

# Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Femininity in Macbeth from the Perspective of Androgyny

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## ABSTRACT

Woolf's theory of the "androgynous mind," Freud's concept of "repetition compulsion," and Foucault's theory of disciplinary power together illuminate the deeper causes of Lady Macbeth's tragic fate in *Macbeth*. In her attempt to transcend traditional gender roles, Lady Macbeth represses her feminine ethical traits and excessively amplifies masculine qualities such as cruelty and decisiveness. This imbalance in gender characteristics leads to intense inner conflict. At the same time, the internalization of social disciplinary power infiltrates her thoughts and behaviors, distorting her understanding of power and identity. As a result, she becomes both a replication of patriarchal logic and a victim of psychological collapse due to her inability to escape gender constraints. The interplay between psychological structure and social discipline reveals the multilayered roots of her tragedy, offering a new theoretical perspective for gender criticism of Shakespeare's female characters.

## KEYWORDS

*Lady Macbeth*; androgyny; gender imbalance; social discipline

## INTRODUCTION

In early modern English literature, gender identity was often portrayed through binary oppositions: the rational, assertive man versus the emotional, submissive woman. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has long served as a crucial site for investigating how dramatic texts negotiate and challenge such dichotomies. Lady Macbeth, in particular, emerges as a figure whose gender performance disrupts traditional expectations. While existing scholarship has extensively examined her ambition, guilt, and psychological downfall, most interpretations remain confined within the male–female binary, often reducing her to either a transgressive villain or a tragic victim.

Recent advances in gender theory, especially the concept of androgyny, provide a more nuanced lens through which to analyze complex characters like Lady Macbeth. Androgyny—understood not as a blending of physical sexes, but as a psychological integration of masculine and feminine traits—offers a framework that transcends rigid gender binaries. Despite its relevance, few studies have employed this framework to explore Lady Macbeth's inner conflict, self-construction, and eventual collapse. Similarly, while psychoanalytic and social power theories have been applied to Shakespearean drama, they have rarely been synthesized to reveal the layered interactions between internal drives and external constraints in the formation of gender identity.

This article presents a novel interdisciplinary reading of *Lady Macbeth* through the lens of psychological androgyny, drawing on psychoanalytic theory and Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. By doing so, it not only exposes the imbalance between masculinity and femininity within Lady Macbeth's psyche, but also reveals how patriarchal systems shape and ultimately dismantle female subjectivity. The research fills a gap in the literature

by foregrounding the dynamic tension between individual agency and sociocultural conditioning in Shakespeare's characterization of femininity.

The purpose of this article is to examine how Lady Macbeth's construction and deconstruction of gender traits reflect a failed attempt at androgynous self-integration. It further aims to highlight the broader implications of this failure for understanding gender identity formation in early modern literature, particularly in relation to the interplay between psychological conflict and social power.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Virginia Woolf, as an outstanding stream-of-consciousness novelist and literary critic in the 20th century, put forward the groundbreaking idea of "bisexual homoeroticism" in her book *A Room of One's Own*. This concept not only questions the social roles of gender, but also explores in depth the issue of gender balance in the individual's psychological traits, emphasizing the need to transcend traditional gender boundaries in order to reach an ideal state of creativity and spiritual harmony. Woolf's view of bisexuality does not only refer to physical bisexuality, but also a state of psychological and spiritual balance. She believed that "the great mind is androgynous. It is only when this fusion is achieved that the mind can be fully nourished and develop its full capacity." (Woolf, 1929:299) In an ideal form of life, masculine and feminine qualities should coexist harmoniously and complement each other, not exclude or suppress each other. In Chapter 6 of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes: "There are two forces in each of us, one masculine and one feminine; in the male brain the masculine force is more dominant than the feminine, and in the female brain the feminine force is more dominant than the masculine. These two forces harmonize with each other and form a spiritual partnership, and it is in a normal and comfortable state that a person's heart is in a normal and comfortable state." (Woolf, 1929: 299) In Woolf's view, bisexuality is not only an ideal state of life, but also a deep spiritual pursuit. Through her creations, Woolf tried to reveal this state of inner balance and called on people to pursue and realize this ideal. The theory of bisexual homosexuality has a wide influence in modern academia and is considered one of the key theories challenging gender essentialism. While gender essentialism views gender traits as innate and unchangeable, Woolf advocates that gender traits should be psychologically fluid and integrated to reach the wholeness of personality. This kind of thinking transcended the traditional view of gender dichotomy and laid the foundation for the development of modern gender studies and psychology (Rosenman, 1986).

