

Richard Wagner and Yeats's Vision of Poetic Drama*

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Abstract: The paper examines the formative influence that the German composer Richard Wagner had on Yeats's early vision of poetic drama. In demarcating the sphere of Wagnerian influence on Yeats, it focuses on the difference between Wagner and Nietzsche on the cause of the downfall of Attic tragedy and the nature of cultural revival. The paper goes on finding Yeats's affinity with Wagner in their dramatic vision by looking at examples of his Wagnerian themed plays.

Key words: Yeats, Wagner, Nietzsche, poetic drama, Attic tragedy

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제목: 리하르트 바그너와 예이츠의 연극관

우리말 요약: 이 논문은 예이츠의 시극이론에 중요한 영향력을 행사한 인물 중 하나인 독일의 작곡가 리하르트 바그너에 초점을 맞춘다. 기존의 예이츠 연구에서 바그너는 서양지성사의 일반론적 맥락에서 언급된 것 외에 본격적으로 주목받지 못했다. 이 논문은 예이츠의 시극 이론과 아일랜드 문예부흥론을 바그너의 악극 이론과 예술론을 통해 새롭게 조명한다. 예이츠 미학의 초기에 발견되는 예술론과 시극이론에 주된 영향을 미친 인물로 니체보다 바그너에 더 주목함으로써 예이츠 연구에 새로운 지평선을 여는 데 그 목적을 둔다.

주제어: 예이츠, 바그너, 니체, 시극, 그리스 비극

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I

In the discussion of the late nineteenth-century European intellectual history, the name that is most often invoked is Richard Wagner (1813-83). (I say invoked, not discussed or analyzed, for reasons). His influence has been indeed far-reaching and universal, going beyond the mere confine of classical music: T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* and Joyce in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* quote directly from Wagner's operas; that quintessentially modernist technique of the interior monologue, first introduced by the French novelist Edouard Dujardin, was surely Wagner-inspired; the French Symbolist writers, starting with Baudelaire, were all Wagner-worshippers; painters such as Cezanne, Renoir, Degas and Whistler were labeled Wagnerian by their contemporaries; on the philosophic terrain, Wagner was the lasting influence on Nietzsche who himself has had an extraordinary influence on a wide variety of philosophers and writers, too many to name here (Magee, *Aspects* 47-56). And there is Bernard Shaw, who gave a wonderfully idiosyncratic analysis of Wagner's tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, in a long essay called "The Perfect Wagnerite" (1898).

Where does all this Wagnerian infection, or what Bryan Magee calls "Wagnerolatry" (*Aspects* 29) leave us, as we are concerned here with Yeats? Much of Yeats criticism conceives of Yeats's relationship with Wagner in terms of all-pervasive influence: few would, consciously or not, escape from the ideas and music of Wagner that were the defining feature of the new cultural milieu, and Yeats would be no exception. Furthermore, it has often been argued, Yeats knew his Symbolic poets and he knew his Nietzsche. Since, it goes on, both Symbolists and Nietzsche were under the heavy influence of Wagner, Yeats must also have been influenced by Wagner. In this fallacious syllogism, Wagner adumbrates the European influence of Symbolist poetics and Nietzschean philosophy on Yeats.¹⁾ Consequently,

Wagner's influence on Yeats loses its specificity as the German composer becomes a figurehead, the master/empty signifier of everything that is significant in the intellectual milieu of modern Europe.

Instead of exercising another generalized invocation of Wagner, Yeats studies should pay especial attention to the need to delineate the contours of Wagner's *specific* influence on Yeats. In order to do so, it is necessary to locate those textual and performative sites in which is found Yeats's (self-conscious) acceptance of and interaction with Wagner's aesthetics of musical drama. Pointers and markers are needed to be made for future studies of the relationship between Wagner and Yeats.

In this paper, I would like to focus on one such marker—Yeats between Wagner and Nietzsche. I believe we should try to avoid the confluence of Nietzsche and Wagner: there exist significant points of difference between Wagner and Nietzsche even *before* the latter's Wagnerian proselytizing days were over, that is, between Wagner and the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Even when the confluence of Wagner and Nietzsche appears legitimate, that is, when Wagner's idea was taken up and articulated by Nietzsche, critics often tend to credit the philosopher as authorial and responsible, as if establishing the philosophical connection between Yeats and the influential and more fashionable philosopher would add philosophical prestige and depth to Yeats's literary reputation.

