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## The Things of Masquerade in Frances Burney's *Cecilia* and *The Wanderer* KELLY FLEMING

The ritual question of the eighteenth-century masquerade, "Do you know me?" presents participants and readers of fiction with an ontological dilemma. While masquerades in eighteenthcentury novels have frequently been analyzed for their subversive qualities or for their depictions of patriarchal complicity, scholars have yet to grapple with the complexities of asking to be identified while in the dress of a different person.<sup>1</sup> There has yet to be a discussion about what happens when costumes temporarily destabilize and transform the identities of the persons who wear them. Until recently, the relationship between person and thing in novels had been explained by declaring that things highlight specific traits in the character who uses them (Freedgood 2). But now that scholars consider things as a consequential part of the rhetorical hierarchy of a text, it is time to consider how things function in a space where person and thing are almost never clearly defined (Freedgood 2).

Perhaps one of the most prolific writers of things in the eighteenth century, Frances Burney is preoccupied not only by things but also by the difference between her heroines and things in her novels. Burney's things invade the memories of readers as they play crucial roles in some of the most intensely psychological scenes in the eighteenth-century novel: Cecilia's nervous breakdown amidst things in a pawnshop and Camilla's terrifying dream of the iron pen, for example. When coupled with other memorable things like Evelina's artificial pineapple,<sup>2</sup> and Juliet's rose-colored dress,<sup>3</sup> the powerful metonymic role of things in Burney's novels makes her *oeuvre* a perfect case study for the problem of reconciling person and thing, owner and outfit, in moments when hierarchies and boundaries are indistinct. In the readings that follow, I will focus specifically on costumes-asthings, on the way the transformation of the person by the costume elucidates cultural histories that would have normally remained concealed. In particular, I will examine the masquerade costumes of workers in *Cecilia* and Juliet's working-class acts of masquerade in *The Wanderer*. In doing so, I will argue that Burney stresses the discrepancy between person and thing in these acts of masquerade in order to illuminate the objectification of the working class by eighteenth-century England's elite, fashionable culture.

In her essay "Crusoe's Island of Misfit Things," Lynn Festa argues that description in the eighteenth-century novel strives to make person and thing "fit together in the world of the novel" while, paradoxically, preserving the ontological distinction that separates them (446).<sup>4</sup> While this fit is the intention of all novelistic description, masquerade scenes in eighteenth-century novels pose a particular problem because, more often than not, person and thing do not "fit" each other at a masquerade. Characters fail to keep up the act of their costume, and readers are treated to an inconsistency between person and thing frequently rendered as comic by the author. By the end of the scene, what we are left with really, as Festa argues, are descriptions of "misfit things":

> Language describes, but *description* tends to emerge precisely at those moments when nomenclature falters or when the names assigned to objects fail to render them adequately. The world almost never resembles its linguistic mugshot. Exposing the inadequacy of the word to compass the thing, description is allotted the thankless task of representing the misfit things that cannot be immediately assimilated to the world as we already know it. (445)

Fictional masquerades are worlds of misfit things. The great fun and pleasure both characters and readers derive from them is precisely the "inadequacy of the word to compass the thing," and, by extension, the inadequacy of the costume to compass the person. I contend that there is more intended by the mismatched persons and things at fictional masquerades than just comedy. The failure of description to make persons and things fit resembles the process by which we are forced, as Bill Brown explains in his essay "Thing Theory," to "confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us" (4), a process by which the thing names "a particular subject-object relation" (4). When literary characters wear costumes to masquerades and fail to act according to their appearances, the things on their body might just name a particular political, economic, or cultural relationship underpinning that particular masquerade or that particular novel. When things are misfits—when they refuse to match their person, or when persons refuse to match their things—they can take on a metonymic power, distilling cultural memories, associations, desires, and fears into the space of their own description.

