

“Tell Thou the Tale”: Shakespeare’s Taming of Folktales in *The Taming of the Shrew*

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Abstract

William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* adapts two European folktales, “The Taming of the Shrew” (ATU 901) and “Lord for a Day” (ATU 1531). The playwright adapts these tales in order to negotiate his role as storyteller with the audience, alternately insisting on his right to innovate and deferring to the audience by allowing them to choose among multiple possible endings.

Introduction

Following Jan Harold Brunvand’s work on the folktale “The Taming of the Shrew” (ATU 901 [see Uther 2004]) in the 1960s (Brunvand 1966; 1991), Shakespearean scholars have begun to acknowledge that this tale is the source for the Katherine–Petruccio plot in William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. Scholarly editions of the play—such as those by Arden, Oxford, and New Cambridge, as well as the New Cambridge edition of the anonymous 1594 play, *The Taming of A Shrew*—have agreed that the folktale is closer to the play than the literary analogues more generally cited (see Morris 1981, 72–4; Oliver 1982, 49–50; Thompson 2003, 12–13; Miller 1998, 12–20). Analysis of the relation of the tale to the play, however, has been limited to these wide-ranging critical introductions. Critics have yet to grapple fully with the question of how Shakespeare adapted this traditional narrative. Even less recognised is the fact that the Christopher Sly plot of the Inductions is also based on a folktale, “Lord for a Day” (ATU 1531). Shakespeare constructed his play from stories that his audience, literate and illiterate, urban and provincial, already knew. If we see the plots of the play as common property, the dynamic between author and audience becomes visible. In this early play, Shakespeare adapts the “Shrew” folktale in order to assert his rights as a storyteller to tell a familiar tale, and yet to break from tradition when his creative will requires it. In his adaptation of the “Lord” tale, however, he does precisely the opposite by neglecting to provide an ending to the story, allowing the audience to choose among several possibilities.

The Taming of the Folktale

A Danish version of the “Shrew” tale, “The Most Obedient Wife,” is perhaps the closest to Shakespeare’s play, a point also made by both Warrick R. Bond (1905, li–lii) and Jan Brunvand (1991, 18). Here follows a summary of Sven Grundtvig’s version of the story:

A man has three daughters, the eldest of whom is contrary and stubborn. While the two younger sisters easily find husbands, no one will marry the eldest. One day a stranger arrives and expresses his interest in the one daughter remaining at home. Her father warns the young man of his daughter's temper, but the visitor persists in his desire to marry her. On the day of the wedding, the groom arrives dressed in ordinary travelling clothes, rather than in the finery appropriate to the occasion, and on horseback with his dog rather than driving the customary coach. After the ceremony, he declares that the newly married couple can't stay for their own feast, but must return immediately to his house.

On the voyage, the bride drops her glove, and her husband orders his dog to pick it up. When the dog doesn't respond, he shoots it dead. When they come to a water crossing, he instructs the horse that the bride's dress must not be splashed. When the dress is wetted, the groom shoots the horse. He tells the bride to carry the saddle on her back; intimidated, she instantly does as he says.

After a few months pass, the husband suggests that they go to visit his wife's family, at which she is very pleased. On the trip, they see a flock of rooks. "What beautiful white birds!" the husband comments. "No, dear, they are black," his wife replies. He claims the weather is too poor to continue travelling, and they return home. A month later, he suggests the visit again. On the way they see a flock of sheep. "What a fine pack of wolves," he says. "You mean sheep, dear," she replies, and once again they return home. A month later, they repeat the attempt. A flock of swans passes overhead. "That was a fine flock of storks," says the husband. The wife agrees.

The husband and wife are finally reunited with her parents and two married sisters. One evening, the father proposes a contest to his sons-in-law, saying he will give a silver cup full of silver coins to the husband of the most obedient wife. The youngest daughter's husband calls her, but she is slow in coming. The husband of the middle sister does the same; she also delays before answering. The husband of the eldest daughter calls his wife, who has a large dish of food in her hands. "Take this dish from me!" she says to her sisters, and when they do not do so immediately, she drops it on the floor so that she can run to answer her husband. And so he wins the bet, and they live happily ever after (Grundtvig 1902, 215–23).