The truth is much of what has often been identified as the Nietzschean influence in Yeats should be more properly called Wagnerian. Yeats had known and admired Wagner before he became interested in Nietzsche: indeed, "Nietzsche's praise of Wagner was one element attracting Yeats to the philosopher" (McAteer 60). Yeats's vision of poetic drama in the years leading up to the opening of the Abbey Theatre was essentially informed by Wagner who saw, better than anyone, the imaginative power of myth in creating a unified national consciousness. In Yeats's early critical writings, it

was Wagner who was most often invoked as the supreme model for cultural revival. Also, the Wagnerian themes and visions are clearly discernable in Yeats's dramatic work. However, it is ultimately Yeats's *vision* of poetic drama where Wagner's influence is most strongly felt.

II

The tumultuous relationship Nietzsche had with Wagner has been one of the better known and documented episodes of modern intellectual history. Although fascinating, Nietzsche's lacerating sense of betrayal, psychological as well as intellectual, that led him to sever all his ties with Wagner, does not concern us here. What interests us is whether there exists a substantial difference between Wagner and the early, Wagner-worshipping Nietzsche that enables us to mark up Wagner *contra* Nietzsche instead of the conflated Wagner—Nietzsche often attributed solely to the philosopher, in the Yeatsian sphere of influence. In order to locate and demarcate the area of their divergence, it is essential to compare Nietzsche's view on Greek tragedy and Wagner's musical drama and Wagner's own conception of musical drama.

Nietzsche's major thesis in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) is genealogical and presentist at the same time. It is genealogical in the sense that the philosopher traces the downfall of Attic tragedy in the breakdown of the dialectic of the Apollonian beauty of form and the Dionysian surge of blind energy. It is not that Nietzsche basks in the destructive spectacle of irrational forces. The appearance of the rational world with its illusions of logical action and meaningful language expressed in the beauty of art form is a necessary condition to live and maintain life. What Attic tragedians revealed, however, is the terrifying truth that exists behind and beneath the surface calm and beauty of the phenomenal world. The exuberant energy of blind, chaotic and irrational

forces that cannot be completely drowned and submerged below the rational(ized) surface of the world is what Nietzsche calls Dionysian, an ecstatic ritual in which actors and audiences plunge into the joy of incomprehensible suffering. It is the combination and interplay of the two opposing drives of Apollo and Dionysus that renders Attic tragedy to be the zenith of human achievements. *The Birth of Tragedy* is therefore a genealogical essay on "how the Dionysian and the Apollonian have dominated the essence of the Hellenic in an ongoing sequence of new births in a relationship of reciprocal stimulation and intensification" (Nietzsche 33).

According to Nietzsche, the Dionysian affirmation of irrational joy of suffering had been all but erased in the now exclusively Apollonian tragedies of Euripides whose philosophical rationalism was fed by Socrates. However, Nietzsche's approach is also presentist because his view of Attic tragedy is colored in precisely such a way as to justify his claim that Wagner's art is the modern-day realization of the Attic ideals. The long process, starting from Socrates and Euripides, of the emasculation of Western art and philosophy has reached the point of total impasse in Nietzsche's own time. As history's irony has it, it is precisely at this point that Wagner has emerged as the creative genius of new art, his music offering the full realization and embodiment of the Dionysian principle. Using the binary of the Apollonian and Dionysian, Nietzsche justifies his parallel apotheosis of Attic tragedy and Wagner's musical drama.

Written in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War (1870), *The Birth of Tragedy* is tinged with political optimism unfamiliar in Germany's history. For Nietzsche, the ecstatic music of Wagner heralding the new era of Germany's cultural rejuvenation was *complimentary* with its political rise. The unifying force of politics and art that the philosopher saw gathering rapidly in Germany was projected back on Athens before the fall of Attic tragedy. Hence the historical parallel between the Germany of Wagner and the Greece

of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The optimistic alliance of art and politics is what separates Nietzsche and Wagner, and, as for that matter, Yeats. For both Wagner and Yeats, political pessimism was to be substituted by cultural revival.

