

# The *Homme Fatale*: Transgressing Normative Behavior and the Loss of Masculinity

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The *femme fatale* as a trigger and cause of male fatality has been a subject of constant study in film noir academia. Noir films seemingly restrict characterization under a formulaic attribution of gender roles and divisions, yet the idea of the *femme fatale* as the *cause* of fatality is entirely too limiting and gives their male counterparts little agency. The idea of the *homme fatale*, of course, is not unstudied; Jans Wager defines him as “above all, fatal to himself,” and even at times causing the demise of the woman.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the noir males often choose to bind themselves to women characterized as fatal. Male masculinity is constantly called into question, as well; noir males feel the need to prove their ‘maleness,’ often times through criminality, generally leading to fatality. It is not merely the *femmes fatales* who lead the males to their deaths, but rather that the doomed male protagonists are lacking in the desire to assume traditional male roles, and in bonding themselves to the *femmes fatales* – or even in *creating* the *femme fatale* figure – they are surrendering these inherent male qualities (as defined by the noir narrative). Thus, fatality is in losing what is typically gendered ‘male’ by transgressing from normative male characterization and male roles.

**The *homme fatale* concedes his masculinity to the femme**

The causal relationship between love and death is a recurring theme in film noir. The obsession, desperation, and all-consuming passion that are inherent in love in *noir* serve as catalysts for criminality and death. In his book, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Frank Krutnik describes the idea of *amour fou* in film noir. Krutnik suggests that “the desire to ‘fuse’ with the woman achieves its ultimate realization in death,” and in contracting himself to the woman, “the male will always risk some degree of destabilization of his post-Oedipal identity as a man.”<sup>2</sup> A gender transgression is then facilitated through this ‘fusion’ of the male identity with that of the *femme*’s. Chris Straayer has observed, “classic film noir, although coded heterosexually, ‘maintain[s] difference-based coupling while deconstructing gender-sex alignment and allowing for gender inversion, gender trading, and same-gender couplings.’”<sup>3</sup> Film noir allows for extra-normative, gender role violations then in its recurring theme of fatal amorous bonds. Perhaps the formation of these bonds allows for, or even facilitates, gender-loss; though, fatality usually comes as a result of these gender role deviations. Both *Gun Crazy* (Lewis 1950) and *Gilda* (Vidor 1946) exhibit gender inversions that lead to the deaths of the violators.

***Gun Crazy*: “the phallic *femme fatale* and emasculated protagonist”<sup>4</sup>**

In *Gun Crazy*, Bart, whose actions are governed by his potent obsession with guns, falls in love with the dangerous Laurie Starr, star of the carnival gun show. This kicks off a thieving rampage that propels the rest of the film, wherein Bart’s participation in the crimes is solely at the insistence of Laurie, the thrill-seeker and criminal driver. In binding himself to Laurie, Bart relinquishes his obsession (the masculine

phallic object of the gun), and transfers his affections to Laurie, whose own obsession is with the kind of life symbolized by the gun. Thus, in this transference of affections, Bart concedes his masculinity to the more unyielding Laurie, who retains her own identity in the formation of her bond with Bart. Frank Krutnik writes, “Where the male over-idealises the woman, the extensive ceding of ego may result in a problematic sacrifice of his ‘licit’ masculine identity and motive power.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, while Bart’s own obsession is now with the power-holder Laurie, she in turn is able to adopt the role of the story-driver and narrative determinate. In establishing a woman as his principle fixation, Bart in effect cedes his motive power to the control of the *femme* and allows for the trading of gender roles, thus creating the “phallic *femme fatale*.” Wager in fact states, “The woman often dominates in film noir and the male protagonist often wants to be dominated.”<sup>6</sup> In forfeiting power as the narrative driver, the *homme fatale* concedes to be the subordinate of the *femme*.

