

Reconsidering Orton and the Critics: *The Good and Faithful Servant**

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Joe Orton's play *The Good and Faithful Servant* was written in 1964 and first broadcast on UK television by Rediffusion in April 1967. Maurice Charney, discussing the play in his article in *Connotations* 18.1-3, presents it as an anomalous work within the context of Orton's drama, contending that "[e]ven though it follows *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and precedes *Loot*, Orton makes none of his characteristic attempts to make the play farcical, and it lacks his usual violence and sexual energy" (139); and he continues: "Because it is so uncharacteristic of Orton, it is no surprise that it is his least produced and least discussed play" (148). Charney argues for the excellence of the play, "just because it is so anomalous, so uncompromising, so absolute" (149).

Charney's article in *Connotations* elaborates upon the view he had presented in an earlier article on the play, included in the 2003 Casebook devoted to Orton's work, in which he wrote: "It is the play of Orton's that has attracted the least interest both in the theatre and in critical discussion. The fact is significant in itself because it is the play that seems least "Ortonesque," as that term has been used to describe Orton's characteristically witty, epigrammatic, grotesquely lurid, and highly sexual style" (Charney, "Orton's Bitter Farce" 21). Charney considered that this powerful play, which contains painful autobiographical details (albeit successfully disguised), "has been more or

*Reference: Maurice Charney, "Joe Orton's Laodicean Tragedy: *The Good and Faithful Servant*," *Connotations* 18.1-3 (2008/2009): 139-50.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney01813.htm>>.

less shunted aside," and that the time had come for it to be given the attention and recognition it deserved (21).

In relating to Charney's view of *The Good and Faithful Servant*, I primarily focus in this essay on his contention, as phrased in the 2003 article and further specified in the later one, that the play has attracted the least interest because it has seemed the least Ortonesque. In line with this contention, I suggest that the specific case of *The Good and Faithful Servant* not only ties in with the highly significant issue of a playwright's critical reception, but also exemplifies a more general phenomenon in regard to critical modes that is worthy of further elaboration. While Charney primarily sets out to promote the play's excellence, he does not inquire into the question of why it is that the play, seemingly the least Ortonesque, has been overlooked in critical discourse engaging with Orton's work. In order to address this question it is necessary to consider the broader issue that regards the role played by the critics in the reception of a dramatist and his plays. My aim here is to examine the lack of interest in the play within the context of the critical dynamics, and to account for the dismissive attitude towards it as deriving from the governing principles underlying the process of critical reception of an individual playwright. Before dealing with the specific case of Orton's play, I therefore present a brief overview concerning the issue of a playwright's critical reception, which I have discussed in detail elsewhere.¹

I note from the start that in engaging with the issue of the reception of playwrights and their dramatic works, I draw on the institutional approach. That is, generally speaking, scholars dealing with the canonization processes of literary and theatrical works can be roughly divided into those who attribute the canonization to the works' intrinsic properties, and those who perceive institutional factors (such as journalists, reviewers and academics) as the ones accounting for the works' canonization (a notable example of the latter is Pierre Bourdieu).² Relating to the theatre reviewers, in line with the institutional approach, I have previously shown how reviewers play a dominant role in the admission of a new playwright into the theatrical

canon (Zarhy-Levo, "The Theatrical Critic"). In examining the critical responses to the first plays of various playwrights (such as John Osborne, Brendan Behan, Shelagh Dalaney, John Arden, Harold Pinter, Joe Orton, Tom Stoppard, and Sarah Kane), I demonstrated that the reviewers employ certain strategies that serve to provide an initial legitimacy for dramatists whose acceptance into the theatrical canon has not yet been determined.³ Typically, in the process of reception of new playwrights, reviewers initially locate them in light of their affiliation to or divergence from already recognized and established theatrical trends and schools, and assess the newcomers' particular means of theatrical expression in terms of their potential contribution to the theatre. While such affiliation serves the reviewers to provide a familiar context from within which to view a new playwright's work, their assessment of the particular means of theatrical expression also enables them to differentiate the newcomer's contribution from that of other, already established, playwrights.