Generally, the many things that work together to transform a character into the inversion of him or herself are overlooked during a masquerade. However, costumes, the things of masquerade, deserve our attention, for there is always misuse in misrule. Typically, a person and his or her things are considered mutually constitutive.<sup>5</sup> Despite the demise of sumptuary laws in the seventeenth century, dress was used not only to express one's identity but also to construct identity in the eighteenth century. Dress externalizes an individual's interpellation, as Julie Park in The Self and It: Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England explains, "the temporality of fashion, if it could speak, follows this structure: 'Yesterday I was what you are, tomorrow you will be what I am" (27). Dress distinguishes not only gender but also class, religion, and political affiliations, as various styles hail and are answered with conspicuous consumption. However, during any act of masquerade, dress is not constitutive of identity. Masquerade costumes obscure selfhood and nearly every facet of identity. The premeditated misuse of dress during acts of masquerade compels us to recognize that material costumes do not always match up with the immaterial self behind them and that the discrepancy between person and thing in a World Upside Down tells us something different about subjectivity than in a World Right Side Up.

In Cecilia and The Wanderer, Burney provides us with

examples that challenge the typical ontological dynamic of persons and things. She brings this dilemma to the attention of the reader by recognizing that there is a cultural history behind dress. For Burney, masquerade costumes embody what Elaine Freedgood, in her work The Ideas in Things, calls "the history that the novel secretes: the history it hides and emits, the one it conceals and produces..." (36). Unlike the history that novels tell us, the histories that masquerade costumes tell us are often veiled beneath the surface. This is because masquerades prevent things from expressing their own cultural histories. In adhering to the rules of masquerade, participants strip themselves of the things that define them and accept another thing, another history. Only in the disjuncture between person and thing is hidden meaning made visible, as when London's elite takes on the history of hay-makers and chimney-sweepers in Cecilia and when an aristocratic, English heiress takes on the history of a poor "Creole" and a shop girl in The Wanderer (46). Ultimately, in both novels, Burney represents misfit masquerade costumes—costumes that fail to accurately describe the wearer-in order to evoke the hidden history of the working class.

#### Memoirs of Misfit Things

Frances Burney's *Cecilia* is a novel concerned with the relationship between the material and the immaterial. This relationship emerges in the myriad critiques of spending in the novel—the ways in which private credit, loans, gambling, and sometimes even charity result in nothing tangible for the spender when they should result in tangible goods. But this relationship between the material and the immaterial also manifests itself at the level of the body in the text. As Catherine Gallagher points out in *Nobody's Story*, there are two Cecilias in the fashion of Adam Smith's self-spectation: the material "one who acts" and the immaterial "one who floats above and enjoys watching the acts" (235). Even for Burney's heroine, a person is at once both person and thing, material and immaterial. Like Smith, Burney attributes

a kind of morality to the spectating dance that person and thing perform around each other. Since *Cecilia* is a moral tale, Burney constructs scenarios, the novel's fabulous party scenes, in which the relationship between person and thing is tested, broken, or disfigured by the festive impulse reigning over the upper classes. What results from this festivity is not only an ontological disjuncture but also the textual materialization of the hidden, immaterial narrative of the worker.

Many things present themselves at the masquerade in Cecilia: colored lamps, chairs, a desert table. However, value changes in the disorder of a masquerade. Values are added and subtracted, making certain things more powerful than others and more able to reveal vibrant histories (Freedgood 8). In the case of the Harrels' masquerade, the working-class costumes certainly stand out in this regard. How do we understand a thing whose essence, whose "thingness" is not exchange value or use value, but the abstract labor that actually creates things (Brown 4)? I believe the answer lies in the way Burney frames her masquerade chapter. As the chapter opens, Cecilia and the reader meet Mr. Rawlins, a mason, trying to get Mr. Harrel to pay him the £400 he is owed-the money with which he is supposed to pay his workmen. Thanks to a culture of paper credit,<sup>6</sup> the Harrels have managed to have workers build Violet-Bank without paying them, as they live in the exhilarating interval between Mr. Harrel's investments and his gambling debts (Campbell 133).7 Framed in this manner, the masquerade costumes of workers acquire a specific and special cultural value. They express the problematic values of a culture whose excessive spending maintains the poverty and alienation of the work force. While these costumes may portray a festive indulgence in disorder, Burney makes sure that the costumes do not fit the wearer, blurring the line between person and thing, in order to comment on the problematic class structure of eighteenthcentury England.

