

“THE THREE SUITORS OF THE KING’S DAUGHTER”: CHARACTER ROLES IN THE ESTONIAN VERSIONS OF THE DRAGON SLAYER (AT 300)

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The first fairy tale type (AT 300) in the Aarne-Thompson type index, the fight of a hero with the mythical dragon, has provided material for both the sacred as well as the profane kind of fabulated stories, for myth as well as fairy tale.

The myth of dragon-slaying can be met in all mythologies in which the dragon appears as an independent being. By killing the dragon the hero frees the water it has swallowed, gets hold of a treasure it has guarded, or frees a person, who in most cases is a young maiden that has been kidnapped (MNM: 394). Lutz Röhrich (1981: 788) has noted that dragon slaying often marks a certain liminal situation – the creation of an order (a city, a state, an epoch or a religion) or the ending of something.

The dragon’s appearance at the beginning or end of the sacral narrative, as well as its dimensions ‘that surpass everything’ show that it is located at an utmost limit and that a fight with it is a fight in the superlative. Thus, fighting the dragon can signify a universal general principle, the overcoming of anything evil by anything good. In Christianity the defeating of the dragon came to symbolize the overcoming of paganism and was employed in saint legends. The honour of defeating the dragon has been attributed to more than sixty different Catholic saints. In the Christian canon it was St. George who, in addition to St. Michael and Ste. Margaret, has gained special fame and has been depicted on most of the iconographic images dedicated to the topic (Röhrich 1981: 795–796, 810–812).

If we proceed from the myths and legends to the even “less sacred” material in the realm of fabulated stories, i.e., fairy tales, the fight with the dragon is widely known in here as well; according to the data in ‘Enzyklopädie des Märchens’ it appears in at least fifteen fairy tale types (ibid.: 798). We are first and foremost interested in

<http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol22/dragons.pdf>

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Photo 1. *St. George and the Dragon. Fragment from a fresco in Öja church on Gotland, Sweden. Photo by A. Kuperjanov, 2003.*

fighting the dragon as it occurs in its so-called pure plot, AT 300 “The Dragon-Slayer”. This is a heroic fight, not for instance stealing back the king’s daughter from a sleeping dragon as it happens in the fairy tale type AT 653 (a well-known story “The Four Skilful Brothers” (*Die vier kunstreichen Brüder*) by the Brothers Grimm – KHM 129).

It is this plot, containing the episode of slaying the dragon, that Vladimir Propp in his work “Morphology of the Folktale” considers to be closest to the prototype of the entire fairy tale tradition (Propp 1969: 81). Although such an idea of all-inclusiveness seems to be a bit far-fetched in its attempts to generalise, even those scholars who divide fairy tales into more numerous plot groups see “The Dragon Slayer” as representative of several types of fairy tale (e.g. Jason 1977: 39; Meletinski *et al* 1969: 162).

Therefore it is not surprising that the topic has been tackled by numerous researchers, with the bibliography in “Enzyklopädie des Märchens”, which includes the most important treatments, men-

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tioning nearly sixty titles. Considering the amount of material observed, the voluminous monograph by Kurt Ranke “Die zwei Brüder” (1934) is important as the author has, all in all, observed more than a thousand versions of AT 300 and AT 303 (“The Twins or Blood-Brothers”) from different countries.

The texts observed here are collected in the Estonian Folklore Archives. Fairy tale type AT 300 with its 175 recordings¹ from the years 1875–1973 belongs to the five most popular ones. As the archive materials are arranged according to the typology of the AT index, I am concentrating on the characters who appear in type AT 300, and will observe whom the narrators of Estonian fairy tales have chosen for the roles of the dragon, the dragon slayer and the false hero who attempts to usurp the latter’s position. I also wish to observe what kind of relationships can be detected in those fulfilling these roles. The other aim of the article is to interpret the possible “general meaning” of plot AT 300 as a fairy tale in comparison with the myth or sacred legend of slaying a dragon.

THE DRAGON SLAYER

A brief summary the story could be presented for the sake of clarity. The main character leaves home and goes to another city that is all draped in the colours of mourning. He learns that following an annual tradition a young girl, who has been chosen by drawing lots and who turns out to be the king’s daughter, will be taken to the dragon. The planned offering is to take place on the seaside where the hero fights with the monster and slays it in the end (as a characteristic of fairy tales, there may also be three fights). After the heroic deed the hero disappears from action for a while, thus not accepting the maiden’s hand and half the kingdom. The man accompanying the king’s daughter decides to impersonate the one who freed her and makes the girl confirm his lie with an oath; the date for the wedding is set. However, just in time for the wedding the real hero returns into the action. After he has provided the necessary proof he is restored to fame and is rewarded with marriage into the royal family.

