is because it was the same contradiction encountered in the Victorian domestic ideology, which promulgated the notion that the home superintended by domestic angels was the foundation of social stability and order.

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