The first misfit costume at the masquerade in *Cecilia* is the hay-maker costume. In a successful description where person and thing are made to fit, the hay-maker costume would suggest the character of an actual female farmer. However, this young girl is unable to tell Cecilia and Delvile anything about the self her costume puts forth to the world. While we can easily imagine the sanitized ignorance of various working-class costumes at a masquerade, this particular costume calls forth the metaphorical association of the worker with idyllic country life. Burney writes:

> Just then they were approached by a young haymaker, to whom the white domino called out 'You look as gay and as brisk as if fresh from the hay-field after only half a day's work. Pray how is it you pretty lasses find employment for the winter?'

'How?' cried she, pertly, 'why the same as for the summer!' (113)

The first obvious issue with this young woman's portrayal of a hay-maker is that she clearly has no idea what her faux profession entails. She does not understand that there is a harvest season, that it is not all year round, and that actual hay-makers have to find other employment during the off-season. Secondly, she does not even know that she should correct Delvile's romanticized description of her profession. She has no idea that words like "gay," "brisk," "fresh," "pretty" are not usually associated with hours and hours of manual labor. Her romantic fantasy removes the real, physical labor of hay-making from the costume. Instead, the costume is simply an adorable outfit. In contrast to the selfexpression usually found in clothing, the hay-maker costume is completely disconnected from the person who speaks behind it. As a result, the reader is forced to recognize how utterly unrealistic her depiction of hay-making is. Her inability to recognize that haymaking is not "pretty," consequently, brings the true history of the working class into focus. Like the Harrels, her ignorance turns the working class into things, tools that perform work offstage. And it is here, in particular, that the reader is meant to think not only of Mr. Harrel's cruelty to Mr. Rawlins but also of Mrs. Hill and her starving family. In representing such a notable inconsistency

between person and thing, Burney illustrates how the fashionable elite objectify the people who construct both their World Upside Down and their World Right Side Up.

The second misfit costume at the masquerade in *Cecilia* is that of the chimney-sweeper. Unlike the hay-maker, the reader knows exactly who the chimney-sweeper really is: Mr. Briggs, Cecilia's guardian. The reader also knows that Mr. Briggs is not a chimney-sweeper—he is a miserly old business man. What becomes visible in the discrepancy between the person and the costume is the metaphorical association between the working class and dirt. Burney writes:

> Before this question could be answered, an offensive smell of soot, making every body look around the room, the chimney-sweeper already mentioned by Miss Larolles, was perceived to enter it. Every way he moved, a passage was cleared for him, as the company, with general disgust, retreated wherever he advanced. He was short, and seemed somewhat incommoded by his dress; he held his soot-bag over one arm, and his shovel under the other. (117)

Instead of actually spending money on a costume, Mr. Briggs has smeared soot all over his face and borrowed an actual chimneysweeper's clothing. He is dirty, smelly, and carrying tools, causing people like Miss Larolles to flee his presence and Robert Floyer to feel insulted. However, the costume does not accurately describe Mr. Briggs, for his speech is riddled with slang terms for money, and his extreme thrift can be evinced by his cheap costume. The person behind the costume is a miser—a man who is used to handling and protecting large sums of money—not a worker. While we could easily imagine a chimney-sweeper costume that is clean, or even romanticized like the hay-maker, the disconnection between the costume and Mr. Brigg's language and personality calls forth the metaphorical association of workers and dirt—a taboo of filth. Because of the "offensive smell" and the falling soot, Mr. Brigg's costume convinces everyone that he is a "common chimney-sweeper" rather than a man in masquerade (117, 119). The phrase "common chimney-sweeper," which both Miss Larolles and Robert Floyer use, illustrates the "general disgust" aroused by the presence of a real laborer (110, 119; 117). The costume is deemed by Robert Floyer to be unconscionable because he is "all over dirty and filth" and even Cecilia is uncomfortable, thanks to the jokes Mr. Briggs makes about popping her in his soot-bag (119, 117). And of course, people like Miss Larolles are horrified by the idea of a worker entering the confines of a bourgeois home uninvited. In spite of the scorn the costume elicits, the dirt that the upper classes metaphorically associate with workers is the result of unpaid wages, terrible labor conditions, and a lack of political agency-all of which could be resolved if the haves acknowledged the dismal realities of the have-nots. How can these workers be subjects if they cannot free themselves from dirt through political means and if their employers ignore their existence? For those who know it is Mr. Briggs and who know that the person underneath does not match the costume, the costume may be amusing. But for those who assume, even in a masquerade, that appearances are true descriptors, the chimney-sweeper costume reminds the upper classes of the things they try to avoid every day.

