



In the Hands of a Woman: Judith's Beauty, Faith, and Divine Justice in the Middle English and King James Bible Texts

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Abstract

This paper explores the biblical character of Judith through the lenses of beauty, faith, and divine justice, comparing how she is portrayed by the Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament and the King James Bible. Often dismissed in biblical history, Judith strategically weaponizes her beauty and intellect to defeat the tyrant Holofernes, reclaiming power in a patriarchal world. Both texts similarly comment on her physical and spiritual transformation before facing Holofernes, demonstrating that beauty is both a pillar of desire and a vehicle of divine intervention. The Middle English text's strong poetic imagery deepens Judith's role as a calculating, cunning heroine, in contrast to the King James Bible, which highlights her faith and her alignment with divine justice. Judith's purification at the fountain, her strategic seduction, and her eventual beheading of Holofernes are explored as acts of agency instead of submission. This paper compares the linguistic and cultural contexts to argue that Judith illustrates a re-vision of femininity as subversive, one that ties beauty to power and piety to rebellion. Judith becomes an enduring symbol of brave resistance, a reminder that a combination of strategic brilliance and faith has the power to take down oppressive regimes.

Keywords: Gender studies, Medieval studies, Manuscripts studies, biblical studies, Middle English Studies.

Introduction

Judith, a largely underestimated figure in biblical history, emerged as a hero through her remarkable intellect and strategic prowess. With a combination of cunning and bravery, she devised a bold plan to confront her foes,

ultimately leading to their downfall and proving that even the most unlikely individuals can shape the course of history. Across the ages, people have been captivated by stories of women who defy traditional notions of femininity. These narratives inspire awe as they

showcase how women have redefined strength in profound and transformative ways. When discussing strength, it is not limited to physical prowess; a woman's strength is limitless, rooted in her beauty and intellect. Judith, a compelling and heroic figure from the Apocrypha, embodies the idea of courage and cleverness. She uses her beauty and intellect to protect her people of Bethulia and Israel from the tyrant Holofernes.

In a time when women were frequently confined to passive roles in society, Judith chose to defy the established norms. Today, she is celebrated for her intelligence, courageous actions, and unwavering faith in God. Her defeat of Holofernes highlights her role as an active figure in reclaiming power within a male-dominated world.

A pivotal moment in Judith's story is her transformation before encountering Holofernes, where her preparation merges physical beauty with spiritual intent. The King James Bible describes this moment in rich, vivid prose:

"And pulled off the sackcloth which she had on, and put off the garments of her widowhood, and washed her body all over with water, and anointed herself with precious ointment, and braided the hair of her head, and put on a tire upon it, and put on her garments of gladness, wherewith she was clad during the life of Manasses her husband" (King James Bible, Judith 13:3).

In contrast, Judith's tale is vividly and beautifully illustrated in the Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament. This rendition highlights her transformation in both physical and symbolic manner, showcasing her evolution from a vulnerable widow to a brave determined heroine. Judith undergoes an

intentional preparation before encountering Holofernes:

"With bawme¹ and with bathes hate² clense all hyr cors fro fote³ to crown⁴. And sythyn⁵ sho her array⁶ in garmentes gud and gay⁷." (METS, Judith 1437.7-10)

These passages illustrate the richness of Judith's transformation. The King James Bible offers detailed accounts of her preparation, including washing, anointing, and putting on her finest dresses. Through these actions, she transforms from a mourning widow into a beautiful woman. The Middle English version richly employs vivid and evocative language to vividly capture her profound spiritual transformation. The text describes her physical cleansing with balm and hot baths, which is said to extend "from fote to the crown." This phrase generally means a thorough cleansing from head to toe. However, in a spiritual context, it represents a deeper significance, symbolizing a complete renewal of both body and spirit. Her adornment in "garmentes gud and gay" represents not mere beauty but a strategy to weaponize that beauty. It showcases Judith's transformation of public perceptions of femininity, using them as tools of power and divine justice.