Freud pointed out through his observations of real-life masculinity and femininity that there are no absolutely pure masculine or feminine qualities in human beings, and that such gender purity is hard to find, both at the psychological and biological levels. Instead, each individual blends traits of the opposite sex within their own gender identity, exhibiting a mix of active and passive traits that do not necessarily correspond to the individual's biological sex. (Freud, 2007) This assertion reveals the fluidity and hybridity of human gender traits and challenges the traditional notion of a gender binary. He argues that an individual's psychological and gendered traits are not solely determined by biological sex, but rather by the intertwining of active and passive, masculine and feminine traits. This coincides with Woolf's theory of bisexuality. In Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the discussion of femininity and masculinity is not a simple dichotomy, but rather a profound exploration based on the structure of gendered power, the nature of creativity, and the critique of social roles. Woolf points out that women possess a "highly developed creative power" (Woolf, 1929: 267), which stems from experiences and emotions that have been suppressed for centuries. She emphasizes that women's creative perspectives are different from men's, with more subtle perceptions and deeper insights into everyday life.

Whereas masculinity is associated with rationality and logic, and masculinity is often equated with rational dominance, Woolf points out in her analysis of history that men were more inclined to define values in terms of war and philosophy, whereas women were confined to narratives of domestic ethics. This trait is also reflected in judgments of the deformity of women writers' works (e.g. Charlotte Bronte's novels were criticized as "morbid"). (Woolf, 1929) At the heart of Woolf's argument is the idea that gender specificity should not be a constraint on creativity. She put forward the ideal of "androgyny", emphasizing that true creativity requires the integration of the strengths of both sexes: for women, the development of rationality and action, breaking away from the stereotypical role of the "good wife" and exploring the public sphere of expression. For men, it is necessary to embrace the power of sensibility and to avoid reducing women to "objects of the male gaze" (Woolf, 1929). Overall, the bisexual view emphasizes a gender-transcendent ideal in which the writer's unique linguistic style is naturally formed. Woolf recognizes the limitations of gender essentialism, the existence of individual differences, and the possibility of an eventual move toward bisexual homonormativity. This is where the unique value of bisexual homoeroticism theory lies.

Bisexual Identity Theory is mainly used in modern feminist textual analysis to break down the traditional view of gender dichotomy and to explore the expression of gender fluidity and plurality in literature and culture. In modern feminist criticism, Woolf's theory of bisexuality has been further developed to become an important tool for deconstructing gender identity and reflecting on patriarchy. In *The Second Sex*, Simone Beauvoir drew on Woolf's reflections on gender fluidity and put forward the idea that "women are not born, but are formed", emphasizing the social construction of gender identity. (Beauvoir, 1949: 13) Furthermore, in her *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler further challenges gender essentialism by arguing that gender is a performative social practice rather than a fixed and unchanging essence. (Butler, 1990: 25) To varying degrees, these feminist theorists have inherited Woolf's view of intersexuality and emphasized the importance of gender fluidity and psychological integration, thus contributing to the plurality and depth of gender studies. Lady Macbeth, as a character who "transcends gender boundaries," displays cold masculinity in her pursuit of power, but suffers from deep self-contradiction and anxiety in the process of suppressing her femininity. The theory of bisexual homoeroticism helps to reveal the deep mechanism of her gradual deconstruction of self in the midst of psychological imbalance and social discipline, which provides a systematic framework for analyzing Lady Macbeth's tragedy, and at the same time reveals the multi-level complexity of Shakespeare's female image.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative approach, integrating literary analysis with gender theory, psychoanalysis, and Foucauldian discourse. The research is grounded in close textual analysis of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, with particular focus on the character of Lady Macbeth. Primary attention is given to her language, actions, and psychological transformation across key scenes to trace the processes of gender construction, deconstruction, and collapse.