In the final robbery scene, we see Bart and Laurie in a ‘normal’ work environment. Bart converses in an easy and friendly manner with the other employees – a glimpse of how his conventional life might have played out without Laurie’s interference. In contrast, Laurie struggles with her superior’s hierarchical authority in the workplace, as she dictates that Laurie adopt a more feminine wardrobe. As Laurie and Bart are shown in their respective environments, their different interactions in and treatment of the traditional workplace becomes apparent. Bart crosses the room slowly whilst chatting with another employee, and in the immediate next shot, Laurie traverses across the entire workspace briskly. Here Bart thrives in the ‘simple’ life, whilst Laurie finds this life to be a tedious task. Moreover, Laurie resents having to assume the traditional female role. When she is questioned for wearing pants and

told to wear a more gender-appropriate outfit the next day, she smirks at the woman with the knowledge of what will soon transpire. Laurie, in fact, kills the woman who attempts to control her self-gendering. With the inevitable deaths of Bart and Laurie, fatality in the pairing is determined by the loss of masculinity (here defined by the concession of the role of decision-maker) by the male and the adaptation of it by the female (here her inability to conform to female gender conventions). Consequently, gender role transgressions are punished.

### ***Gilda*: the male *femme fatale* – the concession of masculinity to another male**

An unusual case of gender transgressions and the *femme fatale* is that of *Gilda*, where the *femme* is in fact a male. Note that this would not make him an *homme fatale* by existing definitions however, as he is usually defined as the male protagonist who causes his own fatality. In the film, the protagonist, Johnny Farrell, is embroiled in the lives of his crooked new boss and the boss' wife, Gilda, who in fact is also Johnny's former lover. What is noteworthy about *Gilda* is that it merges the typical characterization of the *femme fatale* with the noir male villain. The male *femme fatale* of *Gilda* might be labeled as such due to the subservient, and more importantly, libidinous role the *homme fatale* Johnny Farrell takes to the male villain, Ballin. In "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the *Film Noir*," Raymond Durnat offers a view of the relationships in *Gilda* as breaches in conventional gender roles, writing, "Intimations of non-effeminate homosexuality are laid on thick in, notably, *Gilda*, where loyal Glenn Ford [Johnny Farrell] gets compared to both his boss's kept woman and swordstick."<sup>7</sup> One can see these hints of sexual transgression from the first. Johnny is initially acquainted with Ballin when he is saved by Ballin's cane/sword.

The cane here serves as a guideline for what Johnny should be as a 'friend' to Ballin, that is subordinate and obedient, and as Ballin's symbolic phallic representation. Describing the cane's attributes, Ballin states, "It is silent when I wish to be silent, it talks when I wish to talk,"<sup>8</sup> effectively dictating what it is that Johnny should be to Ballin. Johnny is implicated in *choosing* to bind himself to Ballin, and thus taking on these roles when he tells him, "You see now you have two friends [pointing to the cane]. You have no idea how faithful I can be...for a salary,"<sup>9</sup> blatantly offering himself for a price. In comparing himself to the cane, Johnny presents himself as an alternative phallic object and as subject to Ballin.

In the film, Johnny is often compared to and in competition with Gilda, "the kept woman." In fact, Richard Dyer states, "the film shows Johnny to be placed in the same position *vis-à-vis* Ballin as Gilda is."<sup>10</sup> This is most clearly exemplified when Johnny returns Gilda home and they are confronted by Ballin, here a figure cloaked starkly in a near true black. In the scene consisting mostly of a single three-shot, Ballin remains in the foreground, his head out of frame. Consumed by shadow, his censoring tone is all the more emphasized as he asserts his clear authority over the apparently disloyal violators. Moreover, Gilda and Johnny both must make excuses for their behavior, clearly indicating their equally subservient positions to Ballin. Comparatively small in the background, they are clearly partitioned from Ballin, as they remain glaringly illuminated next to his silhouetted figure. The contrast between the extreme light and dark in conjunction with Ballin's interrogative tone is reminiscent of police interrogation scenes; the suspects are probed under a harsh light as the interrogator remains veiled intimidatingly in darkness. The triangle that had been problematic throughout the film – first established as the gender transgression between Ballin, Johnny, and the phallic cane, then trans-

formed into the one of Ballin, Johnny, and Gilda whereby the adaptation of conventional gender roles is made possible given the severing of one extraneous bond – is here presented literally in the composition. Johnny is first placed at the center, with the lines of convergence from the shadows of the room centered on him, and yet Ballin is shown to be the controlling and dominating focal point, as the camera is motivated by his movement traversing across the frame. As Gilda moves away, Ballin steps forth and falls to the center of the triangle, with the other two points at either side of him and in the middle and background, once again establishing their subordinate association to the dominant narrative driver.