The transformation of Judith goes beyond mere vanity. It is a carefully calculated step in her mission to liberate her people. By rejecting her somber widow's attire, which symbolizes her mourning, she chooses instead to reveal her striking beauty, using it as a source of strength. In doing so, she boldly challenges the cultural expectations placed upon her. Her appearance becomes a divine weapon, wielded with purpose and intent, as she seeks to enact justice for those she loves. This paper argues that Judith's intentional use of beauty and

¹ bawme: balm
² hate: hot
³ fote: foot
⁴ crown: head

⁵ sythyn: since
⁶ arayd: dressed
⁷ gay: bright and showy

intellect redefines femininity as a source of empowerment and resistance. By comparing the biblical and Middle English portrayals of her transformation and use of wit, this study shows how linguistic and cultural contexts reveal different aspects of her story. This presents Judith as a timeless symbol of strategic brilliance and divine purpose.

The Strategic Use of Beauty

The ability of Judith to weaponize her charm and beauty showcases how brilliantly she subverted social expectations. At a time when women were objectified and marginalized, Judith redefined these limitations, transforming perceived vulnerability into her greatest strength. Her appearance can be described as a deliberate component of her strategy. Both the King James Bible and the Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament emphasize her appearance as part of her strategy, offering complementary perspectives on how beauty becomes a weapon of divine justice.

The King James Bible describes how Judith's beauty is received when she enters Holofernes' camp:

"And when they saw her, that her countenance was altered, and her apparel was changed, they wondered at her beauty very greatly, and said unto her. The God, the God of our fathers give thee favour, and accomplish thine enterprizes to the glory of the children of Israel, and to the exaltation of Jerusalem. Then they worshipped God" (King James Bible, Judith 10:7-8).

In this passage, Judith's transformation has a dramatic impact. Her new appearance and elegant attire captivate her audiences, evoking

feelings of awe and admiration. Her beauty is depicted as divinely inspired, signifying God's favor and indicating that her mission holds spiritual significance.

Craghan, in his analysis, notes that "Judith 'sets out to rescue the male, using the most effective weapon, viz., beauty'" (Craghan qtd. In Milne 123). In Craghan's perspective, Judith is a figure who provides freedom to her people through her clever strategies and cunning rather than through physical strength. Instead of being merely an object of desire, Judith takes control of her narrative by gaining the trust of Holofernes and other men in the camp. Her adornments symbolize earthly beauty, purity, and divine favor, serving as a source of hope for her community.

The Middle English text amplifies the adornments of Judith through vivid poetic imagery:

"With sylke⁸ and sendell⁹ and satayn¹⁰ and baulkyn¹¹ bettur¹² non myght be, Hyr pellour¹³ all of pure armyne, with pyrry¹⁴ plett full grett plenté, With gyrdyll¹⁵ and garland of gold fyne to make hyr semly unto se" (METS, Judit 1438.1-6).

The text describes Judith's garments and ornaments in a way that emphasizes her elevated, almost regal status. The use of luxurious materials like silk and satin highlights her resplendence, while the incorporation of pearls and gold signifies divine favor. The poetic repetition and lavish descriptions suggest that she deliberately styles herself to captivate and disarm those around her.

Judith's striking beauty is a calculated and cunning tactic in her plan to seduce and kill Holofernes. The King James Bible vividly

⁸ sylke: Silk

⁹ sendell: (sendal/cendal) fine silk

¹⁰ satayn: satin

¹¹ baulkyn: brocade

¹² bettur: better

¹³ pellour: As per Middle English 'Pellour' signifies pale/gold, so in this case it can be related to gold

¹⁴ pyrry: precious stones adorned

¹⁵ gyrdyll: girdle

portrays Holofernes' desires when Judith enters his camp, using rich language:

"Now when Judith came in and sat down, Holofernes his heart was ravished with her, and his mind was moved, and he desired greatly her company; for he waited a time to deceive her, from the day that he had seen her" (King James Bible, Judith 12:16).

Holofernes' emotional and physical response shows the potency of Judith's meticulously constructed look. His heart is "ravished" (overcome with desire), and his mind is obsessively consumed by her, making him susceptible and scattered. His inability to see past her beauty is the first point in his inevitable decline.

The Middle English version has a more poetic tone but describes the scene more briefly:

"Before himself, her sett¹⁶ was wrough¹⁷ full presciosly forto ¹⁸ apere. Hyr ryalnes¹⁹ rayvyschyd²⁰ his thoght; he bede²¹ her mete with meré²² chere²³" (METS, Judit 1459.1-4).