#### The Difficulties of Female Things

Although there is no masquerade ball, Juliet's dress in *The Wanderer* highlights the same ontological problem as the workingclass costumes in *Cecilia*. Framed by Robespierre's Reign of Terror, Burney's last novel involves a series of masquerades that mean life or death for the heroine. Although her history is withheld from the reader for nearly half the novel, Juliet, or "Ellis," is on the run, fleeing a forced marriage to a Jacobin who wants her inheritance. As Margaret Anne Doody describes it, Juliet's "whole progress through England is a sort of unwilling masquerade" (341). As a novel about Juliet's acts of masquerade, *The Wanderer* agonizes over the troubled relationship between person and thing, particularly as it applies to women. Unlike *Cecilia*, the disguises Juliet assumes through things of different races and classes prompt an understanding of "female difficulties" as an inherently ontological problem—a problem of reading the difference between woman and thing.

Among the first novels about sexual harassment, The Wanderer examines things in relation to the problems posed by the illegible female body (Thompson 969-71, 975-77).8 As Juliet McMaster explains in Reading the Body in the Eighteenth-Century Novel, a legible body is the ultimate virtue because it consists of "a readily expressive body and face, one that eloquently and transparently reflects the mind in the body" (81). A legible body has nothing to hide: it expresses everything, especially goodness of mind and heart. In order to have a legible body, with a "readily expressive body and face" that reflects female virtue, the things draped on a woman's body would need to clearly express who she is (McMaster 81). The dress would need to externalize the morality and identity of the woman wearing it. However, in The Wanderer, Juliet consistently appears in clothing that diverges from her aristocratic manners, her intelligent mind, and her virtue. In fact, the illegible female body in Burney's last novel is inextricably linked to the plight of the female worker, for as Juliet flees her Jacobin "husband," she tries to hide her identity behind the things of a Creole housemaid, a shop girl, a music teacher, a toad eater, and a prostitute. Framed by the disorder of the French Revolution, Juliet's identity and her things are never in order-they cause her to appear ambiguous in terms of race, class, and morality. Indeed, the discrepancy between her aristocratic birth and her workingclass things causes her to be consistently treated as a tool available for use. As Margaret Anne Doody argues, "Burney seems to be the first novelist to investigate at any depth the phenomenon now known to us as 'alienation,' the state in which the worker feels no personal participation in the labor by which he-or she-earns a livelihood..." (356). Just like the hay-maker and chimney-sweeper costumes, Juliet's dresses are significant because their essence, or thingness, is not exchange value or use value but the actual labor

that performs services for the upper classes and that is perpetually ignored by them. In *The Wanderer*, Burney explores the ways by which the fashionable upper classes in England make things of female workers.

As *The Wanderer* opens, we encounter the most famous act of masquerade in Burney's entire oeuvre (Doody 341). In the first four chapters, Burney shows her nameless heroine disguised as a Creole "house-maid" (17). In an accurate description of person and thing, an old shawl and "black" skin would probably describe an ex-slave or servant, who was probably transported from the West Indies, where there were massive sugar plantations, to work in France (19). However, it is Juliet, the white daughter of an aristocrat, in the old shawl and black skin, trying to escape the dangers of the French Revolution. While we could easily imagine Juliet escaping in the clothes of a white female servant, the Creole housemaid costume reflects, in Edward Said's words, "what is there or not there": the problematic cultural association between blackness and the slave trade, fashioned by the sugar trade in the West Indies (96).<sup>9</sup> Burney writes:

> Nevertheless, her manners were so strikingly elevated above her attire, that, notwithstanding the disdain with which, in the height of her curiosity, Mrs. Ireton surveyed her mean apparel, and shrunk from her dusky skin, she gave up her plan of seeking for any other person to wait upon her. (41)