The framework of analysis draws on Virginia Woolf's concept of androgyny, which emphasizes the psychological integration of masculine and feminine traits, Sigmund Freud's theory of repetition compulsion, and Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power. These theories serve as analytical lenses through which the character's internal conflicts and interactions with external power structures are examined. By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, the study aims to uncover the complex relationship between Lady Macbeth's inner psychological struggle and the sociocultural forces that shape her

identity.

Textual evidence is drawn directly from the original play, supported by relevant scholarly interpretations. The analysis does not rely on statistical or empirical data, but instead follows the methodological tradition of literary criticism and feminist theory, emphasizing conceptual clarity, interpretive depth, and theoretical integration.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Deconstruction of Lady Macbeth's Femininity*

Lady Macbeth undergoes a dynamic shift from femininity to masculinity in her quest for power. "Within feminist discourse, gender refers exclusively to the requirements and expectations of society for both sexes, i.e. the so-called 'masculinity' and 'femininity', that is, the social identities of both sexes, that is, the social identities of both sexes." (Zhang, 2019: 86) It is within this gender framework that Lady Macbeth actively deconstructs female identity. She does not truly achieve gender balance or transcendence, but rather uses "masculinity" as a passport to power, unilaterally exaggerates and tends to masculinize her identity. Through the lens of Woolf's theory of bisexuality, it is evident that this character is always in a state of torn gender qualities, as she is not able to completely free herself from the ethical constraints of traditional femininity, but also fails to realize the complete internalization of masculinity. Her tragedy not only stems from the excessive pursuit of masculinity, but is also reflected in the dynamic deconstruction process of femininity from repression to alienation.

Lady Macbeth's rejection of femininity has an obvious instrumental tendency. It is not out of instinct that she rejects female identity, but in the male-centered social structure, she sees traditional femininity qualities such as gentleness and sympathy in Shakespeare's time as obstacles to achieving the goal of power. In the famous "de-feminization" soliloquy in Act I, Scene V, she presents the transformative claims of "milk" and "bile" as necessary for the acquisition of power: "Come to my woman's breasts, and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers!" (Shakespeare, 1606: 55). This violent substitution of physiological symbols reveals a double paradox: on the one hand, the active abandonment of milk as a symbol of motherhood suggests that female fertility is seen as a liability in the political game; on the other hand, the toxic character of choler, as the "yellow bile" that represents masculinity in the tetrad of the four bodily fluids, stands in opposition to the nourishing function of motherhood. On the other hand, the toxic character of choler, as the "yellow bile" representing masculinity in the theory of the four bodily fluids, is in opposition to the nourishing function of motherhood. Instead of realizing the transformation of gender, this symbolic substitution has led to a deeper fragmentation of her female identity. However, Lady Macbeth's repression of femininity is always accompanied by a residue of ethical perception. Prior to the regicide, she declares:

"How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dashed the brains out," (Shakespeare, 1606: 61).

This extreme representation exposes precisely the psychological defense mechanism that conceals the true existence of his maternal instincts by exaggerating the violent imagery.

Driven by the desire for power, Lady Macbeth actively represses femininity and deliberately pursues masculinity in order to achieve control of power. She sees the sensual (tender, sensitive) traditional femininity of Shakespeare's time as an obstacle and deconstructs herself in extreme ways. In Act I, Scene V, she calls upon supernatural forces to strip her of her femininity:

“unsex me here  
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full  
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,  
Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
Th’ effect and it.” (Shakespeare, 1606: 24).