In point of fact, Ballin presents himself at the start as Johnny's savior. By introducing the vagrant to his casino, he is in effect taking in the stray Johnny, whereby he becomes a "kept man," and characterizing himself as the male power-holder in the relationship. Dyer writes, "Johnny, the hero of the film, is placed in the position of the woman within the relationship," wherein the relationship is "structured according to the male-female norms of heterosexual relationships."<sup>11</sup> After the supposed death of Ballin, Johnny's relationship with Gilda remains unconsummated for the duration of the film. Johnny marries Gilda, seemingly for the sake of keeping her in check for Ballin. Thus, in marrying to please the male *femme fatale*, the relationship, though seemingly heteronormative, is once again a transgression from the norm. However, *Gilda* does revert to the status quo in the denouement. Ballin, now taking the role of the noir villain, becomes the severed bond of the amorous triangle with his (true) death. Thus, in seducing Johnny, and more importantly, taking the dominant role in the transgression, he is punished. With his death, the triangle is able to return to the heteronormative bond between Johnny and Gilda, wherein he is now able to assume the traditional dominant male role.

Johnny is able to usurp Ballin in his role as the power-holder once his transgression comes to an end and he has reassimilated into the norm.

### **Fetishism and the imposition of the male point of view**

Just as Gilda embodies the physicality of the *femme fatale*, the fatalistic female characters are at times simply an image created in the male point of view. The women become disembodied physical foci and fractured personalities, allowing for the objectification and fetishization of the part and the neglect of the whole. This fetishization of the women by the noir males often either leads to a failure of vision through objectification (*Double Indemnity*) (Billy Wilder, 1944) or the imposition of a false image (*Laura*) (Preminger 1944). In objectifying the woman, the male protagonist blinds himself to her, thus giving in to the fetishized parts of her and failing to acknowledge her negative attributes or possibly fatalistic tendencies. Furthermore, this false attribution of qualities creates the possibility of constructing a *femme fatale* figure when there is not one in actuality. In her book *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*, Julie Grossman writes, “Feminist film critics have recognized that male protagonists in noir hold responsibility for their fates, but this insight hasn’t led viewers to see fully the implications of these observations: mainly, that the presence of the ‘*femme fatale*’ in film noir movies is drastically overstated and almost exclusively the result of male projection.”<sup>12</sup> Film noir’s constant alignment of the audience with the male point of view becomes problematic in understanding the female characters; they remain enigmas to both the male protagonists and to the audience.

In *Double Indemnity*, the male protagonist, Walter Neff, is blinded by the beauty of an adulterous and duplicitous *femme*

and becomes ensnared in a murder plot through her encouragement to kill her husband for an insurance payout. Though the woman, Phyllis Dietrichson, very much fits into the typical *femme fatale* mode, she is also arguably used as an excuse for Walter Neff's criminal curiosities. Walter's attraction to Phyllis seems to be a fetishistic, superficial one at best. In his article, "Some Like It Cold: Fetishism in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*," Hugh Manon remarks, "At the culmination of the film's first act, Walter rejects the possibility of heterosexual union in favor of the perpetuation of a strange conspiratorial brainchild – his memorable attempt to commit a perfect crime."<sup>13</sup> He goes on to say that their unconsummated relationship, resulting from Walter's lack of desire to attain (heterosexual) satisfaction, lead to his need for criminality as a substitution.<sup>14</sup> By killing the *femme*, Walter is attempting to redeem his apparent masculinity by severing the 'poisonous' bond. Yet he is never truly able to, because he himself is a poisonous, criminal element, and thus is not able to escape his grave fate. Walter's consequential fatality is then a result of both his blindness to Phyllis' true nature and intentions, as well as his utilization of her criminal motives as a defense for his own illicit desires.