Judith sits here "full preciously forto apere" (most precious to appear), underscoring the effort to transform her into someone who could be admired and desired. Her "ryalnes" (royal appearance) bewitched Holofernes' mind (rayvyschyd his thoght), and he is enraptured. The word "ryalnes" encapsulates Judith's beauty in a majesty that emphasizes her image of divine favor and enhances her commanding presence.

Holofernes' immediate response reveals, "he bede hyr mete with mere chere" (he bade her eat with cheerful hospitality). This line emphasizes Judith's beauty as a resource, seducing Holofernes, and signifying power. She compels him to view her as someone deserving

of his respect and generosity, all while remaining entirely unaware of the threat she poses.

Both texts showcase Judith's power to her ends. According to Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, the book is a heroic biography characterized by feminist irony. This emphasizes Judith's crafty utterances, seductive beauty, and treacherous scheming. She says, "Judith, herself, is a woman who fights with a woman's weapons, yet far from being defined by her "femininity," she uses it to her own ends" (Fiorenza qtd. In Milne 123). Judith's appearance is one that is both regal and divine, disarming Holofernes and ultimately changing the power dynamics in her favor. What appears to be a moment of surrender as she sits before Holofernes is a careful demonstration of her strategy. A strategy to turn his own lust and arrogance against him.

Judith's beauty, as portrayed in these texts, is not merely a passive quality; it is an active instrument of divine justice. She recognizes the influence of socially constructed images and skillfully employs the conventions of her culture. By enticing Holofernes with her deceptive "ryalnes," she conquers and ultimately manipulates the heart and mind of her enemy. Judith combines physical attraction with intellectual cunning, subverting traditional gender roles. She demonstrates that beauty, when utilized strategically, can serve as a powerful tool for emancipation.

Beauty as a Tool for Divine Justice

Judith's beauty serves different purposes, both as an instrument of lust and as an implement of divine will. Both in the Middle English and the King James Bible narratives, her strategic disposition and obedience to God's will are evident. The imagery surrounding the well and fountain, central to the story, signifies

¹⁶ sett: seat/chair

¹⁷ wroyght: worked/prepared

¹⁸ forto: in order to

¹⁹ ryalnes: royalness/queenliness

²⁰ rayvyschyd: ravished

²¹ bede: order

²² meré: merry

²³ chere: cheer

purification. It depicts renewal and Judith's capacity to support and defend her people. Her beauty is not just an external feature but a potent, active, and eternal force. This enables her to fulfill her will of divine justice.

Judith's Beauty and the Well/Fountain: Purity and Spiritual Readiness

The well mentioned in the Middle English text refers to a water well, which serves as a significant symbol of renewal and cleansing. This symbolism extends beyond just the physical nourishment provided to the Hebrews; it also parallels Judith's spiritual preparation for her mission.

"In that ylke²⁴ dale²⁵ was dyght²⁶ a well with Ebrews that before had bene. Thorof²⁷ thei dranke whore²⁸ thei con dwell, and thorin²⁹ ware³⁰ thei weschyn³¹ clene³²" (METS, Judith 1456.1-4).

For the Hebrews, the well represents both life and spiritual purification, serving as a symbol of hope and trust in divine provision. Likewise, the King James version of the Bible vividly describes Judith's purification at the fountain, reflecting the duality of physical and spiritual nourishment. It captures her act of washing herself before her mission:

"and went out in the night into the valley of Bethulia, and washed herself in a fountain of water by the camp. And when she came out, she besought the Lord God of Israel to direct her way to the raising up of the children of her

people" (King James Bible, Judith 12:7-8).

Bathing in the fountain holds a significant symbolism. While it may appear like a superficial act of cleansing, it represents a deeper meaning. It symbolizes alignment with divine will and Judith's readiness to serve as an instrument of God's justice. Her outward purity reflects her inner strength, and her prayer immediately following the act solidifies her reliance on divine guidance.

The Middle English text highlights the well's role in purifying and sustaining the community, enhancing its spiritual significance:

"So that thei that wund³³ within ware warescht³⁴ wele of thyrst" (METS, Judith 1456.9-10).