It should be noted that such comparison of a new offering to previously established theatrical models, is a common tendency in critical practice. It serves the reviewers to locate the work, whether to endorse or reject the new play. In other words, the reviewers can present the new offering as continuing an already recognized theatrical trend, and thereby extend the legitimacy attributed to the established works to the play in question; or, in contrast, they can present it as failing to correspond to any previously established theatrical model and, in most such cases, will tend to reject the play.

Distinct examples of the reviewers' use of the affiliation or comparison strategy can be found in their initial responses to the London productions of the first play by Tom Stoppard, which the reviewers endorsed, and the first play by Harold Pinter, which they initially rejected. The first London production of Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) opened to rave reviews. The critical responses demonstrate that the majority of the reviewers related both to the dramatist's unique use of Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, and the highly detectable influence of Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. Irving

Wardle, for instance, stated in his review (*The Times*, 12 April 1967) that: "What emerges is a compound of Shakespearian criticism. Beckett-like crosstalk," also remarking that "in its origin this is a highly literary play with frank debts to Pirandello and Beckett." On the whole, the reviewers found the play either to be a highly original contribution to modern adaptations of Shakespeare, or a "blend," combining "tradition" with modern theatrical influences.⁴ The critical perception that emerged from most reviews as to the affinity between Stoppard's play and Beckett's (the latter was by then an established theatrical model associated with the trend of the Absurd) appears to have enhanced the dramatist's critical reception.⁵ Unlike in Stoppard's case, however, Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* (1958) was attacked by most reviewers to such an extent that it was taken off after only a week's run. As the reviews demonstrate, the critics attempted to locate the play, in terms of influences or affiliation, within the framework of British or European theatrical traditions, but could find no correspondence to any previously established theatrical model (e.g., in the review appearing in *The Times* [20 May 1958], the critic commented: "This essay in surrealist drama [...], gives the impression of deriving from an Ionesco play which M. Ionesco has not yet written").⁶ Unable to associate the play's dramatic style with any specific established model, the reviewers thus pronounced it obscure, delirious, oblique, enigmatic, and puzzling and dismissed it as a theatrical failure.⁷

As the case of Stoppard illustrates, and also that of Pinter (regarding the critical responses to his play *The Caretaker* [1960]), once the reviewers have pointed to a specific affiliation, they then embark on a strategy of promotion designed to present (or perhaps 'market') the new playwright's particular means of theatrical expression that distinguishes their specific contribution. The process of a new playwright's reception thus entails two oppositional but complementary critical tendencies: the highlighting of the familiar and the introduction of the original.⁸ Consequently, the playwright can be presented as

continuing, while simultaneously enriching and expanding, the constitutive repertoire of a given theatre tradition.

When introducing a newcomer, the reviewers devise a *package of attributes* that they consider to characterize the dramatist's work. During the process of the playwright's admission into the canon this package becomes formulated into what I term the *playwright construct*. This construct comprises an aggregation of traits recurring in the works that are seen as typifying the dramatist in terms of both influences and innovation. Such a construct is a highly reductive characterization of the dramatist's works and serves in the critical discourse as a reference point to that playwright's distinctive poetics. The formulation of the playwright construct and the dramatist's critical acceptance are interdependent. The emergence of the construct indicates that the dramatist has now acquired a "critical existence," even though other mediators (e.g., producers, artistic directors and/or directors), and not only critics, may also have had their effect on the emergent construct. The reviewers' formulation of the playwright construct is essential in facilitating their mediatory function: to make the newcomer's work accessible and to locate the dramatist within the perceived overall theatrical tradition. The emergence of the construct is an integral part of a playwright's admission into the theatrical canon, with the specific components of the construct and the particular process of its formation differing in each individual case. The construct will be of definitive importance in the later stages of a playwright's career, serving the reviewers for reference in their ongoing/potential enhancement of the playwright's cultural capital. The construct will subsequently be assimilated into the critical/cultural discourse evolving around the dramatist's work, employed in various ways, for example in press articles about the playwright and in the promotional campaigns by the theatres staging the dramatist's plays (e.g., in advertisements or programme notes for new works or revivals).⁹ Furthermore, having become associated with the dramatist's cultural capital, the construct will then be employed, in turn, when citing awards or prizes bestowed on the dramatist (citations for a