By the time Katherine and Petruchio reach his house, the audience has recognised the folktale elements: the eldest shrewish daughter, [1] the insistent stranger, and the travesty of a wedding, all follow the familiar narrative. Now, squarely in Petruchio's territory, Shakespeare asserts his prerogative as storyteller. We thus hear about the post-wedding trip from Grumio, Petruchio's servant, who recounts it to Curtis, another servant.

GRUMIO: First know my horse is tired, my master and mistress fallen out.

CURTIS: How?

GRUMIO: Out of their saddles into the dirt, and thereby hangs a tale.

CURTIS: Let's ha't, good Grumio.

GRUMIO: Lend thine ear.

CURTIS: Here.

GRUMIO: There. [*Strikes him.*]

CURTIS: This 'tis to feel a tale, not to hear a tale.

GRUMIO: And therefore 'tis called a sensible tale; and this cuff was but to knock at your ear and beseech listening. Now I begin. *Inprimis*, we came down a fowl hill, my master riding behind my mistress—

CURTIS: Both of one horse?

GRUMIO: What's that to thee?

CURTIS: Why, a horse.

GRUMIO: Tell thou the tale. But hadst thou not crossed me, thou shouldst have heard how her horse fell, and she under her horse; thou shouldst have heard in how miry a place, how she was bemoiled, how he left her with the horse upon her, how he beat me because her horse stumbled, how she waded through the dirt to pluck him off me, how he swore, how she prayed, that never prayed before, how I cried, how the horses ran away, how her bridle was burst, how I lost my crupper, with many things of worthy memory, which now shall die in oblivion, and thou return unexperienced to thy grave (Act 4 scene 1, lines 47–75). [2]

Curtis's interruption "Both of one horse?" is, as critics have noted, a nod to the folktale (Brunvand 1966, 354 note 26; 1991, 194; Thompson 2003, 12 and note on Act 4 scene 1, line 50). He anticipates a crucial detail: there can only be one horse if bride and groom are to walk the rest of the journey, carrying the horse's gear, once the groom kills it. Much like the playhouse audience, Curtis knows the tale and expects it to be told in the traditional manner. Grumio, however, is telling a different story, and is put out by Curtis's interference: "Tell thou the tale." Grumio, the smart-mouthed, even abusive, servant here takes on Shakespeare's voice. This episode is "a cuff . . . but to knock at [the audience's] ear and beseech listening." The whole passage is insistently framed as storytelling by the slapstick surrounding hearing and telling, and by Grumio's mock refusal to narrate the events. Just as Grumio is not telling the story even as he is—he tells Curtis what he would have heard had he not interrupted—so Shakespeare is not telling the folktale, even as he is.

In addition to giving Grumio/Shakespeare the opportunity to exercise his power as storyteller, the changes to the episode of the homeward voyage make for a kinder, gentler husband. Petruchio does not kill animals, even though the horse's failure has the same result as in the Danish story—muddying the bride's dress. He instead limits his violence to farcical beatings of his servants. The remnants of the folktale version of the voyage to the husband's house evident in the play underline this. Once Petruchio and Katherine arrive at his house, he begins barking demands, among them "Some water here, what ho? Where's my spaniel Troilus?" (Act 4 scene 1, lines 136–7). Knowing the folktale as well as Curtis does, we may fear for Troilus's life, especially given a literary version in the Infante Don Juan Manuel's *Count Lucanor* in which the husband kills the dog after he does not fetch water on command (Brunvand 1991, 195). [3] The dog's name, too, is ominous. While the name "Troilus" is a byword for faithfulness, making the name similar to "Fido" in meaning, it also connotes loyalty monstrously betrayed. Petruchio's request is completely inconsequential, however; Troilus does not come and is not mentioned again, and a servant enters with water, as specified in the Folio stage directions. Moreover, while in most versions the wife must carry the saddle home when the horse has died, a few variants take this further. In a Russian version of the tale, the husband hitches his wife to the sledge and has her pull it once the horse is no more (Afanas'ev 1945, 161–2). A Virginian version specifies that the wife has the saddle on her back and the reins around her neck (Chase 1956, 226–7). In several versions of the tale analysed in Brunvand's study, the husband saddles and rides his wife (Brunvand 1991, 92 and 166). Petruchio's notorious statement that his wife is his property—"My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything" (Act 3 scene 2, line 230)—may be another reflection of the animal-like abjection of the wife in the folktale. Katherine, however, is figuratively but not literally made a beast of burden.