Whereas Nietzsche attributed the collapse of Attic tragedy to the rise of rationalism embodied in the philosophy of Socrates and the drama of Euripides, Wagner conceived of the problem in political terms: as Bryan Magee writes, "Wagner attributed the decline of Greek drama to the political decline of Greece: the Greek city states lost their power, wealth and importance, and became run-down societies" (*Tristan Chord* 298). With the political decline came the cultural waning. For Wagner, high hopes raised by the tide of political revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848 were so rapidly frustrated by the reactionary politics that set right in. Now, in the absence of revolutionary politics, his musical drama would instead point to the possibility and realization of a revolutionary cultural project. Bayreuth was to be the sacred site of a new cultural politics. Dublin was a long way from Bayreuth, of course, and financial and artistic resources available for Yeats were negligible compared to those for Wagner. And yet, the Irish poet's ambitions were equal to those of the German composer. Yeats envisioned his cultural project as the only viable alternative to the failed Irish nationalist politics in the aftermath of Parnell's death.

The central thesis of *The Birth of Tragedy* is that the supreme achievement of Attic tragedy was made possible because it thrived on two warring impulses, the Apollonian and Dionysian. According to Nietzsche, Greek drama found its miraculous perfection in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles where the Apollonian form of rational beauty is fully matched by the Dionysian cry of irrational suffering. However, the dynamic of these polarities is absent in Wagner's discussion of Greek drama. Wagner found the creative source of his art in the total unity of human arts rather than the

struggle of oppositional forces. Magee summarizes often not quotable and excruciatingly long and obscure writings of Wagner in these succinct words:

First, it represented a successful combination of the arts--poetry, drama, costumes, mime, instrumental music, dance, song--and as such had greater scope and expressive powers than any of the arts alone. Second, it took its subject-matter from myth, which illuminates human experience to the depths and in universal terms. . . . Third, both the content and the occasion of performance had religious significance. But fourth, this was a religion of "purely human," a celebration of life. . . . And fifth, the entire community took part. (*Aspects* 5-6)

For Wagner, Greek tragedy is the highest form of human creative achievement because of its all-embracing unity as art-form, its mythic subject, and its total community involvement in the celebration of humanity.

Yeats's poetic vision that thrives on life's antinomies was the product of his serious engagement with Nietzsche whose philosophy the poet found to be in perfect harmony with William Blake (Yeats would exclaim that Nietzsche completes Blake!). However, it was not until the autumn of 1902 when John Quinn, the American lawyer, sent him English translations of Nietzsche's major writings that Yeats was able to immerse himself in Nietzsche's ideas. In Yeats's critical and dramatic writings that were written prior to his reading of the German philosopher, we find the young poet-dramatist not only heaping praise on Wagner (most strikingly in his 1897 essay on "The Celtic Element in Literature") but exuberantly playing on Wagnerian chords: a youthful yearning for tragic ecstasy in tandem with a belief in the very possibility of the totality of experience, the unity in which antinomies of life and work and nature and art are dialectically superseded.

The totality of experience alone, which subsumes all technical branches and theoretical offshoots, can be a proper object of artistic realization.

Cultural revolutions aim at the fullest realization of experiential totality, and when that realization is achieved, they become a genuine alternative to political revolutions that failed invariably all over Europe including the politically fragmented Germany and colonial Ireland of the nineteenth-century. In this sense, Yeats's self-appointment as the cultural successor of Charles Parnell is profoundly Wagnerian in its burning ambition and grandiose self-delusion.

However, Yeats's early conviction that in the wake of the Parnell fiasco, culture was the only viable force of national unity was contradicted by the Irish historical experience because, as F. S. L. Lyons points out, culture "has been a force that has worked against the evolution of a homogeneous society and in so doing has been an agent of anarchy rather than of unity" (2). The Irish cultural revival, as envisioned by Yeats, was to be more a divisive force than a unifying one. Not surprisingly, then, Yeats's relationship with his own theatre would undergo a radical change from high optimism to bitter resignation.