Because of the heroic battle that takes place with the gigantic monster in the tale, the hero of type AT 300 is always male: a young

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man (the youngest son, the third son), who as a rule is poor (the son of a poor man, the son of a cotter), and in some versions a soldier, who has been released from the army. In the case of contaminations the hero may also be a king's youngest son – for instance in AT 502 (“The Wild Man”) the dragon is slain by a king's son who has left home (as a punishment) for he has accidentally set free a little man held captive in a mushroom to amuse the king's guests.

The heroes bearing the proper names of *Peeter* and *Jüri* (8 versions) deserve special attention. According to researchers, *Peeter* had already by the 15th century developed into a widespread name in Estonia (Rajandi 1976: 143); *Jüri*, which is also originally a loan (George), can for the past couple of centuries “be treated almost as a native Estonian first name” (*ibid.*: 91). Although both names are, for that reason, most appropriate for the fairy tales, *Peeter* – as we can see a bit later – has only been used in the Estonian versions of “The Dragon Slayer” as of the 19th century. The use of the other name has obviously been influenced by the legend of St. George. At times the texts hitherto noted as fairy tale type AT 300 in the archives do not even resemble a fairy tale, but rather seem to represent a legend (or a brief summary thereof), as, for instance, the following text from Kullamaa parish.

There was this terribly big snake that ate a person every day. In the end the king's daughter was chosen by lot and the snake had to eat her. But Juri was a valiant man and defeated the snake. To commemorate this juripää [St. George's day] was named (ERA II 189, 542/3 (101) < Kullamaa parish – Enda Ennist < Liisu Kirkman (1938))

By the way, it is worth mentioning that the saint's name used in AT 300 is not only found in the Setu region, which has had a strong influence from Christian iconography, but also in, for instance, in central Estonia². Apparently the continuity of the name and relics of the legend can be linked to the important status of St. George's Day in the Estonian folk calendar (see Hiiemäe 1996).

THE DRAGON

The appearance of the dragon that desires the king's daughter is not described very eloquently in Estonian folk tales. This is also the

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situation in some other traditions – Satu Apo mentions that the figure of the dragon is fairly pale and colourless in the Finnish versions of the fairy tale (to be more precise, those deriving from the Satakunta region) in comparison with its “Russian and Hungarian colleagues” (Apo 1995: 234). The Russian scholar Vladimir Propp, however, has stated that in the real Russian folktale the dragon is also never described (Propp 1986: 216). Nevertheless, we need not believe that it results from the fact that the local fauna is not particularly colourful. Still, we have to admit that in the Estonian versions the defeated monster is also given a fairly uniform description – in most cases it appears as a many-headed (if the fight with the dragon has been given a three-stage gradation in the fairy tale, three-, six- and twelve-headed monsters enter the action as a rule) serpent (a great serpent; a flying serpent), an evil spirit (an evil spirit with three heads; an old bad one; a beast with twelve heads) and it often appears to be associated with water (a sea monster; an old goblin of the sea; a sea devil). On only three occasions has the monster been described in a somewhat more detailed way, yet in all these cases we have to deal with correspondents, the authenticity of whose several textual contributions is questionable.

Although the abstract dragon figure is not gendered, the masculinity of the powerful creature is intimated – this is also referred to by the wording of the version in which an annual lot is cast to find out whose turn it is to “marry the terrible serpent” (H II 64, 293/316 (14) < Setu county, Meremäe village – Jaan Sandra < Sulbi Joorka (1902)). The dragon is also linked with the male sex by Bengt Holbek (1987: 504), who believed that all fairy tale characters should have their equivalents in the real life of the society of the narrator.³ At the same time the dragon figure of the fairy tales has been considered rather an “extreme figure” than an existing being (e.g. according to Röhrich 1981: 800) and it need not be assumed that the narrators unconditionally believed in its existence. Nevertheless, Satu Apo (1995: 235) has noticed the “ecotyping” of the monster in Finnish fairy tales, its replacement with beings found in their belief system. In the same way we can meet a snake, a treasure-bringing goblin, the old bad one in the Estonian versions. In the version in which the narrator has cast the old bad one as the monster and, at the same time, for example, St. George as the dragon slayer, it can be assumed that the Christian background has increased the “truth value” of the fairy tale.