Having asserted his power over the audience to tell the tale as he will, Shakespeare now makes the audience explicitly parallel to the tamed Katherine, forced to reject what she knows. While in the Danish folktale the bride must agree with her husband that swans are storks, Shakespeare's Katherine must agree that the sun is the moon and that an old man is a young woman. Shakespeare chooses to diverge from the folktale in ways that point to the extra-diegetic "real world" of the theatre, so that Katherine's truth is also the audience's truth. When Petruchio, planning the trip to Bianca's wedding, says, "I think 'tis now some seven o'clock," Katherine objects, "I dare assure you, sir, 'tis almost two," to which Petruchio responds:

Look what I speak, or do, or think to do,
 You are still crossing it. Sirs, let't alone,
 I will not go today, and ere I do,
 It shall be what o'clock I say it is (Act 4 scene 3, lines 184–92).

For all the audience knows, in the world of the play it could be seven o'clock—time is established only by what the characters say. Given that performances began in the early afternoon and continued for two or so hours (Gurr 1980, 161–2), it may very well have been "almost two" in the theatre at the moment Katherine says it is. Likewise, on the voyage to see Katherine's family, Petruchio points out the moon, to which Katherine responds, "The moon? The sun! It is not moonlight now" (Act 4 scene 5, line 3), just as the sun was over the amphitheatre at that moment. The audience is in Katherine's position. Just as Curtis and the audience have to reject what they know—the folktale—at Shakespeare's insistence, so Katherine must reject what she knows at Petruchio's insistence.

While Katherine initially responds with resentment, as well she might, to Petruchio's insistence that she succumb to his accounts of the world, ultimately she enters into his world imaginatively and playfully. In this way, she provides a model of both the audience and author as they enter into this new version of the folktale. When old Vincentio enters, Petruchio says:

Good morrow, gentle mistress, where away?
 Tell me, sweet Kate, and tell me truly too,
 Hast thou beheld a fresher gentlewoman?
 Such a war of white and red within her cheeks!
 What stars do spangle heaven with such beauty
 As those two eyes become that heavenly face?
 Fair lovely maid, once more good day to thee.
 Sweet Kate, embrace her for her beauty's sake.

Katherine, vying to outdo Petruchio's ornate compliment, approaches Vincentio with:

Young budding virgin, fair, and fresh, and sweet,
 Whither away, or where is thy abode?
 Happy the parents of so fair a child,
 Happier the man whom favourable stars
 Allots thee for his lovely bedfellow (Act 4 scene 5, lines 27–40).

We can gather that Katherine is enjoying herself not only from the high-flown hyperbole of her verse, but also from Vincentio's address to her as "my merry

mistress" (Act 4 scene 5, line 52). Her submission to Petruchio is not abasement because the very enthusiasm and exaggeration of Katherine's speech mark it as a performance. She has made both Petruchio's demand and her fulfilment of it ridiculous. This is also true, as I read it, of her final speech on wifely obedience, making her submission a performance that opens up the possibility of its critique. In addition to seeing Katherine's imaginative entry into Petruchio's world as a model for the audience's submission to Shakespeare's version of the story, we can also see it as a model for Shakespeare's imaginative entry into the folktale. Stephen Roy Miller argues that "Shakespeare was not adapting the folktale straightforwardly, but ironically" (1998, 14). He points to the changes that make Petruchio less of a violent ogre than the folktale husband, and concludes that "Shakespeare overwrites the 'old testament' of Type 901 with the 'new testament' of domestic relations," a humanist emphasis on eschewing domestic physical abuse (Miller 1998, 14). Shakespeare alters the traditional shrew-taming tale, like and through Katherine (and Petruchio, who is constantly performing as tamer), by following it closely and overenthusiastically, caricaturing it.

Having tamed his audience as well as the folktale, Shakespeare can now expect their collusion and even share a joke with them about it. Earlier in the play, Shakespeare had pointed to the conditions of the playhouse, the fact that performances took place in the early afternoon, in a way that confirmed the fiction. In the Vincentio scene and at the end of the play, he points to the fact of cross-dressed boys playing female roles, which does not confirm but rather undermines his fiction. When Petruchio and Katherine address Vincentio as if he were a girl, Hortensio says aside, "A will make the man mad, to make the woman of him" (Act 4 scene 5, line 35). This moment would surely remind the audience that the young man playing Katherine had been made a woman.