III

In "The Reform of the Theatre" published in 1903 in *Samhain*, an annual journal published by Yeats, the poet-dramatist writes about the need for radical reform of the Irish theatre in no uncertain words: "I think the theatre must be reformed in its plays, its speaking, its acting, and its scenery. That is to say, I think there is nothing good about it at present" (277). He had in mind those Victorian plays in which flamboyant gestures and overdone scenery and costumes are intended to cover up the lack of intellectual excitement generated by literary refinement of poetic speeches. Mimetic drama is incapable of embodying and expressing beauty and truth which should be

the ultimate purpose of art and literature. In order "to restore words to their sovereignty" (277), acting, costumes and scenery should all be inconspicuous, not drawing attention to themselves and obeying the rhythms and patterns of poetic speech. Yeats was not advocating a somnambulistic reduction of drama to a poetic recital. What he was aiming at was no less than total realization of literary properties of spoken language. Poetic drama for Yeats was to be a living literature fully embodied and realized in sight and sound. In this, he concurred with Wagner's vision of musical drama.

Reacting vehemently to the extravagance of romantic operas that were characterized by exaggerated gestures, flamboyant costumes and scenery, and overripe music accompanying often silly dramatic action and inane libretto, Wagner desired to create a musical drama that concentrates on fully realizing the unity of music and text. Both music and text are expressive media of drama. According to Carl Dahlhaus, "[t]he central category in Wagner's aesthetic theory of musical drama is 'realization'" (157). Realization, a Hegelian concept, refers to the internal necessity art possesses to externalize itself. For Wagner, the so-called absolute music is only absolute unto itself, expressing its absoluteness without presenting that absoluteness to the perceptions of others. When expressed (i.e., performed), absolute music therefore is reduced to a subjective experience. Only in musical drama can the objective and subjective be united to create a singularly meaningful experience.

Yeats shared the Wagnerian idea of dramatic realization in his conception of poetic drama. Poetic drama is often misunderstood as either the dramatization of poetry or the poeticization of drama. The generic hybridization of poetry and drama meant little for Yeats whose vision gears toward the mythic transcendence of the mundane and quotidian world through the unity of dramatic action and poetic diction. Dramatic concentration is realized in poetic language, and poetic freedom is embodied in concentrated drama.

Reflecting on the two decades of their achievement at the Abbey, Yeats

wrote these words to Lady Gregory in 1919:

Our dramatists, and I am not speaking of your work or Synge's but of those to whom you and Synge and I gave opportunity, have been excellent just in so far as they have become all eye and ear, their minds not smoking lamps, as at times they would have wished, but clear mirrors. . . . We have been the first to create a true 'People's Theatre,' and we have succeeded because it is not an exploration of local color, or of a limited form of drama possessing a temporary novelty, but the first doing of something for which the world is ripe, something that will be done all over the world and done more and more perfectly: the making articulate of all the dumb classes each with its own knowledge of the world, its own dignity, but all objective with the objectivity of the office and the workshop, of the newspaper and the street, of mechanism and of politics. Yet we did not set out to create this sort of theatre, and its success has been to me a discouragement and a defeat. (*CWVIII* 127-28)

The Abbey now is a successful theater. However, its success is mainly commercial, with the original purpose and vision of a national theater heavily compromised by the crude materialism of its day. The myopic self-interest of the largely middle-class audience is best expressed by realistic drama whose realism draws on the class it tries to represent. It is precisely this self-enclosure of artistic provincialism devoid of genuine emotion, this lock-up of bourgeois culture and economy in the name of empty objectivity, that troubles Yeats. Almost two decades further on, Yeats laments the sad reality that even the artistic solidarity thought to be cemented between Synge, Lady Gregory and Yeats himself had been broken up, his poetic drama left out of favor at the Abbey: "my audience was for comedy, for Synge, for Lady Gregory, for O'Casey, not for me" (*CWII* 24). In the course of Yeats's long relationship with the Abbey audience, we find that early enthusiasm gives way to rueful grudge which in turn gives way to bitter resignation.