*Laura* is exemplary of the *femme fatale* as a creation of the male projection. In the film, a detective is sent to investigate the murder of Laura, and he falls in love with her as he learns about her through her letters, diary, and testimony from her friends and murder suspects. In the film, Laura's intended role as an ambiguous entity remains unchanged. It is perhaps not so much a lack of desire to understand Laura, as it is a preference for the idea of the woman as a blank canvas on which to impose the male's (unrealistic) version of the woman that promotes this imposition of a false image. Grossman writes, "as viewers, we often ally ourselves with male protagonists such as [Mark] McPherson, violating the spirit of the representation

of female characters in these films by superimposing the strict terms of the 'femme fatale' on them."<sup>15</sup> In *Laura*, the image imposed upon the female namesake is composed of such contradictory falsities that she becomes both the *femme fatale* as well as the innocent woman. Indeed, Laura does not exist in the present for the entire first half of the film – she is merely seen through flashbacks, and as a result only through other people's subjective view of her. This alignment leads to clear misreadings of Laura. This is evident in a scene where Waldo Lydecker tells Detective Mark McPherson of his history with Laura. In the flashback sequence he writes a slanderous column on Laura's suitor Jacoby. He imagines that Laura had laughed at his article, and then proclaimed that "she could never regard him seriously again" afterwards. However, it is revealed later that Laura resents him for this act, consequently leaving us to question the truth of these flashbacks – that is, the flashbacks in *Laura* comprise subjective information. The viewers are aligned with the male figures for the majority of the film in their perception of Laura. As a result, Laura remains an enigma to the end. The audience's understanding of Laura is based entirely on what it is that these men wish for her to be, so that in the end she is a mere creation of the amalgamation of these perceptions. The portrait of Laura that bookends the film becomes not a mirrored likeness of her, but rather a representation of Laura as a product of masculine attentions. On visual representations of women in noir, Grossman writes "that these women first appear at first as photographic or painted images strongly suggests their initial status as images coined by male desire, 'derealized' in Mary Ann Doane's terms (*Femmes Fatales*, 146), in the service of male fantasy."<sup>16</sup> Lydecker states his idealization of Laura most clearly when he calls her "the best part of myself," and in attempting to preserve something of a pure image of Laura, that is a pure part of himself, Lydecker explains his reasoning

for killing her as not wanting another man to have her. Laura's created image of perfection and goodness is so potent here that the idea of the destruction of this image calls for the ending of her life. Laura is seen purely as an agentless object – she has become the portrait of herself, one that is nothing more than an image.

There is a clear differentiation between McPherson and Laura's 'losing' suitors. McPherson is the embodiment of noir masculinity, all the more apparent as he enters Laura's space, here clearly gendered feminine. Both Lydecker and Laura's fiancé, Shelby Carpenter, are depicted as somewhat effeminate. Lydecker, with his overly posh English accent, and Shelby, soft-spoken and self-declared as "not the conventional type," are contrasted with McPherson's tough noir detective. That Lydecker and Shelby belong to this feminine environment, coupled with the view of Laura as an extension to their own identities, is a deviance that can only be corrected with the death of one and the usurpation of the other by the masculine McPherson.

In his article, "The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition," Jack Boozer asserts, "It could be argued that the prevailing male gaze upon the seductress provides the most obvious confirmation of the woman's visual objectification. On the other hand, the male gaze is also problematized and punished in the *noir* narrative."<sup>17</sup> The noir male seems to fall victim to the overtly *femme fatale* figures when seen fetishizing the women. In *Laura*, the audience is only given a *version* of Laura, created out of a compilation of male projections and physically represented by material possessions and visual interpretations. For Bart in *Gun Crazy*, his obsession is with guns. In *Gilda*, the fetishized object is Ballin's phallic cane. These objects of obsession are illustrative of the males' tunnel focus on particularities, which blinds them to that which will ultimately cause their

fatality. Thus fetishism in film noir leads to a willing subordination of masculine power and agency to the fetishized personage.