This incantatory monologue not only shows her active challenge to gender boundaries, but also reveals her inner gender anxiety and identity tearing. She associates feminine weakness with words such as “remorse” and “peace” and regards them as the greatest resistance to the realization of her political ambitions, thus resorting to mystical forces for both physical and psychological transformation. They resort to mystical powers to transform both the body and the psyche. This self-denying prayer is in fact a violent stripping away of the female identity, as well as a denial and reconstruction of the inner self. The words emphasize the intention of “Make thick my blood” and blocking “peace” and “remorse”, and the transformation of the internal perception of the body also implies her complete revolt against “motherhood” and the role of “life-giver”. This series of intense verbal and psychological actions shows that Lady Macbeth’s masculinization is not a manifestation of her genuine acquisition of “male power”, but a self-construction based on the denial of female essence. Her “de-gendering” or “forced masculinization” does not really give her sustained subjective power, but rather brews a deep psychological rift in the subsequent episodes, foreshadowing her inevitable fate of ultimate tragic collapse. This choice of “self-masculinization” appears to be empowering on the surface, but in fact it is a struggle to submit to the binary order of gender, in which her body becomes a carrier of desire, fear and violence in the patriarchal structure, rather than an emancipated subject in the true sense of the word. Here, she sees the “disempowerment of femininity” as a prerequisite for the acquisition of power, demonstrating her desire to be free of femininity and to acquire what she perceives to be the cold and decisive qualities of masculinity. This rejection of femininity is in fact a revolt and self-alienation against the restrictions of traditional gender roles. In the ensuing episodes, Lady Macbeth plays the role of the “guide” and constantly provokes her husband’s violent tendencies, demonstrating her determination and coldness. When Macbeth hesitates to commit regicide, she provokes him by saying:

“When you durst do it, then you were a man:  
And to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man.” (Shakespeare, 1606: 61)

By questioning Macbeth’s masculinity, she stimulates him to act violently. This episode shows that she has completely abandoned the meekness and submissiveness of the traditional women of Shakespeare’s time in favor of cold and decisive masculinity to manipulate the situation. She is no longer the “good wife” who supports her husband behind his back, but rather she is the mastermind of political maneuvering, taking the initiative to control the tempo and execution of the regicide plan.

“In Shakespearean tragedy, there is a reverse gender transgression. Patriarchal society gives women ‘mother’, ‘wife’, and ‘woman’ respectively the ‘subservient patriarchal’ Femininity and social identity, they cannot escape from the barrier of this social identity, but they all try to use the opposite sex to realize the transcendence of the “patriarchal” society.” (Zhang, 2019: 88) In her words, she equates “manhood” with “greatness” and “daring”, and by redefining masculinity, she creates shame and anxiety within the husband’s heart, making Macbeth forced to do what he wants. By redefining masculinity, it

creates shame and anxiety in the husband's heart, so that Macbeth is forced to fulfill the first step of power violence by complying with his wishes. This kind of manipulative behavior with humiliating words is essentially a kind of gender-reversed discourse violence, which not only deprives the husband of his dominant power in the husband-wife relationship, but also challenges the gender ethical order of the Renaissance, which is “dominated by the husband and submissive to the wife”. Lady Macbeth does not stop at verbal stimulation; she also makes plans and arranges details herself, showing a high degree of rationality and decisive action. In Act I, Scene 7, she clearly points out the time and place to assassinate Duncan, and even how to frame the guards: When Duncan is asleep —

Where to the rather shall his day's hard journey  
Soundly invite him — his two chamberlains  
Will I with wine and wassailso convince,  
That memory, the warder of the brain,  
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason  
A limbeckonly: when in swinish sleep  
Their drenchèd natures lies as in a death,  
What cannot you and I perform upon  
Th' unguarded Duncan? What not put upon  
His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt  
Of our great quell? (Shakespeare, 1606: 61)

This is a great example of her calm and logical thinking at the executive level, which almost completely replaces Macbeth's dominance in the action. Her “manipulation”, “boldness”, and familiarity with violence and calmness completely breaks through the stereotypical expectations of women to be indoors and subservient to patriarchal authority at the time. She not only destroys her husband's hesitation with her words, but also overrides his dominance with her actions. However, this kind of “subjectivization of power” is not really based on gender integration and spiritual integration, but is an extreme path of “de-feminization”.