Nobel Prize, awarded in 2005 to the late Harold Pinter, distinctly exemplify the use of the “Pinter” construct).¹⁰

Orton’s reception

The process of Joe Orton’s critical reception, noted here in brief, underwent two major phases. The first phase relates to the production of his play *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (at the Arts Theatre Club, London, 6 May 1964) and the broadcast of the original version of *The Ruffian on the Stair* as radio drama, by the BBC (Third Programme, 31 August 1964). The production of *Entertaining Mr Sloane* received mixed reviews, many of which were reserved. In introducing Orton’s first play most reviewers relied (albeit implicitly) on the critical repertoire associated with Harold Pinter’s drama, relating to dramatic features such as the “obscure” nature of the play, the “madness” of the characters, the “nightmarish” atmosphere, and the centrality of the dialogue.¹¹ A few reviewers explicitly pointed out the “Pinterish” nature or style of Orton’s work. In his review for *The Guardian* (7 May 1964), Christopher Driver, for instance, contended that “Mr. Orton’s play, which sounds at the start like a bad farce, intended for the coach trade but takes on this Pinterish inconsequence and latent terror [...]” By drawing an affinity (either implicitly or explicitly) between Orton’s play and Pinter’s drama, the reviewers extended the legitimacy attributed to the (already recognized) work of his predecessor to the new play in question. Indeed, the reviewers’ perception of Orton’s work at this early stage of his career primarily relied on its association with Pinter’s drama. This perception was further supported by later critical and scholarly assessments of Orton’s early plays—*Entertaining Mr Sloane* and the radio version of *The Ruffian on the Stair* (later revised as a stage version, produced in 1966)—as largely influenced by Pinter’s drama.¹² It thus appears that although the reviewers’ perceptions (whether expressed directly or indirectly), as to the resemblance of Orton’s work to Pinter’s plays, seemed to have facilitated the initial

reception of Orton's drama, it also delayed their consideration of the characteristics unique to the latter dramatist's work, thereby hindering the emergence of an "Orton" construct.

The reviews following the 1966 London production of Orton's play *Loot* (at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre, 29 September) mark the major, second, phase of the dramatist's critical reception.¹³ This production, produced by Oscar Lewenstein and directed by Charles Marowitz, opened to enthusiastic reviews. Lewenstein's highly regarded name as a producer and Marowitz's authoritative standing as a director and critic undoubtedly contributed to the favourable reception of the play, which subsequently won both the Evening Standard Drama Award and the Play and Players Award for the Best Play of 1966. Moreover, Marowitz's active promotion, in particular the article he published in *The Guardian* (19 September 1964), ten days prior to the play's opening, as well as his theatrical reputation, also influenced the eventual critical perception of Orton's poetics. During this second phase an "Orton" construct finally emerged, consisting in attributes such as dark humour, comic snappy dialogue, satire of official attitudes to authority, crime and death and violently anarchic action; a construct largely echoed in the judges' citation for the awards bestowed on the play (the report appeared in the *Evening Standard*, 11 January 1967).¹⁴

It is noteworthy that two years after Orton's abrupt and tragic death in 1967, a scandalous reception¹⁵ greeted the posthumous production of his play *What the Butler Saw* (at the Queen's Theatre, London, 5 March 1969). Subsequently, the "Joe Orton Festival," held at the Royal Court in April to July 1975 (when Oscar Lewenstein was completing his term as artistic director), received in the main mixed reviews that reflect the critical controversy.¹⁶ Thus, while Orton's admission to the canon was marked by the emergence of his construct following *Loot*, his standing as a playwright, celebrated by the festival itself, has maintained its controversial nature (compatible indeed with the anarchic quality attributed to his dramatic style).

