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"The Only Person Who Saves Me is Me": How *Once Upon A Time* is Challenging Traditional

Gender Roles

Fairy tales have been around for hundreds of years. They have been changed and adapted into many different versions, but one thing that has been consistent throughout is the gender roles that they display. During most of these stories lifetimes, they have consistently shown women as the weaker, less capable sex. In a critical analysis of gender equality in fairy tales, literature expert Pierre Ruterana contends that "…in fairy tales males characters have been portrayed as…strong, potent, and powerful, with mastery themes such as cleverness and adventure, whereas female characters were portrayed as impotent, weak, passive, naïve, even sweet, with second sex themes such as beauty, gentility, domesticity, marriage, emotions, motherhood, and so on" (89). One doesn't have to look far to see that Ruterana is right. Dating back to their earliest versions, most fairy tales feature female protagonists who sit like a bump, albeit a beautiful one, on a log while a dashing prince comes to their rescue. In more modern interpretations, however, that trend seems to be changing. More and more fairy tales are beginning to challenge traditional gender roles, and the ABC TV show *Once Upon A Time* is at the forefront of that movement. The show has been on the air since 2012. *Once* follows protagonist Emma Swan as she discovers that her parents are Snow White and Prince Charming. The show explores the backstories of most every fairy tale character, though it may not be the

story that people are familiar with from the Disney movies. Specifically, the female characters differ drastically from their predecessors. They are strong-willed, empowered, and smart women who defy expectations at every turn. Analyzing the classic and *Once Upon A Time* versions of Belle from *Beauty and The Beast*, and Red from "Little Red Riding Hood" will display how the show has challenged or reversed traditional gender roles and the importance of the change.

Effectively analyzing what makes *Once Upon A Time*'s characters so interesting starts with looking at the tradition of gender roles in fairy tales. Since people have been adapting fairy tales for generations, they have permeated our society and the gender roles of any given time period are reflected in their pages. The literary tradition of fairy tales started in the 1600s with Charles Perrault, who wrote stories where the women belonged exclusively in the home. Over the next two hundred years, the Brothers Grimm and other classic authors carried on this trend. For almost three hundred years, women experienced very little change in their station in society, which can be seen in the literature written at the time. It wasn't until much later that the role of women changed at all. Even so, the change was not drastic or impressive.

In the their analysis of feminist fairy tale structure authors Leslee Kuykendal and Brian Sturm, two experts in the field of library science, discuss the later evolution of women in fairy tales. Andrea Dworkin shows that in the 1950s and 60s there were two types of women in fairy tales, "There [were] the good women…There [were] the bad women…The good women must be possessed. The bad women must be killed, or punished… [the ending of these tales] tell us that happiness for a woman is to be passive, victimized, or asleep" (QTD in Kuykendal 39). In this time period, as men returned from war, women who had gone to work in the war effort were encouraged to go back to domestic life. The stories reflect society because the young women in the stories who were domestic, genteel, and motherly are revered and saved. Meanwhile, the strong, independent women are the evil characters who must be destroyed. Later on, in the 1970s

and 80s, the feminist movement changed and so did the literature. Kuykendal and Sturm explain that the attitude became "women were naturally separate from men and rightly superior" (39). The literature at the time displayed that. *The Paper Bag Princess*, published in 1980, was one of the first where the girl saved the boy and skipped into the sunset, still single and independent. While this definitely represents a huge step toward dismantling stereotypical gender roles, Kuykendal and Sturm argue that fairy tales need more than role reversal to really impact gender norms. They cite a study done right after *The Paper Bag Princess* was published that showed that children did not view the main character, Elizabeth, as a genuine hero. It showed that "while children admired strong female protagonists, these were not the characters they wished to emulate" (QTD in Kuykendal 40). They emphasize that for fairy tales to really impact society, they need to be less about role reversal and more about female agency. This is where *Once Upon A Time* enters the world of feminist fairy tales. While the characters may have the same names as their classic counterparts, that is about where the similarity ends. The women of *Once Upon A Time* are not just reversed versions of their male equivalents, but independent entities entirely. This makes them exponentially more effective than their predecessors as feminist fairy tales.