Lady Macbeth's deliberately suppressed femininity returns in a destructive form under the erosion of guilt and trauma. In Act V, Scene 1, she repeatedly washes her hands in sleepwalking, muttering, “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (Shakespeare, 1606: 131) The bloodstains not only symbolize the crime of regicide, but also represent her unresolved ethical conflict and return to femininity. According to Freud's theory of “compulsive repetition” in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, individuals unconsciously repeat traumatic experiences in traumatic situations in an attempt to regain control of unresolved psychological conflicts through repetitive behavior. (Freud, 1920) Her constant attempts to “wash” the blood off her hands is in fact a reenactment of the night of the regicide in an attempt to symbolically wash away the unbearable guilt she feels deep down. However, this act does not bring comfort and relief, but rather reveals that she has been completely consumed by moral collapse and traumatic experiences. The female ethical feelings that she had once successfully suppressed now recoil in an unconscious state of extreme anxiety, remorse, and schizophrenia. The “blood” in her mouth is no longer just a visual hallucination, but a figurative manifestation of her female instincts (tenderness and compassion), which have been suppressed for too long under the times, and which have resurfaced in the sinful reality. This return is no longer tender and ethical, but traumatized and epileptic. Sleepwalking, hallucinations, and repetitive language are all ways in which the rejected femininity recovers its presence in the subconscious. Ultimately, this imbalance and division leads her to a complete mental breakdown and self-destruction, becoming a classic symbol of Shakespeare's tragedy of gender repression.

### ***Reconstruction of Femininity through Breakdown***

The root of Lady Macbeth's gender tragedy is not only the imbalance of her personal inner gender traits, but also points more deeply to her inner colonization and gender discipline under the structure of patriarchal society. "The tragic fate of the female characters in Shakespeare's tragedy is not only a result of the character defects of the male and female protagonists in the play, but also a gender tragedy caused by the contradiction between the gender traits endowed by the society and culture and the women's aspirations for equality, freedom, and spiritual independence, i.e., an important reason for the occurrence of the tragedy is related to the female gender traits under the domination of Philemoncentrism, and in particular, it is closely related to the female gender traits' dislocation and imbalance are closely linked." (Zhang, 2019: 87) During the Renaissance period in which Shakespeare lived, women were generally confined to the traditional image of being submissive, gentle, and good wives and mothers, while power, justice, and rationality were relegated to the male domain. It is under the pressure of this gendered power structure that Lady Macbeth sees "being male" as the only way to gain power and subjectivity, and thus takes the initiative to reinvent her femininity. Her prayer in Act I, Scene V, "unsex me here ..." (Shakespeare, 1606: 24) is not only a denial of gender identity, but also an internal solitude that has been deeply colonized by the patriarchal consciousness. inner monologue deeply colonized by patriarchal consciousness. She sees feminine qualities such as tenderness, compassion, and sensuality as obstacles to the achievement of the "subject of power", and desperately seeks a masculine psychological structure in order to adapt to and gain a voice in the male-dominated order. This kind of active repression reveals how male discipline penetrates into women's hearts, prompting them to "discipline themselves" and complete the reconstruction of their own subjectivity.

Lady Macbeth is not only a participant in the power system, but also a product of its internalization. Her behavior and the tragedy of bisexual imbalance are closely related to this logic of discipline. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, suggests that discipline "makes" the individual; it is a specific technique that sees the individual as its object and instrument of operation. (Foucault, 1977) Power operates not only through direct oppression, but also through discipline that permeates the body, mind, and behavior of the individual to internalize social norms. However, Lady Macbeth does not simply mimic masculinity, but in the process attempts to recreate a new image of "feminine power". She demonstrates a "feminine expression of power" by influencing her husband's actions in a calm, decisive, and dominant manner. When she persuades Macbeth to commit regicide, she not only dominates with emotional control (questioning his courage and masculinity), but she also dominates the whole process of regicide with clear logic and planning. This kind of manipulation is not all masculine and forceful violence, but a new kind of temperament that combines strategy, emotional manipulation and discursive guidance, which reflects her exploration and experimentation of "how women can control power" under the patriarchal structure. Therefore, although Lady Macbeth is ostensibly "becoming a man", she is essentially challenging the traditional division of gender temperament, trying to construct a "hybrid temperament" that is different from the traditional female submissiveness or male hegemony. But essentially it is an attempt to construct a "hybrid temperament" that is different from the traditional female submissiveness or male hegemony, based on challenging the traditional division of gender temperament. Lady Macbeth tries to escape from the traditional role of "good wife and mother," but is also forced to serve her husband's and family's quest for power. "There is a reverse gender transgression in Shakespearean tragedy. Patriarchal society assigns women "mother", "wife", and "woman" respectively "subservient to patriarchal" Femininity and social identity, they cannot escape from the barrier of this social identity, but they all try to use