The Good and Faithful Servant

Orton's play *The Good and Faithful Servant* was broadcast on television four months after the dramatist had won two awards for Best Play of 1966 for *Loot* (and four months before he was murdered by Kenneth Halliwell). This specific timing of the play's broadcast can be seen as a significant factor in accounting for the critics' attitude to the work. It is reasonable to assume, notwithstanding the impressive cast (notably, Donald Pleasance playing George Buchman—the lead role—and Patricia Routledge playing Mrs. Vealfoy), that the decision to broadcast this play in 1967, although written in 1964, had relied to some extent on the dramatist's rising fame following *Loot*, while also being geared to cultivating it. In considering, however, Charney's view that this play "does not fit well with the other plays of Orton," ("Laodicean Tragedy" 148), it appears that the decision to broadcast this work might have been a poor move if intended to enhance the dramatist's theatrical reputation. Charney specifically notes that even if certain events or speeches (such as Mrs. Vealfoy's final speech) in the play might be ironic, "the irony is grim and unlike anything else in the works of Joe Orton" (144). He also points out that, despite some resemblance between *The Good and Faithful Servant* and Orton's *The Erpingham Camp* (broadcasted on television by Rediffusion in 1966), the latter "is a manic play full of excitement and violence that is distinctly missing from *The Good and Faithful Servant*" (144). He further contends that "[s]ome of the most effective scenes in *The Good and Faithful Servant* are wordless, which is, again, unusual for the jokey and epigrammatic Orton" (145). Unlike Orton's other plays, in which "the playwright sought vigorously to disguise his bitterness in one-liners, epigrams, polymorphous perversity, and knockabout farce," Charney finds *The Good and Faithful Servant* "much too bitter to be farcical" (148). In line with Charney's view, it seems probable, especially given that there are no available reviews of the play's broadcast, that the work failed at the time to attract any critical attention.¹⁷ Because of the critics' lack of interest in the play, possibly derived from

their perception that it was incompatible with Orton's recently emerged construct, and since the playwright's career was cut short soon thereafter, the fate of *The Good and Faithful Servant* was seemingly sealed as an overlooked play.

The perception of *The Good and Faithful Servant* as incompatible with the "Orton" construct may also account for the play's lack of revivals, especially when considering that the stage version of *The Ruffian on the Stair* and of *The Erpingham Camp* (both written originally for television) were produced (in a double-bill entitled *Crimes of Passion*) by the Royal Court in 1967; and, more significantly still, that the 1975 festival included revivals of three of Orton's plays: *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *Loot*, and *What the Butler Saw*. Indeed, the reviews of the festival's productions show that the "Orton" construct or, as it was labelled, the "Ortonesque" is seen to correspond with all three plays. It thus appears that the "Orton" construct that had emerged following *Loot* and been confirmed by the awards given to this play, was maintained by the 1967 production at the Royal Court, further cultivated by the 1975 festival, and has since come to be considered as the dramatist's trademark. As such, it subsequently served as a departure point for scholars engaging with Orton's work, becoming, in the critical/cultural discourse, a reference point to this dramatist's recognized, innovative contribution to the theatre. Consequently, *The Good and Faithful Servant*, seen as incongruent with the "Orton" construct, "has been more or less shunted aside," to quote Charney ("Orton's Bitter Farce" 21).

If the case of *The Good and Faithful Servant* can be explained by means of the general phenomenon of the playwright construct—exemplifying both the integral role of the construct in a dramatist's admission into the canon and its consequent impact on the evolving perceptions of the playwright's oeuvre—the particularity of this case as emerging from the specific context of Orton's overall career should be considered in the light of seemingly similar cases.

In considering the issue of a deviant work—a play seen as incompatible with a dramatist's previously devised construct—the careers

of Pinter and Stoppard, previously noted, serve yet again as instructive examples. The career of Harold Pinter illustrates a distinct example of a playwright who time and again seemed to challenge the critics by writing plays that were seen as incompatible with his devised construct (notably, *Betrayal*, *A Kind of Alaska* and the sequence of his overtly political plays). Pinter's long and successful career enabled him to establish an ongoing interaction, whether implicit or explicit, with critics and scholars of his work. Throughout his career he had practiced his authority in various ways to resist and counter critical classifications and categorizations, eventually exploiting his influence as a canonized dramatist to affect a change in his devised construct.¹⁸

Tom Stoppard's career, although differing from that of Pinter's in many respects, particularly where interaction with the critics is concerned, has also incorporated a significant number of plays that were seen by the critics (at times only initially) as more or less "deviant" works (a distinct example is *Arcadia*).¹⁹ Stoppard's long and successful career, much like Pinter's, has enabled the critics and eventually the scholars, too, to acquire a broader view of the dramatist's work within which they could locate, in one modifying way or another (e.g. dividing his works into phases), those plays that they perceived as deviating from the construct.