Just as the well quenches the thirst of the people, Judith's beauty and her actions provide spiritual and emotional relief. She is a personification of regeneration, and her luster is reflected in the life-giving qualities of the well.

Beauty as Strategic Resourcefulness

Judith's engagement with the well and its imagery highlights her resourcefulness and agency. In the Middle English text, her active role in ensuring the well's accessibility demonstrates her leadership and strategic thinking:

"And thore³⁵ scho and hyr damsell³⁶ trayveld so them two betwene. Thei mad³⁷ a spryng³⁸ that fro yt fell at the Cyté³⁹ syde⁴⁰ forto be sene" (METS, Judith 1456.5-8).

²⁴ ylke: same

²⁵ dale: valley

²⁶ dyght: dug; prepare

²⁷ thorof: thereof

²⁸ whore: where; also a prostitute (unchanged from old English origin)

²⁹ thorin: therein

³⁰ ware: were

³¹ weschyn: washing

³² clene: clean

³³ wund: no word in old and middle english is found; as per the context it will be wound: an injury

³⁴ warescht: warishen/waresht meaning recover, get well, were relieved

³⁵ thore: there

³⁶ damsels: maid/ female helper

³⁷ mad: made

³⁸ spryng: spring

³⁹ cyté: city

⁴⁰ syde: side

This passage portrays Judith as both a provider and protector, dedicated to keeping her people safe and alive. The image of her and her maid creating a spring reinstates her role as a nurturer and a lifesaver. This act of resourcefulness connects her beauty and intellect to divine power, highlighting how her actions inspire hope and faith among her people.

The King James version echoes this description by highlighting Judith's extreme faith in God and the divine guidance to accomplish her mission:

"She besought the Lord God of Israel to direct her way to the raising up of the children of her people" (King James Bible, Judith 12:8).

Her prayer demonstrates her humility and faith in God. It also reveals her awareness of herself as a vessel for God's justice. While she is beautiful, this beauty pales in comparison to the planning and beliefs that contribute to her victory.

Judith's Autonomy and Divine Justice

The imagery of the well and the fountain not only resonates with Judith's beauty but her autonomy and capacity for decisive action, as well. The Middle English text glorifies her freedom and agency:

"Thus myght sho wende⁴¹ with win⁴² and lend at hyr awn⁴³ lyst⁴⁴" (METS, Judith 1456.11-12).

The description of Judith going forth with "win" (victory) emphasizes her independence. Acting "at hyr awn lyst" (at her own pleasure) highlights her control over her task. She does not have to conform to the rules of a patriarchal society; instead, she moves boldly and with power. Her beauty, while central to her strategy, is just one aspect of her multifaceted strength.

In the King James Bible, her independence is mirrored through her actions. Bathing in the fountain in the middle of the night inside in the woods represents her autonomy and serves as a homage to her own destiny. The prayer she recites right after her purification demonstrates the balance between her independent will and her beliefs, highlighting how this renders her an agent of divine justice. Ora Brison states, "Judith as a woman who mediates between the human and the divine worlds. Moreover, that the leaders refrain from asking questions as to her secret plan probably shows that they accept her as a person with high spiritual capabilities" (Brison 185).

Judith's autonomy is further demonstrated in her ability to use her beauty for a broader purpose. Her radiant charm bedazzles and disarms her foes, but her bravery and cunning ensure their ultimate downfall. These characteristics point out her special role as a woman anointed by God to deliver justice.

Judith's Faith and Divine Alignment

Judith's appearance and strategy are supported by strong faith and trust in God. The poetic narratives from the Middle English text beautifully describe the scene just before Judith goes to fulfill the divine order:

"To hyr chambre⁴⁵ scho wentt and prayd God specially, Als he knew hyr entent⁴⁶, to kepe hyr fro velany⁴⁷" (METS, Judith 1461.9-12).

This moment illustrates Judith's humility and dependence on divine guidance. Before taking any action, she returns to her "chambre" (bedroom) and prays. The term "entent" refers to the intention or purpose that she claims to possess. Her request to be kept "fro velany"

⁴¹ wende: return

⁴² win: victory

⁴³ awn: own

⁴⁴ lyst: pleasure

⁴⁵ chambre: bedroom

⁴⁶ entent: purpose; intention

⁴⁷ velany: villainy

signifies her prayer to be protected from villainy. This demonstrates the serious tension she feels between acting on her intent and her mission and losing her honor in the process.