the opposite sex to realize the transcendence of the “patriarchal” society.” (Zhang, 2019: 88) Macbeth ostensibly grasps the initiative to control her husband’s psyche and drive the plot, but essentially, she is still constructing her subject with a male frame of reference, failing to truly break free from the logic of patriarchal structure. She uses Macbeth’s actions to realize her political ambitions, but she is still dependent on the role of male power implementer. This mode of “transgression” through the use of the opposite sex gives her a sense of participation in power on the surface, but fails to fundamentally reshape the gender structure.

In the play, she not only demands that her husband conform to the logic of power, but also tries to shape her own subjectivity by imitating this logic. However, this self-regulation makes her both an enabler and a victim of the system of power. She sees a sense of ethics and empathy as symbols of weakness, and realizes her quest for power by drawing closer to what she perceives as cold, decisive masculinity. This deviation, although apparently an active choice, is in fact the result of the logic of power that disciplines women, and she has internalized the idea that “masculine coolness” is a necessary condition for the realization of power. She internalizes the idea that “masculine coldness” is necessary for the realization of power. Her behavior is a support of male power under the logic of discipline, which ultimately leads to the intensification of her ethical and psychological conflicts. Although Lady Macbeth attempts to mimic masculinity, her feminine ethos is not completely repressed and eventually returns in the form of sleepwalking and washing her hands. While sleepwalking, she repeatedly tries to wash away the “blood”, which according to Foucault is both a continuation of power over the individual’s body and a failure of discipline. (Foucault, 1977) Unfortunately, in the face of the powerful disciplinary mechanism of the patriarchal society, the reinvention of Lady Macbeth’s temperament ultimately fails to gain cultural and psychological legitimacy. In her study of Shakespeare’s plays, Chen surfaces that “the negated female represents the very opposite form of the normative value of any given society, or rather, the male personifies the opposite value of social norms as the evil nature and image of the female, and then negates it or puts it to death.” (Chen, 1995: 30) In the second half of the play, as Macbeth gradually takes control of the situation and Lady Macbeth retreats into the background, her psychological pressure and gender imbalance begin to backfire, indicating that her attempts to fight against the power structure are still fundamentally difficult to get rid of the suppression of the patriarchal system. Her eventual mental breakdown and death also reveals the high price women pay in the process of challenging gender norms and reshaping the subjectivity of power - not only does she have to fight against external structural oppression, but she must also endure the double torment of internal ethical tearing and identity anxiety. She is neither able to completely realize her masculine quest for power nor return to her feminine ethical qualities, leading to a total psychological and spiritual disintegration

## **CONCLUSION**

Lady Macbeth’s tragedy stems from the complex interaction of her gender trait imbalance, inner psychological conflict and outer social discipline. She tries to control the power by suppressing the female ethical traits and strengthening the male cold traits, but this behavior does not bring real psychological harmony, but destroys the inner balance of gender traits, and the gradually accumulated conflict becomes the root cause of her psychological collapse. At the same time, her behavioral logic and values are deeply shaped by the power discipline of the patriarchal society, which makes her equate the cold and decisive masculinity with the symbol of power and define her self-worth in this way. She is neither able to completely free herself from the ethical constraints of her female

identity nor fully integrate into the masculine power system, and this identity tear is further amplified by the dual effects of internal conflict and external oppression. In the end, Lady Macbeth becomes a double victim of gender and power discipline, and her tragedy not only reflects the individual psychological disharmony, but also reveals the far-reaching impact of social norms and power structure on the oppression of female subjects, which provides an important revelation for interpreting the complexity of Shakespeare's female image and the dynamic relationship between gender and power.

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