The reviewers' use of the construct, as exemplified (among others) in the cases of Pinter and Stoppard, indicates that the critics do not respond independently to each new play by the playwright in question, but rather react (at least initially) in accordance with their already-held overall perception of that playwright's distinctive theatrical expression. In other words, once the playwright has been admitted into the theatrical canon and eventually becomes established, the reviewers will tend to maintain the construct as previously devised. Typically, this involves a continuous critical reference to the devised construct or affirmation of it, in the responses to new works or revivals. This consistency, which in most cases is also revealed throughout the playwright's initial reception (i.e. the construct evolving from the package of attributes that has emanated from the early critical percep-

tions of the dramatist's plays), facilitates the communicative function that underlies the reviewers' discourse, contributing to the accessibility of the playwright's work. The reviewers' initial reactions to Pinter's "deviant" works, however, show how the critical tendency to hold on to the construct as devised is put to the test when an established playwright writes a play apparently incompatible with his previous works. Whether or not the play is "objectively" incompatible with the playwright's previous work is irrelevant here. What is significant is that, as reflected in their responses, many of the critics consider it to be so. Forced to react promptly, theatre reviewers tend to respond cautiously to what appears to be the "deviant" play of an established playwright. That is, the new work, which seems incompatible with the construct as devised, catches the critics by surprise and they do not have any ready-made alternative. From the start, therefore, they employ different, "emergency," modes rather than legitimize the playwright's unpredictable move, apparently seeking to re-affirm and preserve the existing critical repertoire associated with the playwright in question.²⁰ Moreover, although a playwright construct may undergo modification over time, theatre reviewers, even if acknowledging a possible change in the dramatist's poetics, primarily tend to employ circumventing tactics, reluctant in general to devise a construct anew (the critical responses to Pinter's play *A Kind of Alaska* offer a distinct example).²¹ Whereas the construct facilitates the reviewers in the prompt mediation of the dramatist's new plays, in the scholarly studies that follow the construct will be a given, a point of departure (a notable example is the use of the "Pinter" construct or, as it was labelled, the "Pinteresque" in numerous studies engaging with the dramatist's work).²² To this extent, theatre reviewers lay the groundwork for future critical assessments, including academic studies, which bear further influence in situating the playwright within cultural and historical memory.

As noted, Orton's career, unlike Pinter's or Stoppard's, spanned only three years, terminated by the dramatist's untimely death shortly after the emergence of his construct. Given the circumstances, his

canonical standing, albeit subject to future oscillations, has been maintained as conditioned by and closely bound to his devised construct. As a consequence, *The Good and Faithful Servant* has remained hitherto overlooked, awaiting an advocate to promote its theatrical significance.

Markedly, Charney's article reveals (between the lines, as it were) that a perspective of over three decades of the Orton oeuvre may lead to a differing assessment of this play within the context of the dramatist's writings. That is, in discussing the play, Charney suggests that this anomalous early work nonetheless contains a number of Orton's characteristics, albeit in a somewhat embryonic form (for instance, the attitude to law and order, the use of music, the discrepancy between the kind of situation and the sort of dialogue or exchange it evokes, the lack of sentimentality, and the character of both the "rebel" and the "figure of authority"). As such, *The Good and Faithful Servant* can be seen anew, not only as a highly powerful play in itself but also as a significant work in understanding Orton's all-to-brief development as a dramatist.

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NOTES

¹See, for example, Zarhy-Levo, *The Theatrical Critic* and *The Making of Theatrical Reputations*.

²See, for example, the titles by Bourdieu and the works of Rees, both of which are distinct representations of the institutional approach.

³For elaboration on the role and strategies of theatre reviewers in the reception of new playwrights, see Zarhy-Levo, *The Theatrical Critic* 1-9; 95-107. For a discussion of the case studies of the dramatists noted, see Zarhy-Levo, *The Theatrical Critic*, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations*, and "The 'Kane' Mark."