A final adaptation to the folktale likewise draws attention to the cross-dressing convention. Katherine's penultimate act of obedience, before her long speech on wifely duty, is to throw the cap she is wearing onto the floor at Petruchio's command. As Brunvand points out, this is a less bawdy version of the concluding episode in some versions of the folktale in which the wife is ordered to undress before the group, or in which the summons from her husband comes while she is in the bath, and she wins the wager by arriving immediately, without taking time to dress. Here is a prime example of Brunvand's (1991, 124–6) argument that the changes Shakespeare made to the folktale replaced an unstageable with a stageable action. Not only was nudity impossible on the public stage, but if the actor playing Katherine was to disrobe the audience would have beheld a naked boy, not a naked woman. Shakespeare alerts us to this fact earlier in the play, in the second Induction. As part of the trick on Sly, the Lord causes one of his pages, Bartholomew, to dress up as Sly's wife. Upon meeting, Sly and his "wife" have the following exchange:

- SLY: Madam wife, they say that I have dream'd
And slept above some fifteen year or more.
- PAGE: Ay, and the time seems thirty unto me,
Being all this time abandon'd from your bed.
- SLY: 'Tis much. Servants, leave me and her alone.
Madam, undress you and come now to bed.

PAGE: Thrice-noble lord, let me entreat of you,
To pardon me yet for a night or two (Induction 2, lines 113–20).

Sly's command to the page to undress, if followed, would give away the game, so that Bartholomew must quickly back-pedal from his initial provocation. The joke itself is made explicitly parallel to the early modern stage by the gratuitous cross-dressing of the boy to play a female role. While women could not act on stage, they could participate in private practical jokes. A female servant or the Lord's actual wife could more easily have taken part in the trick on Sly. In fact, when Shakespeare's Inductions were rewritten in the eighteenth century as a farce entitled *The Cobler of Preston*, a female servant participated in the practical joke by playing Sly-as-Lord's wife. [4] Now that women could act, the point of having a boy take on the role was obviated. By underlining that the women on stage were boys, Shakespeare acknowledges the mental accommodations the audience makes to accept this translation of the folktale to the theatre.

Sly as Lord for a Day

Before the shrew taming tale even begins, Shakespeare launches into a different folktale. The two opening scenes of the play, the Inductions, establish for the audience within the first forty lines that they are seeing a version of this story. Christopher Sly, a tinker, is kicked out of a tavern for drunk and disorderly behaviour. He falls unconscious on the ground, and a Lord, out hunting, comes across him. The Lord decides to carry Sly back to his house, dress him in rich clothes, and convince him that he is in fact a lord who has, because of insanity, believed himself to be a tinker for years and years. (As part of the ruse, Sly is entertained by a play put on by travelling performers, and this play is the plot involving Katherine, Petruchio, Bianca, and Lucentio.) Folktale scholars know this tale involving a practical joke in which a wealthy, powerful man arranges for a lower-class man to temporarily take his place as "Lord for a Day" (ATU 1531). [5]

In Shakespeare's play, oddly enough, the "Lord for a Day" story has no ending. After interrupting the play once, Sly is never heard from again. In the anonymous *The Taming of A Shrew*, however, he continues to interject, eventually falls asleep and is deposited back by the tavern. He assumes that his brief life as a lord was just a dream. [6] Given the lack of an ending in Shakespeare's version of the story, it is significant that versions of the folktale vary in terms of the poor man's ultimate fate. Four Renaissance literary versions, three ultimately deriving from an anecdote in a letter by the Valencian scholar and humanist, Juan Luis Vives, end with the dupe's return to his normal life, as in *A Shrew*. [7] Two other versions, however, supply a different ending. In *The Arabian Nights'* "The Sleeper and the Waker," following the revelation of the trick, the dupe Abu al-Hasan is given a position at Harun al-Rashid's court and gets married to one of his wife's handmaidens (Burton 1886, vol., 21). Likewise, the ballad "The Frolicksome Duke; or, the Tinker's Good Fortune" ends with a reunion of tinker and duke after the tinker's return to his usual station, in which the duke grants the tinker five hundred pounds, ten acres, and makes the tinker's wife Joan a waiting woman to his own wife (Percy 1905, vol. 1, 173–6). The ballad is undated, but given the ending it seems to be kin to "The Sleeper and the Waker." "The Waking Man's Dreame," in Susan DuVerger's *Admirable Events* of 1639, ends with something of a