Analyzing the evolution of characters from useless to useful starts with looking at the past of one of the most popular fairy tales ever written. *Beauty and the Beast* has a universal appeal. The story of kind, gentle Belle taming the fierce beast into a marriageable prince is one that all young girls love to read. Despite its popularity, Beauty and the Beast is not exactly revolutionary in terms of breaking gender stereotypes, especially not in its original form. The traditional version of Beauty and the Beast was written by Jeanne-Marie Leprince De Beaumont in 1756. In this story, Beauty is a beautiful and properly behaved lady. It is evident from the beginning that her beauty will be paramount to almost everything else in the story because it is

literally her name. Where her sisters are vain, pretentious, and arrogant, Beauty is humble, kind, and loving. She is better than her sisters in every possible way. Instead of being defined simply as "beautiful," Beauty has many more redeeming qualities. In fact, she has only redeeming qualities. The character that de Beaumont writes is completely perfect. She is unrealistic and utterly lacking in faults of any kind. Beauty never has a moment of jealousy, insecurity, or internal struggle. She is almost inhuman in her ability to remain good and kind. To add to her list of virtues, Beauty is more than willing to sacrifice herself to save her father when he gets in trouble with the beast. While this is an act of bravery and sacrifice not often displayed by women in fairy tales, it is just another standard of perfection that Beauty meets. She is the ideal daughter, giving herself up for her father. De Beaumont's Beauty is incredibly passive and apathetic. When the father asks his daughters if he can bring them anything, Beauty asks for a rose; she does not want a rose, but "she did not want to set an example that would make her sisters look bad" (34). Beauty is incapable of saying no. Before she leaves for the Beast's castle, she tells her father that he should allow her sisters to marry and that she "forgave them the evil they had done her" (De Beaumont 36). Her sisters were abusive, but Beauty never once stood up for herself. There is strength in forgiveness, but there is also strength in being more than an emotional punching bag for people. Beauty is not able to defend herself because it would be a break from the unfailingly kind and patient character she is. These qualities are magnified when Beauty goes to live with the Beast. She treats him with the utmost respect and patience, and the Beast treats her similarly. Because the Beast provides for Beauty's basic needs, it is easy to forget that Beauty was essentially kidnapped. She owes him nothing but acts as if she owes him everything. When Beauty stays away from the castle longer than planned, she is wracked by guilt. She says, "If I made him unhappy, my lack of appreciation would make me feel guilty for the rest of my life" (De Beaumont 40). Beauty feels bad for leaving the monster who held her captive. This shows

that she is not so much a character as a doormat. The action of the story is done to Beauty, not by Beauty. Beauty takes initiative only when the Beast asks her to marry him, and she refuses. Yet, in the end, she rushes back to him and promises she will never leave. He then turns into a beautiful prince and everything ends happily, but the fact remains that Beauty is a pretty face with no substance. She is never assertive or independent. She has many admirable qualities, but she isn't an excellent role model for girls today. Given the time that this story was written, it is understandable that Beauty is so perfect but so spineless.

Despite being produced over 200 years later, Walt Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* didn't produce a more empowered character. Disney's Belle is almost identical to her predecessor. She has the same loving heart, the same infatuation with reading, and the same lack of character development. She takes more action, but is completely stagnant in terms of personality and growth. This evolution, or lack thereof, is worth mentioning as it is one of the most popular versions of the story. There is little to analyze in terms of content because Beauty and Belle are essentially the same character, written 200 years apart.

Conversely, *Once Upon A Time's* Belle is altogether different from her previous versions. She is introduced in the fairy tale world during the twelfth episode of the first season. Belle does have certain characteristics in common with her classic counterparts. She is beautiful and just as loving, humble, and patient. When we first meet her, she is also making a large sacrifice. Her father's kingdom is stuck in a war and they are asking for the help of Rumpelstiltskin. He agrees to help them win the war if Belle comes to live with him as his servant. Her father tells Belle that he won't let her go to which she replies, "No one decides my fate but me" ("Skin Deep"). This starts a long saga of Belle being exactly the opposite of passive and quiet. She takes action whenever she can. She goes to live with Rumple, and soon learns that he was not always a monster. Not long after she starts living there, a thief breaks into the castle. Rumple captures and