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Among the “ecotyped” beings also a frog is being fought in a text deriving from the town of Narva. It seems, however, that the narrator has been influenced by the literary fairy tale “The Northern Frog” in an Estonian writer Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald’s recognizable reworking of the story in the collection “Old Estonian Fairy Tales”, in which it is the frog that has replaced the dragon. In this example more literary influences can be detected – if the dragon slayer is often helped by animals he has acquired in a miraculous way, the names of his three dogs in this version are “Break the chains”, “Tear and kill”, and “Fetch food”, that is conspicuously close to another fairy tale by Kreutzwald, titled as “The Lucky Rouble” that is also based on the plot of “The Dragon Slayer”. Kreutzwald has named the dogs “Run-Fetch-Food”, “Attack-and-Kill” and “Break-

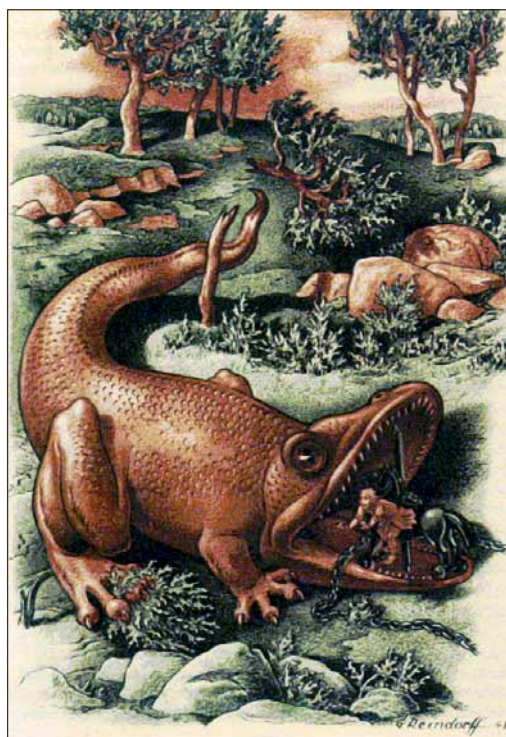


Figure 1. G. Reindorff's illustration to Fr.R. Kreutzwald's fairy tale "The Northern Frog" (1951).

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the-Chains” (Kreutzwald 1985: 255). Such names are contained in several of the archives’ recordings from different regions, but in all of them major overlap with Kreutzwald’s text can be noticed – in several cases the hero is called Peeter, the hero meets the king’s daughter, who is being taken in a coach to her death etc. Even the lucky coin that is given to the hero in all these versions “usually appears in a different kind of story” according to August Annist (1966: 200), who has analysed the origins of Kreutzwald’s fairy tales.

AN ILLOGICAL STEP: THE HERO LEAVES THE STAGE

The telling of fairy tales has obviously also had other purposes besides mere amusement, either a mythologically “creative magical” one of the olden times or the didactic one of the children’s stories in the contemporary world. Every storyteller has his/her own message, his/her story has its own meaning. However, has AT 300 a “general” meaning?

Bengt Holbek, who has interpreted fairy tales in depth, remarks on the above-mentioned monograph by Ranke: it is useless as the question of meaning has been avoided by the Finnish school (Holbek 1987: 560) – Ranke discusses more than a hundred versions without displaying “the least interest” in the meaning of the dragon for the storyteller (Holbek 1987: 250). Also for instance Vladimir Propp (1986: 223–224) has expressed criticism as regards Ranke’s work. This is understandable. As a representative of the Finnish school, Ranke, who has examined “The Dragon Slayer” motif of different nations, has carried out an onerous task first and foremost to find out the “original form” of the fairy tale in question and is finally convinced in its Indo-European origin (Ranke 1934: 378). The usefulness of the monograph as a source of a quantitative general survey of the directions the plots take is to be admitted. It is from Ranke that we learn that in only a hundred cases from among the sample he observes – which statistically makes up but a tenth part⁴ – the hero marries the king’s daughter immediately after the fight or after a small interval filled with adventures (Ranke 1934: 231). In most cases, however, the hero disappears from the action after obtaining proof of being the slayer of the dragon, thus postponing the

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receiving of the honourably earned reward (marriage with the king's daughter) for a year or even several years.

Why does the hero take such an illogical step? – From the point of view of the plot the hero withdraws, making room for the false-hero; a character, who has been present at the fight (as a mere onlooker or someone who was actually supposed to save the maiden), reacts in an as unexpected a way after the winner has disappeared. On the threat of death the so-called False George makes the king's daughter proclaim him her saviour, to be on the safe side he requires that she confirm the lie with an oath. Although the motif of revealing a false slayer appears in, for instance, the Greek tale of Peleus (see de Vries 1954: 149), it is in the story of the dragon slayer in which this episode seems to appear as a significant element of the plot. Maybe it is the false hero that helps us to understand the meaning of the whole fairy tale?