Yeats's failure as the Abbey dramatist compelled him to find inspirational

sources in the internal antinomies of his art and his life. Nevertheless, by the time he wrote "The Choice" and "Vacillation," Yeats was no longer modelling himself after the Nietzschean hero: instead of riding joyously on the antinomies, he was suffering them. When the suffering turned into an old man's rage, we would meet the Yeats of "The Spur" and *Purgatory*. At one level, therefore, the familiar tripartite view of Yeats's life (the early, middle, and late periods) would translate rather comfortably into one of the Wagnerian, Nietzschean, and post-Nietzschean stages.

IV

Wagner's exposition on the glorious achievement of Greek drama is geared toward his own vision of musical drama. As we have seen, Greek tragedy is the highest form of human creative achievement for the German composer because of its all-embracing unity as art-form, its mythic subject, and its total community involvement in the celebration of humanity. In short, what Wagner saw as essential elements of Greek drama would also constitute his musical drama as *Gesamtkunstwerk*—total art work. It should be clear by now that Yeats articulated his own vision of Irish Literary Theatre along Wagner's revolutionary project. Yeats's poetic drama shared essentials with Wagner's musical drama except that the musical element of Wagner's art would be replaced by poetry. Indeed, the idea of the Irish Literary Theatre as a public forum for poetic drama that would "restore words to their sovereignty" (Yeats, *CWIII* 27) was inspired by what Barry Millington calls "the musico-poetic synthesis" that lies at the center of the mature Wagnerian musical drama: it consists in "the blending of melody and the spoken word into a line that liberated music in order to proclaim the drama instead of being constricted in regular patterns and pre-determined forms" (203).

It was not only Wagner's theory of musical drama that found a clear echo in Yeats's vision of poetic drama. Yeats borrowed from Wagner some of the important dramatic themes for his early pre-Nietzschean plays. Set in a cottage near Killala in 1798 on the eve of the Irish Rebellion, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) centers on a young man named Michael Gillane and his inexplicable attraction to an old haggardly woman who hovers around his house. She tells the Gillanes about her "four beautiful green lands" (*CWII* 88) that was taken away from her. Her mysterious story is continued into a song about "yellow-haired Donough that was hanged in Galway" (*CWII* 89), the man she tells who died for the love of her. The same magic spell that worked on Donough is cast on Michael, and he finally decides to forego his marriage and material comfort to join the French forces and Irish rebels at Killala, an important battlefield during the Rebellion. As Michael accepts her demand for an unconditional self-sacrifice ("If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all" (*CWII* 90)), she praises in song those who have willingly given themselves up for her:

They shall be remembered for ever,
 They shall be alive for ever,
 They shall be speaking for ever,
 The people shall hear them for ever. (*CWII* 92)

As the play ends, the old woman is transfigured into "a young girl" who now has "the walk of a queen" (*CWII* 93). The old woman represents The Poor Old Woman, or Shan Van Vocht as Irish legend has it, the symbol and personification of Ireland. She is also a vampiric being in the line of the Irish tradition, living off the blood of young men. However, she is also a Valkyrie. This Irish Brünnhilde will lead those young mortals into the Irish Valhalla, the sanctuary of immortal heroes, to be remembered forever. By

turning them into national heroes, Yeats brings the Scandinavian originary epic down to the level of national history without losing its mythic power.

It was Yeats's compatriot, Bernard Shaw, who in his "The Perfect Wagnerite" advanced a brilliantly idiosyncratic account that sees Wagner's epic tetralogy as the allegory of human greed and its fateful consequences in the development of capitalist economic system.²⁾ Shaw's interpretation of Wagner's musical drama was carried in tandem with his reformist politics of Fabian socialism. Yeats's appropriation of Wagner on the other hand was carried at the national-mythic level. He fuses the Scandinavian and Irish myths in a powerfully direct way to create a play that is imbued with both nationalist historical overtones and Wagnerian mythic undertones.