tortures him. Belle won't stand for that, so she lets the thief go. When the thief asks her why, she says "I couldn't let this happen. I will stand up to the beast that he can be" ("Lacey"). This sentence sums up so much of Belle's character. She says "can be" meaning that she knows this isn't the only side of Rumple. She is a kind person, much like her earlier versions, but this Belle will stand up for what she thinks is right. She is determined to make Rumple a better man. Instead of just sitting and hoping for it to happen, she takes initiative. Of course, when Rumple discovers that Belle let the thief go, he is enraged. They go after the thief, but Belle spends the whole time telling him that she truly sees the good in him and that "[he] is not as dark as [he] wants people to believe" ("Lacey"). Instead of feeling guilty or bad about her actions, she makes Rumple see the fault in his actions. She doesn't let him off the hook for his behavior even though she sees the kind side of him. This makes her a strong character who stands up for what she believes in. In the end, Rumple doesn't kill the thief, and Belle realizes she is getting through to him. She refuses to compromise on what she believes to be right and she gets results. This is a huge difference because the classic story emphasized complacence as a way to win someone over; *Once Upon A Time*'s version, however, shows that being assertive is just as, if not more, effective. This change in Belle's character shows that a woman doesn't have to be quiet or passive to find happiness.

This difference makes Belle a stronger character, but it does not make her the perfect character. Unlike the classic Beauty, Belle has many faults. This is important because it shows character development that classic Beauty was severely lacking. Since she was already perfect, classic Beauty couldn't develop at all. On the other hand, *Once*'s Belle is constantly evolving as a character. For instance, she is terrified of going to live with Rumple and cries upon her arrival. This shows that crying isn't a weakness for a character. Not being completely okay in the face of scary situation is perfectly rational, and Belle is under no obligation to always be a resolute,

strong character. Then, when he asks her why she came in the first place, she says "To be a hero. I always wanted to be brave. I figured, do the brave thing and bravery will follow" ("The Outsider"). Belle knows that she isn't a brave or courageous person usually, but she really tries to be. By making this change in her character, by showing that people evolve, Belle becomes far more realistic than Beauty ever was. In addition, Belle is not always cool-headed and perfect. When Rumple kicks her out of his house for breaking the rules, she gets angry. She yells at him, refusing be the calm, dainty princess that she usually is. Anger is a completely rational, normal emotion and Belle displays that. She proves that being a princess isn't always about being perfect, and that taking action is not a fault.

Belle continues to prove this point as the series develops. After getting kicked out of Rumple's house, instead of going home, she goes to hunt a dangerous creature with a group of men. She feels like she failed in fixing Rumple, which is not an emotion that most princesses feel. Fear and uncertainty are rare in classic stories, but Belle again proves that not only are they real emotions, but that they are normal and conquerable. The men on the trek treat her poorly, which results in Belle doing something that most other princesses never do; she takes her fate into her own hands. She tricks the men into going the wrong way and goes after the creature herself, which, while admirable, is a terrible idea. For all her good qualities, Belle has no idea how to fight such a terrifying creature. When she arrives at its cave, she realizes that she has made a mistake. Unlike Beauty from the original story, she is capable of making mistakes. She finds herself in a situation that no amount of kind words can get her out of. Fortunately, she is saved by a woman who teaches her how to hunt. She ends up defeating the beast with her intelligence rather than a sword. Belle takes a chance on herself, makes a mistake, and fixes it. She does this without the help of a man, and indeed is aided by another smart, capable woman. Her journey to empowerment is realistic and leads Belle to go back and fight for Rumple. In

Once Upon A Time, Belle is the exact opposite of Beauty. Instead of just letting things happen to her, she is all about taking action, even if it might not be the right action. Despite her imperfections, Belle is a strong women. She is more capable and almost better because of the mistakes she makes and the faults she has.

Given the complex nature of her character, it is no surprise that Belle challenges two separate gender roles. The first is the idea that women must be perfect in every single way. The societal standard for women in the past was that they had to display every single trait that classic Beauty has, and never show a moment of weakness, or slip from perfection. One crack in the facade will be disastrous to their chances of finding a husband and living happily ever after. This is an incredibly harmful standard to hold women to. Women do not all fit into one singular mold, nor are they perfect in every way. As Kuykendall and Sturm explain, "real women are not the stuff of fairy tales….they are complicated" (40). Perfect fairy tale characters, like Beauty, set unrealistic expectations for girls. Girls feel that they must be as perfect as she is, and struggle to attain a level of perfection that is impossible. *Once Upon A Time*'s Belle is a far more realistic role model for young girls. She is a strong, kind woman, but she has moments of weakness and moments of anger. She is not always perfect, but that doesn't mean she is a bad character. In fact, she is stronger because of it.