### **The *homme fatale* and his (lack of) stability and a stable family life**

The *homme fatale*'s digression from societal expectations is often underscored through depictions of the conventional home life – that is, the life that the male protagonist is meant to adhere to, were he to refrain from criminality. Males who set themselves outside of settled life in these films often are given the possibility of stability, but lose the potential for a stable family life through their criminal behavior, which in turn leads to fatality. On the sexual paradigms of film noir, Jans Wager states, “The *homme fatale* wants either a more lucrative lifestyle than participation in lethal forms of capitalism enables, or a sexually dominant and worldly woman rather than a submissive wife.”<sup>18</sup> *Criss Cross* (Siodmak 1949) and *Gun Crazy*, portray the ideal home, and in both cases, it signifies contentment in the home and the loss of this possibility with the forging of a bond with the sexually dominant woman rather than the submissive wife. *Criss Cross*, a film in which a rekindled romance goes awry when the woman's new mobster husband begins to suspect of the affair, goes a step further in depicting the home as devastated by the actions of the protagonist.

*Criss Cross* holds one of the rare occurrences in noir, where the protagonist, Steve Thompson, has something akin to the ideal home and family life, albeit one in which he remains in the stunted role of the son and brother as opposed to the role of ‘man of the house’ that he is meant to assume. Prior to engaging in a dalliance with his now married ex-wife Anna, Steve is established as belonging to a model family unit with the caring mother and a brother who is about to start a family

of his own with his fiancé. Here, the conventional relationship is emphasized with Steve's brother. His relationship typifies the desirable and societally valid bond. Steve looks on from a distance as the fiancé clearly adopts the role of the submissive wife when she consents to an initially unwanted public embrace after he jokingly threatens to slap her. Even in this model family, the potential for the maintenance of this life is disturbed by Anna's ever-presence in Steve's mind as we see him stare furtively at the phone, overwhelmed by the temptation to telephone her. In her article, "Women's place: the absent family of film noir," Sylvia Harvey notes, "if successful romantic love leads inevitably in the direction of the stable institution of marriage, the point about film noir, by contrast, is that it is structured around the destruction or absence of romantic love and the family."<sup>19</sup> That Anna and Steve could not function in a relationship in the stable institution of marriage once previously points to the inevitable destruction of their new relationship and loved ones.

Steve's idyllic family home is in fact tarnished when the clandestine extramarital relationship between Anna and Steve is discovered. Anna's husband, Dundee, and his men invade Steve's home, and in the strange juxtaposition of a homey, light room and the menacing men inside this room, the safety and comfort of the stable family home is effectively destroyed. At this point, Steve suggests a heist to Dundee, and in trying to save Anna and himself, Steve causes the death of Pop, the surrogate father figure. The semblance of stability in the home that he had prior to being reacquainted with Anna is extinguished with the bombardment of his home with criminal elements, to which Steve only further augments.

The motif of the exemplary home life as a foil to that of the male protagonist's also arises in *Gun Crazy*. In attempting to evade the law after their last heist, Bart and Laurie decide to

hide in the house of Bart's sister, Ruby. As they approach the house, Bart and Laurie's point of view as they stare in through the window shows the picture-perfect home – an idyllic image of Ruby cooking with her children in a kitchen that exudes comfort and safety. The shadowy space occupied by Bart and Laurie is contrasted with the interior home space flooded with light – made all the starker in the shot of the window, where all that does not play out inside the window frame is steeped in complete darkness. As they enter the home, the viewer is situated behind Ruby and her children, and thus takes on her point of view. Harvey describes the scene, writing, "Taking refuge with Bart's family at the end of the film, they so clearly do not belong; they constitute a violent eruption to the ordered patterns of family life."<sup>20</sup> As in *Criss Cross*, Bart and Laurie signify an invasion of the home environment and are destructive forces in direct conflict with the safety and stability that the home represents.