This version immerses the reader in the beauty and depth of Judith's prayer, using poetic language to convey her emotions and determinations. In contrast, the King James version presents this scene in a more direct way, showcasing Judith firmly grasping Holofernes' head and praying to God for strength:

"And approached to his bed, and took hold of the hair of his head, and said, Strengthen me, O Lord God of Israel, this day" (King James Bible, Judith 13:7).

In this passage, Judith's prayer is both direct and resolute, highlighting her reliance on divine power to accomplish her mission. Furthermore, her prayer emphasizes that her mission is not a personal endeavor, it is a task for humanity that is ordained by God.

This moment in prayer places Judith as both a faithful servant of God and a woman of profound strategy. By praying, she makes sure that her beauty, intellect, and bravery align with divine justice. This makes her actions more than human effort, a holy enterprise.

The Culmination of Justice: Judith's Triumph and Legacy

The story of Judith culminates with the beheading of Holofernes and her heroic return to Bethulia, where her actions are held as divine justice. Both the Middle English text and the King James Bible provide powerful verses of these climactic moments, focusing on her courage, strategy, and unflinching faith. Together, they portray a portrait of Judith as an exceptional woman who transcends the

normative boundary of gender and who embodies both human agency and divine intent.

The Beheading of Holofernes: The Strike of Divine Justice

Holofernes' beheading is the final act of Judith's divine mission. To accomplish this mission, her beauty, intellect, and faith coalesce into decisive action. The Middle English text conveys the brutality and the precision of the act in compelling detail:

"Sho drogh⁴⁸ his sword full sone sertayn, qwylke⁴⁹ show fand standand in that sted, And with that brand sho brest⁵⁰ his brayn⁵¹ so with that dynt sone was he dede⁵². Then cutted sho sunder⁵³ synow⁵⁴ and vayn⁵⁵, and fro hys halse hewed⁵⁶ of hys hed" (METS, Judith 1463.1-6).

The narrative describes the visceral imagery of Judith exploding Holofernes' brain and then cutting off his head. This foregrounds the physicality of her actions and the final victory. Holofernes' own sword becomes an instrument of justice, a devastating conclusion that reinforces the poetic reversal of his dominance.

The King James Bible, on the other hand, is less graphic and emphasizes Judith's strength and focus:

"And she smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she took away his head from him" (King James Bible, Judith 13:8).

The unembellished narrative of the King James Bible draws focus on the theological importance of the act. The phrase "with all her might" posits Judith's determination and dedication to her mission, positioning her as a tool for divine

⁴⁸ drogh: drew

⁴⁹ qwylke: quickly

⁵⁰ brest: explosion

⁵¹ brayn: brain

⁵² dede: dead

⁵³ sunder: asunder

⁵⁴ synow: sinew

⁵⁵ vayn: vein

⁵⁶ hewed: cut/ chop

justice. The execution is not a violent act, but the doing of God's will.

The Return to Bethulia: A Heroine's Welcome

Judith and her maid rushed back to Bethulia carrying the severed head of Holofernes as proof of victory. The haste of their journey reflects the perils of their mission, as explained in the Middle English text:

"To have ther hele thei hastyd fast and made no tareyng⁵⁷ in that tyde⁵⁸. Tyll tyme thei were all perels⁵⁹ past, thei wust yt was no boyte⁶⁰ to byde⁶¹" (METS, Judith 1464.1-4)

These lines explain Judith's practical foresight and the weight of her victory. It shows how without any "tareyng" (delay), she wants to reach Bethulia and declare victory. The King James Bible does the same, giving the journey equal measure, but layering her actions with faith and ritual:

"And they twain went together according to their custom unto prayer: and when they passed the camp, they compassed the valley, and went up the mountain of Bethulia, and came to the gates thereof" (King James Bible, Judith 13:10).

Prayer remains the most significant aspect of Judith's journey, which reflects her continuous faith in God's guidance and the sacredness of her mission.