In addition to having faults that make her relatable, Belle also challenges the stereotype that women should be "seen and not heard" to please men. In order to achieve the level of perfection that society demanded, women were told that they must be passive. They couldn't stand up for themselves because assertive and independent do not make the list of patriarchy approved traits for women. Despite that, *Once Upon A Time*'s Belle refuses to sit back and let life wash over her. She is not the perfect princess, but she refuses to be a doormat. This is important because

Belle shows that perfection isn't required to stand up for herself, make good decisions, or fight

for what she loves. Her character is flawed, but still incredibly talented and strong.

    The same cannot be said for the original version of the next fairy tale character, Little Red

Riding Hood. There were previous versions of Red Riding Hood, but it wasn't until Charles

Perrault wrote "Little Red Riding Hood" in 1697 that she truly became a defined character.

Perrault's Red is "the prettiest you could imagine", who makes up for in beauty what she lacks in

intelligence (11). That is her first, and almost only characteristic. The classic Little Red Riding

Hood is not a smart girl. When the wolf first approaches her, Perrault writes, "the poor child,

who did not know that it was dangerous to stop and listen to wolves." (12). Red is so

unintelligent, she doesn't realize that talking to a wolf is a bad idea. While there is frequently an

unrealistic element in fairy tales, a girl of seven or eight who doesn't realize that talking to

wolves is a bad idea goes a bit beyond the stretch of the imagination. The other attributes that

Perrault gives Red are not any better. She is naïve enough to believe that the wolf laying in her

grandmother's bed is really her grandmother, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. It

is assumed because her grandmother gave her the red hood she is so famous for that Red would

know what her grandmother looks like. However, all the wolf has to say is "the better to

hear/smell/see you with", and Red falls right into his trap (13). Perrault's Little Red Riding Hood

fits the mold of fairy tale girl perfectly. She is "pretty, well-bred, and genteel" to a fault (Perrault

13). She represents an outdated ideal of women who were supposed to be seen and not heard. In

terms of characteristics, this makes Red exactly like every other fairy tale women, especially

those written in the same era. However, Perrault's story is unique in that Red Riding Hood

doesn't get saved. Almost all other princesses have a dashing prince to rescue them, but the wolf

gobbles Red up, and she is never heard from again. Even in most other Red Riding Hood

adaptions, Red at least survives her encounter with the wolf. In Perrault's, though, he seems to be saying that her death is punishment for being so ridiculously stupid and naive.

The next adaption of Red Riding Hood doesn't make Red out to be any smarter either. The Brothers Grimm wrote their story entitled, "Little Red Cap" in 1857. In this version, Red Riding Hood is just as beautiful and unintelligent. However, she gains one attribute that makes her even more typical of a fairy tale girl: obedience. Much of the Grimm's story is focused on how Red being better-behaved and listening to her mother would have prevented her from ending up as the wolf's second course. At the end of the tale, she says "Never again will you stray from the path and into the woods, when your mother has forbidden it" (16). Red must learn to be more obedient, and all her problems will be solved. Of course, perhaps it is because of this that she does get saved, which is another difference between the Grimm's and Perrault's versions. In the Grimm's story, a kind huntsmen comes to the rescue of Red and her grandmother. He cuts them out of the wolf's stomach and kills it. As is standard for fairy tales, it is the man who does all the saving. He is the one who has to fix the mess made by poor, stupid Red. This is a characteristic that reflects gender roles at the time. Women were meant to stay in the house and do as they were told. Otherwise, men would constantly have to be coming to their rescue. Both Grimm and Perrault's Little Red Riding Hood represent the perfect woman for the time period they were written in. Now, though, they seem outdated, inaccurate, and even ridiculous in their perfection.