The woman's place in the home is emphasized here, as well. Ruby represents the ideal wife and mother – one who remains in the home and whose solitary concerns remain within the sphere of domesticity. Laurie enters her home dressed entirely in black. This is contrasted with Ruby's light colored clothing with which she wears an apron, denoting her place as the 'good wife.' Moreover, when Laurie and Bart first enter, Ruby immediately assumes a protective stance over her children. Laurie, by contrast, attempts to take one of the children on the run with them, thinking that the child would dissuade the police from taking aim at them. Laurie's foil in Ruby points to her lack of 'natural' motherly, feminine instincts, affirming the impossibility of having a stable family life for Bart and Laurie. Laurie's refusal of her traditional gender role – her adoption of the male criminal role – and Bart's passive concession to these gender inversions solidifies the pair's demise.

### **Criminality as redemption of masculinity**

It is a common noir theme for the male protagonist to feel the need to undertake the conventional male role as provider for the couple. However, as in *Gun Crazy*, this undertaking often results in criminal behavior that eventually leads to the hero's demise. Frank Krutnik has observed that, "it is through his accomplishment of a crime-related quest that the hero consolidates his masculine identity."<sup>21</sup> In *Criss Cross*, Steve formulates the plan for the payroll heist in order to obtain enough money to run off with Anna. In *Gun Crazy*, Bart provides adventure for Laurie in the form of criminality. In *Double Indemnity*, insurance salesman Walter Neff attempts to kill his lover's (Phyllis') husband in order to get the insurance money and the girl. However, in all these cases masculinity is never regained. Steve is double-crossed during the heist, and in lacking success in crime the male is castrated by the female judge, losing his masculinity and his life. Bart's apparent masculinity in being able to provide adventure for Laurie is merely pretense, as Laurie maintains the role of narrative driver throughout their robbery spree, and he merely a player in it. We find that Phyllis has been manipulating Walter since the start. As she was in control, he was therefore merely the subordinate collaborator in the crime. He does not truly regain his masculinity until he shoots and kills his manipulator, in effect severing the grasp of the power-holder – though, at that point it is too late for him, as well. Perhaps then the criminal who relinquishes his masculinity is deemed fatal. Criminality in the noir narrative then is gendered male, for the female perpetrators of crime are often ones who are viewed in relation to a gender-transgressing male.

### **Survival through adherence to male normative behavior**

The *homme fatale* of film noir, who is characterized by

his deviant masculinity, is always punished narratively as he meets a fatal ending. Perhaps then the male protagonists who remain closed off to the females and who adhere to traditionally appropriated gender roles are the ones who are allowed to survive, like the detective in the “tough’ investigative thriller,” as defined by Frank Krutnik.<sup>22</sup> The protagonist who is able to maintain narrative agency, as well as the ability to remain closed to the personage to whom the action of forging a bond may cause the concession of this agency, is the protagonist who is able to elude the otherwise unavoidable self-destruction that frequently concludes a noir film.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jans B. Wager, *Dames in the Driver's Seat* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 55-56.

<sup>3</sup> Wager, 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Krutnik, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Wager, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Durnat, “Paint It Black: The Family Tree of *Film Noir*,” in *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2005) 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Gilda*, dir. Charles Vidor, Columbia Pictures, 1946.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dyer, “Resistant through charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*,” in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1978) 94.

<sup>11</sup> Dyer, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir* (Basingstoke, U.K.; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 29.

<sup>13</sup> Hugh S. Manon, "Some Like It Cold: Fetishism in Billy Wilder's 'Double Indemnity'," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 44, no. 4 (2005): 19.

<sup>14</sup> Manon, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Grossman, 42.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Jack Boozer, "The Lethal *Femme Fatale* in the Noir Tradition," *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 51, no. 3/4 (1999/2000): 22.

<sup>18</sup> Wager, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Sylvia Harvey, "Woman's place: the absent family of film noir," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1978) 25.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Krutnik, 57.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

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