Despite the "old shawl," the skin that is more "black than brown," and the "large black patch, that covered half her left cheek," Juliet has manners "strikingly elevated above her attire," knowledge of England's geography, an understanding of English propriety, and the ability to speak English well, albeit with a French lisp (19, 20, 41). Enraged by the discrepancy between Juliet's manner and her things, Mrs. Ireton turns to a racially charged discourse of objectification.<sup>10</sup> Juliet is suddenly described in terms of things, animals, and deformities because of her "dusky skin." Juliet is a "black insect," a "grim thing," and "such a skin, such a garb" (27; 29). She is a "dwarf" and a "giantess," carrying "black and white outsides" and "wooden legs and broken arms" (46, 45). But most of all, Juliet's "new skin" is turned into a thing by Mrs. Ireton, as if to mark her change of class: "Why that new skin must have cost you more than your new gown. Pray which did you get the best bargain?" (45).

In her aforementioned essay, Festa explains that the descriptions of the misfit skins Crusoe wears as coat, hat, and shoes fail because, for whatever reason, they "contradict the message (about the civility of the wearer, for example) that they are charged with carrying, or because they do not quite line up with their proper shape" (458). Like Crusoe's skins, Juliet's Creole "skin" is a misfit thing, contradicting the message her manners communicate to Mrs. Ireton. Instead of fitting her and speaking for her background, this description of "new skin" speaks about something else. By uncovering her white skin and instigating Mrs. Ireton's comment about the cost of a new skin, Juliet forces readers to remember the fact that skin color does result in commodification at this point in history. What is "not there" in Mrs. Ireton's comment is a reference to the slave trade (Said 96). Juliet's illegible body, which so irritates her, brings the history of the slave-asworker into view for readers. Mrs. Ireton's assumption that Juliet is a Creole housemaid is too much associated, historically speaking, with the slave trade supporting the West Indian sugar trade not to result in its dehumanizing rhetoric. The cultural association between "dusky skin" and the slave trade paints Juliet, in the colonizer's view represented by Mrs. Ireton, as a thing to be used. Of course, that association continues for Mrs. Ireton even after Juliet's skin remains white because she later hires Juliet to be her "toad-eater" (421). In exploring what happens when person and thing reflect different races, Burney recalls the problematic history of the female slave-as-worker in eighteenth-century England.

The second misfit costume Juliet adorns is the outfit she wears when she is mistaken for a prostitute at the end of the novel. No longer in her black skin, Juliet has continued her working-class acts of masquerade. In a successful description where person and thing match, a solitary female in an expensive gown and workingclass accessories would probably describe a prostitute. However, it is Juliet, the virginal daughter of an aristocrat, who has exchanged her expensive "white chip" bonnet for a straw one and put on the "blue striped apron" of a female worker in order to hide from her Jacobin "husband" (665). While Juliet could easily have changed her entire outfit or, like Elinor, adopted the dress of a man, the discrepancy between person and thing in this working-class costume calls forth the cultural association of sexual promiscuity with female workers. Burney writes:

> ... and Juliet, young, rosy, and alone, seemed exactly fashioned for awakening their drowsy faculties. No one, therefore, passed, without remarking her; and scarcely any one without making her some address. The inconsistency of her attire, which her slackened pace allowed time for developing, gave rise to much comment, and some mockery. Her ordinary bonnet and blue apron, ill accorded with the other part of her dress; and she was now assailed with coarse compliments upon her pretty face; now by jocose propositions to join company; and now by free solicitations for a salute. (668–69)

The obvious inconsistency here between Juliet's costly dress and her cheaper accessories fills the male observer with the wrong assumptions about Juliet's character. When Juliet's chic dress is offset by the common accessories of a female worker, the straw bonnet and blue apron, men assume that she is the type of female worker who has already been ruined, earning that costly dress in exchange for her sexual favors (665, 669). Thus, like "the female consumer [who] becomes identified with the products she consumes," Juliet is identified as working class precisely because of her straw bonnet and blue apron (Kowaleski-Wallace 95). While Burney disguises with her prim language the extent to which Juliet is treated like a thing, women are not asked for kisses, or "a salute," on the street when strangers believe, based on their clothing and manner, that they are gentlewomen (669). Nor are gentlewomen usually "assailed" with "jocose propositions to join company," which can only mean, in Burney's veiled language, that they asked her for sexual favors (669). Juliet's mismatched outfit inspires such freedoms because there is a cultural assumption that female workers will inevitably be corrupted by "their placement in an environment where men have access to them" (Kowaleski-Wallace 120). As R. Campbell argues in The London Tradesman (1747): "Nine out of ten young Creatures that are obliged to serve in these Shops are ruined and undone" (209). When girls work in a shop or in a large house as a maid, they are considered tainted by their close proximity to men, their sexuality, and the exchange of money. However much Juliet might be completely disconnected from the character her things make her appear to be, her costume still forces her to embody the projection of a male fantasy: a woman acting out her "undisciplined sexual impulses" on the male observer (Kowaleski-Wallace 141). For the male observer, any sign of bodily illegibility, like a mismatched dress, means they can treat her like a sexual plaything. As a result, the evident detachment between Juliet and her things illuminates the very many, and very easy, ways eighteenth-century English culture makes things of women.