⁴See, for example, the review, "Denmark's Dynamic Duo," in *Esquire* (12 Apr. 1967) and Philip Hope-Wallace's review in *The Guardian* (12 Apr. 1967).

⁵For an expanded discussion on Stoppard's critical reception, see Zarhy-Levo, *The Theatrical Critic* 67-80.

⁶See also, for example, Milton Shulman's review in the *Evening Standard* (19 May 1958) and J. C. Trewin's review in *The Illustrated London News* (31 May 1958).

⁷See, for example, W. A. Darlington's review in *The Daily Telegraph*: "[...] it turned out to be one of those plays in which an author wallows in symbols and revels in obscurity." And the review, "Puzzling Surrealism of *The Birthday Party*," in *The Times* (20 May 1958): "Mr. Harold Pinter's effects are neither comic nor terrifying: they are never more than puzzling and after a little while we tend to give up the puzzle in despair." For an expanded discussion on Pinter's critical reception, see Zarhy-Levo, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations* 164-76.

⁸Rees claims that the attempts to endorse a judgment of a literary work "always implies a number of implicit comparisons: any work to which high quality is attributed is supposed to conform to as well as to differ significantly from the unchallenged masterpieces to which reference is made" ("Masterpiece" 411).

⁹For various examples of the ways a playwright construct is used through the dramatist's career, see Zarhy-Levo, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations*.

¹⁰See *The Daily Telegraph*, "Extracts from the Citations," 14 Oct. 2005. The name of the reporter for *The Daily Telegraph* was not specified on the cuttings, located at the Theatre Museum Collections, London.

¹¹See for example Bernard Levin in the *Daily Mail* (7 May 1964); Jeremy Kingston in *Punch* (May 13 1964); John Salt in the *Tatler* (15 July 1964) and the reviewer for *The Times*, "Hard to Define Triangle" (7 May 1964).

¹²Biggsby presents Orton's two early plays as "heavily influenced by Pinter [...]" (24). Taylor, Lahr and Esslin elaborate upon on the two versions of Orton's play *The Ruffian on the Stair*—the radio drama (BBC 1964) and the revised version intended for the stage (1966)—pointing out the resemblance between the first version and Pinter's early plays, as opposed to the distinctive Orton style (as a result of the dramatist's revisions, accounted and documented by Lahr) that emerges from the stage version.

¹³On the disastrous pre-London tour (1 Feb. 1965 to 19 Mar. 1965) of the first production of *Loot* (produced by Michael Codron), as well as on the critical responses to the stage production of *The Ruffian on the Stair* (1966) that can be seen as a transformation phase in the process of Orton's reception, see Zarhy-Levo, *The Theatrical Critic* 48-58.

¹⁴For further elaboration on the process of Orton's critical reception, see Zarhy-Levo, *The Theatrical Critic* 43-61.

¹⁵See, for example, David Nathan in *The Sun* (6 Mar. 1969); Fergus Cashin in the *Daily Sketch* (6 Mar. 1969); Felix Barker in the *Evening News* (6 Mar. 1969) and Irving Wardle in *The Times* (6 Mar. 1969).

¹⁶E.g., Irving Wardle's favourable review in *The Times* (18 Apr. 1975); John Barber's unfavourable review in *The Daily Telegraph* (18 Apr. 1975); Michael Coveney's favourable review in the *Financial Times* (17 July 1975), and Christopher Hudson's unfavourable review in the *Evening Standard* (7 July 1975).

¹⁷There are no reviews of the broadcast in the Theatre Museum Collections nor in the British Film Institute, National Library, London.

¹⁸On Pinter's "deviant" plays and his ongoing interaction with mediators of his work, see Zarhy-Levo, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations* 176-205.

¹⁹See Zarhy-Levo, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations* 92-95.

²⁰On the emergency modes employed by the critics when faced with a dramatist's "deviant" work, see Zarhy-Levo, "Critical Modes" 176-77.

²¹See Zarhy-Levo, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations* 177-80.

²²See, for example, Bold, Gale, and Gordon. It is also worth noting that the adjective "Pinteresque" even merited an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

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