Once Upon A Time's Red Riding Hood is the opposite of the idyllic women that Grimm and Perrault wrote. She has just about one thing in common with her classic counterparts. She is every bit as beautiful as them, but that is where the similarities end. The first time Red appears in *Once*'s fairy tale form, she is begging her grandmother to let her go hunt the wolf with a hunting party. The wolf has been ravaging the village, killing sheep and chickens, and Red wants to help kill it. So right off the bat, it is understood that she will not be the hapless girl from previous

versions. Of course, her grandmother tells her that she can't go because it's dangerous. At first, Red seems to take her grandmother's advice. The next morning she finds Snow White hiding in her hen house. Instead of kicking her out, Red takes Snow under her wing. She explains to Snow all about the wolf and how her Grandmother uses the wolf to keep her from seeing her boyfriend Peter. Snow tells Red that it isn't fair of her Grandmother to do that, and suddenly Red realizes that if she kills the wolf, she will be free to go with Peter. She tells Snow, "I'm going with or without you" and goes out to hunt the wolf ("Red-Handed"). Red doesn't need much of a push to take her destiny into her own hands. Instead of being the familiar obedient girl, this Red is all about being independent and getting what she wants. Of course, if that were the only thing that changed about Red, she would have died anyway because her lack of intelligence would have gotten her killed by the wolf. This is not the case. Once Red and Snow go out to hunt the wolf, it is discovered that Red is not as stupid as the classic stories made her out to be. She teaches Snow White how to track animals using prints and marks in the snow. Instead of wandering aimlessly through the woods, Red is prepared and has her wits about her. When Snow asks her how she learned all of her skills Red simply replies, "When there is something I want, I'm good at tracking it down" ("Red-Handed"). This shows that Red is not one to sit back and wait to be rescued. She prefers to do the saving because it is her life that has to be saved. All of the weaker, less realistic parts of Red's character that are in the classic stories are replaced in *Once Upon A Time* with stronger, more interesting characteristics. Red goes from being a flat, one-dimensional character to a dynamic heroine, who takes her own destiny into her hands.

This metamorphosis includes the part of the story where Red has to be saved from the wolf. The interesting twist that *Once Upon A Time* puts on Little Red Riding Hood's story is that she is the wolf. The only thing that keeps her from turning is the red cloak she is so famous for. Of course, when Red discovers this, she has a pivotal moment of character development. She

could choose to run from the people who care about her, and turn her back on everything. However, that is not the choice she makes. Instead, Red stays with her family, but starts to wear her cloak more often and always puts their safety before her own. Red is scared and confused, but she chooses every day to keep living and doesn't let her strange, new condition stop her. Then, one day, she finds a clan of people like her. They teach her how to control the wolf inside of her. The people who teach her say "The only way you can defeat the wolf is by accepting it as a part of you" ("Children of the Moon"). Once Red realizes that she doesn't need to be afraid of the animal inside her, she gains control of it. With the help of the clan, she defeats the wolf inside herself, no huntsman needed. Even though she makes mistakes and is often afraid, the only person that Red truly needs is herself. In fact, Red is one of the only fairy tale characters who never has a rescuing prince. Even in *Once Upon A Time*, Red doesn't need a man in her life. Her friends and family are the most important thing to Red. So, when the clan later turns their back on her and tries to kill Snow White, Red comes to her rescue. The clan is angry because they believe that all humans cause destruction and they insist that Red can't be part of both worlds. However, Red knows that she can be, so when the leader of the clan tells Red, "You chose [Snow]," Red responds, "No, I chose me" ("Children of the Moon"). By protecting Snow, Red is saying that she refuses to accept the black and white world presented to her by the wolves. She knows she can have both, and she will. When it comes to the being saved aspect of Red Riding Hood's story, *Once Upon A Time* produces a character who doesn't need to be saved by anyone and in fact saves others in addition to herself.

Those qualities are also a large part of the gender role that *Once Upon A Time's* Little Red Riding Hood is challenging. Red defies the traditional stereotype that women cannot save themselves. In fairy tales and the real world, women are often told that it is better to sit back and let the man do the work. They are told men will save them. However, Red is not about to

passively sit back and wait for someone else to save her. She is the model of a self-rescuing princess who can stand on her own two feet. This is a huge reversal from what is usually seen in fairy tales. Red uses her own intelligence to save herself. In a traditional fairy tale, the smart, independent, and strong willed women are not the princesses. As Leslee Kuykendal and Brian Sturm explain in their critical analysis of feminist literature, "powerful women in fairy tales are generally ugly if not also evil" (Kuykendal 39). If a woman is portrayed as assertive she will end up being the villain of the story. Furthermore, the intelligent woman's character is undermined by the fact that she is often incapable of being caring, loving, kind or anything else positive. Women who save themselves don't usually get happy endings; Red Riding Hood breaks the mold. She is a female character who is beautiful, smart, independent, capable, loving and caring. She is a realistic women who isn't defined by one or two arbitrary characteristics, but instead has real human depth. Little Red Riding Hood in *Once Upon A Time* stands for self-saving and female empowerment.