In both *Cecilia* and *The Wanderer*, Frances Burney explores what happens when the things of masquerade fail to accurately describe the person wearing them. When these descriptions fail, things begin to speak about themselves, about their essence, their history. When the reader realizes that the people behind the haymaker, the chimney-sweeper, the Creole house-maid, and the prostitute fail to connect with their costumes, the inconsistency forces them to see the hidden history of the working class. While Margaret Anne Doody rightfully uses *The Wanderer* to hail Frances Burney as one of the first authors to explore the objectification and alienation of the worker, it is crucial that we see Burney's insightful reading of the workforce in *Cecilia* as well. Both novels use things to underscore the problems of a culture in which the focus on fashion and spending perpetuates that alienation and objectification. It is for this reason that we need to continue to read things in eighteenth-century novels and to be conscious of the way masquerades are often full of misfit things. If we do not, we will fail to see the cultural histories that are often in disguise.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Terry Castle's *Masquerade and Civilization* and Catherine Craft-Fairchild's *Masquerade and Gender* for analyses of the eighteenth-century masquerade.

<sup>2</sup> See Julie Park's reading of the pineapple in *The Self and It:* Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England (142–47).

<sup>3</sup> See Margaret Anne Doody's reading of the rose-colored dress in *Frances Burney: A Life in the Works* (351).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the relationship between literary characters and their things, see Mark Blackwell's essay, "The People Things Make"; Bill Brown's *A Sense of Things*; Lynn Festa's *Sentimental Figures of Empire*; Elaine Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things*; John Plotz's *Portable Property*; and Cynthia Wall's *The Prose of Things*.

<sup>5</sup> For more on self-fashioning via dress, see Julie Park's "For the Pleasure of It" in *The Self and It* (3–47) and Sophie Woodward's "Looking Good: Feeling Right—Aesthetics of the Self" in *Clothing as Material Culture* (21–40).

<sup>6</sup> For more on the culture of paper credit in the eighteenth century and its impact on literature, see Catherine Ingrassia's *Authorship, Commerce, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century: A Culture of Paper Credit.* 

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Harrels' masquerade and its relation to their debt, see Catherine Keohane's essay, "'Too Neat for a Beggar': Charity and Debt in Burney's *Cecilia*."

<sup>8</sup> While Helen Thompson insightfully reads Juliet's

working-class costumes as a performance of work with her aristocratic body in "How *The Wanderer* works: Reading Burney and Bourdieu," I am more interested in what the things Juliet uses to disguise herself have to say and the cultural histories they carry.

<sup>9</sup> The role of slavery in the sugar trade spawned popular protests against sugar and gave rise to abolitionist pamphlets, which brought the issue to the attention of many people in England. It is important to note for the purposes of my argument here that these protests occurred during the 1790s when Burney's novel is set. For more on abolitionist protests against sugar, see Charlotte Sussman's article, "Women and the Politics of Sugar, 1792."

<sup>10</sup> For more on race in *The Wanderer*, see Sarah Salih's "'Her Blacks, Her Whites and her Double Face!': Altering Alterity in *The Wanderer*" and Tara Czechowski's "'Black, Patched and Pennyless': Race and Crime in Burney's *The Wanderer*."

<sup>11</sup> See Chloe Wigston Smith's "*The Wanderer*'s practical disguises" in *Women, Work, Clothes in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* for an analysis of the relationship between practicality and vulnerability in Juliet's costumes (173–74).

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