Another example of Yeats's Wagnerian-themed drama is *The Countess Cathleen*. Published first in *The Countess Cathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* in 1892, the play was the inaugural production of the Irish Literary Theatre, performed at the Ancient Concert Rooms in Dublin in 1899. Set "in Ireland and in old times" (*CWII* 27) during a famine, the idealistic Countess of the title sells her soul to the devil so that she can save her tenants from starvation and from damnation for having sold their own souls. After her death, she is redeemed as her motives were altruistic and ascends to Heaven. Famously recounted by Joyce in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the Dublin performance of the play created an uproar thanks to the Countess's Faust-like pact with the devil.

Its dubious morality apart, the play was controversial for its political implications. As Roy Foster astutely observes, "[Yeats's] demon soul-merchants must, to a contemporary audience, have looked like Protestant proselytizers or English oppressors; and Famine Ireland was, to any reader of John Mitchell, an inescapably political *mise-en-scène*" (209). However, it was Arthur Griffith who, in the IRB-based *United Irishman*, pointed to the Wagnerian aspect of the play: "it was so Wagnerian as to be 'un-Irish':

Yeats's 'Celtic-named puppets' were really 'Teutonic dolls'" (Foster 212). Like *Ni Houlihan*, this Cathleen is modelled after Wagner's Brünnhilde in that the act of defiance against her God-Father's express will (the Christian God and Wotan) is in truth the act of recognizing and fulfilling his inner desire. Thus, betrayal on the moral level is obedience on the divine terrain.

The Countess Cathleen was written expressly for Maud Gonne, who refused to play it but was recognized in Yeats's dedication. Gonne accepted Yeats's invitation to play the eponymous role in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Yeats, it seems, saw in Maud Gonne his ideal Brünnhilde: it was the Irish avant-garde writer George Moore who in his novel *Evelyn Innes* gave the portrayal of Yeats through a character named Ulik Deane, with his "unrequited adoration of the Wagnerian heroine" (qtd. in Foster 199). It is perhaps no coincidence that Maud Gonne named one of her daughters Iseult, the Irish princess to be married to the king of Cornwall in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

In *Where There Is Nothing*, which was published in 1902 and produced two years later in London, Yeats creates his true alter ego in the character Paul Ruttledge: he is a poet who wants to live poetry. Identity, not antinomy, was the keyword for Yeats's poetic diction. The irreconcilable antinomy of life and work that was to be expressed in "The Choice" was alien to Yeats at this time. And yet, as James Pethica points out, Yeats's early aesthetic inclinations were increasingly tuned on a pessimistic tone (209). Daniel Came has argued convincingly that the abiding principle that runs through all of Nietzsche's writings is that "illusion is a necessary condition of the affirmation of life" (211). Nietzsche's philosophical journey is one of overcoming: he was compelled to go beyond Wagner and Schopenhauer who, between them, shared a belief in art's consolation of life's horror, not the philosophic affirmation of it. Even at the height of their pessimism, Wagner and Yeats never relinquished their faith in the anamnestic power of national

myth. Perhaps the longing for the totality of human experiences we find in Wagner and Yeats has also made them politically vulnerable: the Nazi exploitation of Wagner and the subsequent defamation of him is probably the main reason for the willful ignorance of Wagner among critics in any discussion of his influence on Yeats; in his turn, Yeats in his last years flirted with reactionary politics, the notoriety of which R. F. Foster, for instance, has tried to curtail by calling it an “episodic interest in Fascism” (213). In the end, it seems that Wagner, rather than Nietzsche, offers a better guiding light on the development of the young Yeats’s vision of poetic drama.

Notes

- 1) Yeats’s relationship with the Symbolists has been well established and amply documented: it suffices to mention Katharine Worth’s *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*, especially because her book focuses, among others, on the Symbolist relevance to the dramatic work of Yeats. For Yeats’s indebtedness to Nietzsche, see Moses (2004, 2010). On the Belgian Symbolist Maeterlinck’s influence on Yeats, see Albright 15-16.
- 2) It must be pointed out that Shaw’s idiosyncratic and politically motivated view of Wagner’s Ring Cycle has been artistically vindicated when Bayreuth put on a production of it in celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the founding of Bayreuth festival in 1976. Directed by Patrice Chereau and conducted by Pierre Boulez, it was “the most sensational production since 1876,” the controlling idea of which was “Shavian” (Spotts 281-82).

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