Her moment of arrival at Bethulia is of communal relief and celebration. The Middle English text conveys the raw emotions of the people of Bethulia:

"Hyr voyce full wele thei knew; for fayn⁶² full fast thei wepe⁶³. Full mony a bold Ebrew

com thore hyr forto kepe" (METS, Judith 1464.9-12).

The voice of Judith in Bethulia signifies not only her survival but the successful accomplishment of her mission. The tears of the Hebrews and their gathering around her reflect their gratitude and admiration for her act of bravery and sacrifice. The King James Bible also reflects a similar narrative:

"And then they ran all together, both small and great, for it was strange unto them that she was come: so they opened the gate, and received them, and made a fire for a light, and stood round about them" (King James Bible, Judith 13:13).

The mention of the "fire for a light" symbolizes the clarity, hope, and divine favor that she brings back to her people, to her hometown Bethulia.

The Revelation of Victory: A Moment of Divine Glory

The Middle English text very dramatically portrays Judith's presentation of Holofernes' head. This solidifies her victory against evil and God's intervention in the strategy to defeat the tyrant:

"Sho stud up in a sted of hyght that all men myght se hyr certayn. And thore scho schewed hyr releke⁶⁴ ryght, the hede out of hyr poket playn" (METS, Judith 1465.5-8).

Judith's elevated position affirms her as an instrument of divine justice, and Holofernes' head's "releke" (relic) becomes a physical manifestation of God's power. Her speech guides the people's admiration towards God.

"Loves God," sho sayd sadly, "That for you hath ordand

⁵⁷ tareyng: delay
⁵⁸ tyde: time
⁵⁹ perels: perils
⁶⁰ boyte: good

⁶¹ byde: delay
⁶² fayn: joy
⁶³ wepe: wept
⁶⁴ releke: relic

To sett your vycory
in a wake⁶⁵ womans hand'" (METS,
Judith 1465.9-12).

Referring to herself as a "wake woman" (weak woman), she contrasts what society labels weakness with and what God has given her. This reinforces the miraculous nature of her actions.

The King James Bible echoes this revelation:

"behold the head of Holofernes, the chief captain of the army of Assur, and behold the canopy, wherein he did lie in his drunkenness; and the Lord hath smitten him by the hand of a woman" (King James Bible, Judith 13:15).

This narrative emphasizes that, like the Middle English text, it redefines triumph not as Judith's personal victory. It indicates God's mercy and power, displayed through an unexpected vessel. Ora Brison discussed Judith's emotions in her essay, "In her song, Judith mocks Holofernes for not dying as a war hero, but as being beaten by a woman whose weapon is her feminine beauty: 'For their mighty one did not fall by the hands of the young men, nor did the sons of the Titans smite him, nor did tall giants set upon him; but Judith the daughter of Merari undid him with the beauty of her countenance' (16.7)" (Brison 198).

Conclusion

In both the Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament and the King James Bible, the tale of Judith testifies to the transformational potential of beauty, intellect, and faith harnessed and refined for divine ends. Her skillful use of her physical beauty as a tool and her steadfast faith in God creates a character that defies the confines of cultural expectations. By the end, Judith has perfected her plan, displaying various skills and a deep spiritual conviction.

The rich, poetic imagery of the Middle English text expresses the symbolic and emotional undertones of Judith's journey. On the other hand, the King James Bible's concise and straightforward narrative captures the theological essence of her mission. In the Middle English text, the execution of Holofernes is described in a detailed way, where it is mentioned, "And with that brand sho brest his brain," which in literal translation means, before cutting off Holofernes' head, Judith exploded his brain with the sword. The word "brest" in Middle English text means explosion. However, in the King James Bible version, the beheading scene of Holofernes is straightforward, "And she smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she took away his head from him," this means she just strokes two times and chopped off his head. Collectively, these accounts give us a rich and multifarious portrayal of Judith as a beacon of hope and an enduring symbol of liberation.

Judith's victory not only liberates her people from oppression but also challenges the conventional gender roles of her time. Her role as a "weak woman" who achieves an extraordinary victory pushes back the frontier of the feminine agency. She demonstrated that beauty and faith, when wielded with purpose, can achieve unimaginable outcomes. Her legacy continues to inspire, exemplifying the strength of faith and purpose.

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⁶⁵ wake: weak

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