While *Once Upon A Time* is challenging the gender stereotypes in new and interesting ways, the question arises: is it necessary? Are girls really affected by the gender roles in fairy tales? Study after study has proven that they are. One of the most reliable studies on this subject was conducted by fairy tale analyst Kristin Wardetzky in Germany in 1990. In the study, Wardetzky asked 2,470 children between the ages of eight and ten (grades two and four) to write a fairy tale based on a predetermined opening line. The results speak for themselves. Wardetzky found that if the opening line indicated "repression and/or becoming overcome by anxiety" the majority of children would write the story with a female protagonist (164). Meanwhile, if the character was one that suggested "sovereignty, autonomy, or personal initiative" the students would choose a male protagonist (Wardetzky 164). Furthermore, when it came time for the children to write a scene where the protagonist was tried or tested, girls only wrote a battle scene

if the protagonist was male. There was not a single story where "girls…produced a sword swinging heroine who kills a monster" (169). So to say that girls are effected by the gender roles of typical fairy tales would perhaps be an understatement. The gender roles are so ingrained in their heads that even when they write their own story, the girl can't or doesn't save herself. So, at least on a subliminal level, girls are being effected by the gender roles that fairy tales teach.

Since it is obvious that girls are being influenced by what they read in fairy tales, it is easier to understand the importance of what *Once Upon A Time* is doing. By reversing and challenging stereotypical gender roles *Once Upon A Time* is teaching girls that they can be more than the standard that society has traditionally set for them. In a world where women are constantly under a barrage of expectations to be perfect, pretty, obedient, and nothing more *Once Upon A Time* is trying to change that. The show is teaching girls that they have power, that they can save themselves, that they are smart, and that they do not always have to be perfect. In addition to that, the show is working to show girls that gender roles are not as black and white as fairy tales make them seem. Fairy tales have always shown men and women as cookie cutter opposites of each other that must meet the exact expectations set for them. This is obviously inaccurate, and teaching young children that it is true causes them to have unrealistic expectations about their own roles in society. As Kuykendall and Strum explain "Real men and women play roles beyond the traditional gender-defined positions depicted in canonical fairy tales" (40). It is important for young children to understand that men and women in real life will not always fit the mold that fairy tales say they should. *Once Upon A Time* tries to show that phenomenon by making their characters more realistic and relatable. The show features people that make mistakes, princesses that are completely self-rescuing, and men that aren't always strong. These characters are more accurate depictions of real people, and *Once Upon A Time* manages to show them while still keeping the magic and excitement of a traditional fairy tale.

That is what makes the show so important in society today. Children deserve to see the magic and wonder of fairy tales, but they also deserve to see realistic expectations of themselves and others. That is exactly what *Once Upon A Time* is doing.

In the constantly evolving world of fairy tales, female empowerment is one of the newest trends. The sword-swinging heroine is unfamiliar in a world where there are hundreds upon hundreds of fairy tale adaptions. However, *Once Upon A Time* is at the forefront of the movement to make female characters with real human depth. The show's version of Belle and Little Red Riding Hood are just the tip of the iceberg. They represent a small portion of the strong, powerful, smart women that the show features. The show is challenging stereotypical gender roles with every opportunity, and has been rewarded for it. *Once* has been on air since 2012, and remains one of the most popular shows on mainstream television. This means that society and women appreciate shows like *Once*. Princesses who are capable in their own right are appreciated in today's society. Hopefully, that will inspire other shows, movies, and books to follow in their footsteps. For now, however, women looking for empowered females need not look any further than Emma Swan and her fairy tale friends, a collection of characters who prove that being a self-rescuing princess is not only possible, it's the best way to find a happy ending.

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