middle position between these two outcomes. After the joke is over, "The Duke used some liberality towards him for to help him in the poverty of his family" (1996, 66). This constitutes a tip for his trouble rather than a real change in the dupe's economic and class status. These three endings make three different statements about class structure: a peasant can never be a lord, a peasant can be a lord, and a peasant cannot be a lord but should be compensated for his oppression.

In what can only be a remarkable coincidence, one literary version of the tale, like the Sly plot in Shakespeare, breaks off (mid-sentence) while the peasant is still under the delusion that he is a lord. A unique manuscript of *Count Lucanor*, a fourteenth-century collection of stories by the Spanish prince Don Juan Manuel, includes this partial tale, not usually printed as part of the work. [8] The canonical text of *Count Lucanor* in fact contains two stories based on the "Shrew" tale type; one episode involving the killing of animals to intimidate the bride, and another about how the good wife agrees with her husband's patently absurd statements about animals (Juan Manuel 1977, 137–41 and 113–21). While the Spanish manuscript could be incomplete for any number of reasons, it is interesting to consider a possible resistance to determining the ending of "Lord for a Day" and the attendant attitude towards class structure.

In the Inductions, Shakespeare treats the audience exactly the opposite from the way he deals with them for the "Shrew" plot. While he insists that the audience accept the way that he is telling the "Shrew" tale, for the "Lord" tale he leaves them to their own devices. They are free to select the ending they want. Shakespeare refuses to assert his prerogative as storyteller. This complete reversal serves a function, however: Shakespeare's attitude in revising the "Shrew" folktale prepares the audience for a more radical revision of the "Lord" tale, the complete excision of the ending. By not committing himself to an ending, Shakespeare is also not committing himself to a position on the inviolability of class structure. While his changes to the "Shrew" tale make the gender hierarchy of the folktale slightly less absolute, Shakespeare refuses even this degree of commitment when dealing with the class issues of the "Lord" tale.

A similar equivocation emerges in the play proper. Lucentio's servant Tranio gets to play the role of his master, with all its privileges, so that Lucentio can disguise himself as a tutor and woo Katherine's sister Bianca. While the idea to let Tranio be "lord for a day" ostensibly comes from Lucentio, Tranio seems to be the agent behind it (Act 1 scene 1, line 185). He is forced to resume his position as servant once Lucentio's father arrives, recognises Tranio, and outs him as the son of a sail-maker in Bergamo (Act 5 scene 1, line 69). The social order is restored, as it is in some versions of the "Lord" folktale. As editors note, [9] however, Tranio in his own person seems to be treated as the social equal of Petruchio and his master Lucentio in the final banquet scene, as he is addressed as "Signor Tranio" and included in the banter (Act 5 scene 2, line 49). His disguise momentarily clings to him after his unmasking, just as Hymen refers to Rosalind as "he" even after she resumes her woman's clothes and identity in *As You Like It*. [10] As with the two versions of the folktale's ending, we are left with at least some ambiguity about whether social class is performative or inherent.

While my reading of the "Shrew" plot sees the playwright as taming the audience and the folktale, identifying him first with Grumio, then Petruchio, and

finally with Katherine, the “Lord” plot asserts an identity shared by Sly, author, and audience. The Inductions are rich in references to Shakespeare’s home, the area around Stratford, as in no other of his works. Sly and Shakespeare are from the same milieu, and Shakespeare seems to be addressing those in the audience who know it as well. When Sly awakes in the Lord’s house, he asserts his identity with a series of references to Warwickshire, Shakespeare’s former neighbourhood. “Am not I Christopher Sly, old Sly’s son of Burton-heath,” he asks. “Ask Marian Hacket, the fat ale-wife of Wincot, if she know me not” (Induction 2, lines 17–22). Describing Sly’s “madness” to the lord, one of the servants says “Sometimes you would call out for Cicely Hacket.” Sly replies, “Ay, the woman’s maid of the house.”

THIRD SERVANT: Why, sir, you know no house, nor no such maid,
 Nor no such men as you have reckon’d up,
 As Stephen Sly, and old John Naps of Greece,
 And Peter Turf, and Henry Pimpernell,
 And twenty more such names and men and these,
 Which never were nor no man ever saw (Induction 2, lines 90–7).

Barton-on-the-Heath is about sixteen miles from Stratford, and Wincot four miles. Scholars tend to think that these people “which never were” were real people known to Shakespeare, as Hackets and Slys did live in Warwickshire area (Morris 1981, 62–3, note; Oliver 1982, notes on Induction 2, lines 17, 20 and 91). Why, at this moment in this play, does Shakespeare so directly address his old friends? By making Sly one of them—and by reasserting that he himself is one of them—Shakespeare perhaps provides a reason why the Lord does not triumph in his particular version of the story.

We could see Shakespeare’s lack of ending not as inconclusive but as pointedly refusing to reinforce the class hierarchy by failing to enact the ultimate indignity on the poor man; that is, his baffled return to his old life, following a practical joke whose function was to make him the butt of upper-class mockery. Even in the versions in which the poor man does indeed move up the social ladder in the end, he still must suffer this humiliation. Yet, the Inductions do retain the notion of intrinsic class boundaries. Even when Sly becomes convinced he is a lord and begins to speak in blank verse, he still proves the point of the joke by his general ignorance and boorishness. The Lord views him with nothing but contempt and disgust, so that it is hard to imagine him rewarding Sly when the joke is over. We are left with conflicting evidence. While Katherine must at least pay lip service to her taming and subordinate gender position, the class hierarchy is never really reinstated, although it is never really left behind. The Inductions’ story is at an impasse, perhaps because Shakespeare identifies more fully with Sly than with Katherine.

Conclusion

These folktales comprise an essential context for Shakespeare’s play. Attention to folk sources can illuminate perennial controversies, such as the extent to which Katherine is tamed and the Sly story’s lack of an ending. We can also begin to see Shakespeare as a literary adapter and transmitter of folktales. Acknowledging

traditional sources refocuses our attention on the audience in the theatre as well as on the author at his desk; in basing his plays on stories known to all, Shakespeare engages his audience on common ground. The innovation of the London professional stage thus emerges as a venue for the age-old telling of traditional tales, with a difference.

Notes

- [1] While there are two sisters in Shakespeare, in *The Taming of A Shrew* there are three.
- [2] All citations of *The Taming of the Shrew* are to Morris's (1981) edition.
- [3] Thompson (2003) reiterates Brunvand's point in her note for Act 4 scene 1, line 121. The story referred to is in Juan Manuel (1977, 137–41).
- [4] This is the case for both Johnson's (1969) and Bullock's (1969) versions. Even though men played the wife and hostess roles in Johnson's version, presumably for comic effect, a woman played the part of the maid (Haring-Smith 1985, 14).
- [5] On the tale, see Frenzel (1977) and Marzolph, van Leeuwen, and Wassouf (2004). Sources for the Sky plot are discussed in Morris (1981, 76–7), Oliver (1982, 34–5) and Thompson (2003, 10). Miller, in particular, emphasises the oral rather than literary tradition (1998, 17–18).
- [6] On conjectures as to why Shakespeare's Sly story lacks an ending, see Morris (1981, 39–45), Oliver (1982, 40–3) and Thompson (2003, 180–1). Morris (1981, 44) and Thompson (2003, 181) are inclined to believe that there were originally more Sly scenes. Oliver believes that either there were never more Sly scenes, or that Shakespeare deliberately revised the play to eliminate them (1982, 28–9).
- [7] See Miller (1998, 18). Boas reprints these versions (1908, 101–12).
- [8] The story is printed in York's translation (1924, xvii–xviii). On the manuscript in which the tale is found, see Sturcken (1974, 138–9, notes 3 and 4).
- [9] See Oliver's (1982) and Morris's (1981) notes on Act 5 scene 2, line 49.
- [10] Dolan (2000), at Act 5 scene 4, line 112. See also the note; many editors correct the text from "join his hand with his" to "her hand with his."

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