Although the false hero has entered the events of the story already when the king's daughter is being taken to the dragon, his falsehood becomes apparent only after the withdrawal of the real hero (here a comparison could be made with the tradition in the genre of the detective novel, according to which the real criminal participates in the events from early on.)

The extant Estonian versions of "The Dragon Slayer" cast a coachman (the king's coachman), a military man (an old soldier, an old general, a young general, an army chief, twelve generals, a young and handsome chief, a chief and officer) or another person at the court (a chef, a valet) as the false hero. As a rule there is one false hero in AT 300 (which is logical, as only one man at a time can marry the king's daughter). The cases in which more than one man strives for the status of the false hero, are contaminations: with the type AT 301A ("Quest for a Vanished Princess" in one version a chef and a valet, in another – in which the elements typical of AT 300 are rather weak – a chief and an officer) and AT 466 (three strong men). A version representing AT 303+300, in which the role of the false hero is assumed by the three worst drunkards of all, is obviously an exceptional recording, a merry interpretation by the storyteller⁷. The pseudo-saviours are given a reward in the inns of the city by the king's permission – "Now these three drunkards shall have free meals and drink in the city and all the inns and taverns

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shall be open to them” (H II 32, 992/1004 (2) < Setu county, Meremäe parish, Vasildõ village – Hindrik Prants < Mikita (1890)).

It is still the king’s coachman who appears as the false hero more often than other figures; and in quite a few tales it is a military man. The military false heroes in Estonia are still variable and not as fixed as, for instance, “Ridder Rød” who fulfils the role in Danish fairy tales.⁶

In a fairy tale, the characters get their meaning through their relationship to the status of the main character – the false hero is an “unreal” version of the hero with some of his characteristics coinciding, yet the false hero is still missing something (cf Novik 1975: 244–245). This emerges clearly from the recordings in which a soldier has been cast as the hero and a general as the false hero. For example, the main character can be a young soldier and the false hero an old general (H II 52, 277/92 (18) < Rāpina parish – Joosep Poolakess (1895)); or the main character may be Jūri, son of Ants who is serving in the military and the false hero a young general (H II 50, 223/33 (1) < Laiuse parish, Raaduverre village – J. Riomar < Jaan Lass (1895)). Naturally, a similar cast can appear in the above-mentioned contamination with the story type AT 301A, in which the reward of the soldier is also desired by a chief and an officer.

What are the similar characteristics of the most common combination – a poor boy and a coachman? Already Ranke (1934: 239) has noted that just like the military men who appear as false heroes, the coachman belongs to the court, i.e. to the sphere towards which the hero is striving. The false hero has been more in the vicinity of the king’s daughter than the hero ever has. Naturally, given the opportunity, he succumbs to the temptation to make his life better and gain the honour to claim (the material goods) of the dragon slayer for himself – unlike the hero he regards marriage as a means and not as an end in itself in almost all cases.

If we consider the higher social position of the false hero in comparison with that of the dragon slayer (once more the “inappropriateness” of the three drunkards strikes the eye), we can detect a social critique directed at those in power in the storyteller’s attitude towards the false hero. Thus for instance Lev Barag has considered the class conflict between the dragon slayer of AT 300 and

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his brothers serving as false heroes to be a later addition to the mythological plot (Barag 1981: 169). Actually (at least in Estonia), the storytellers have not so much condemned the higher status in itself, but the coercion used to force the king’s daughter to lie and take an oath in support of the lies on the part of someone in a higher position. The following events confirm this – by the beginning of the wedding, which has been postponed in answer the plea of the saved maiden, the real dragon slayer turns up and the king’s daughter recognizing the hero wants now to become free of the oath given to the false hero.

In Estonian versions the hero, as a rule, regains his place by her side on the basis of her words. On the other hand, those versions in which the hero shows his victory over the false hero with another heroic deed, for instance, has strength to lift the stone under which he has hidden the remains of the dragon that the false hero cannot do, remain in the minority. This indicates that the real – and “right” – choice between the suitors is made by the king’s daughter. As in many fairy tales, it is the future spouse who is the most active character in the final part of the story (Holbek 1987: 431).

Let us once more narrow down the body of material we are considering, letting only these texts remain that derive from one folklore collection in the archives, namely, that of Jakob Hurt, the initiator of Estonian folklore collecting; and, if we omit the texts in which there is no false hero, 41 texts remain. The three characters of these are represented in the Figure 2. On the basis of the social position of the false hero the different false heroes have been attributed a lighter or darker background colour (the middle column); the same shade has been attributed to the “dragon” (the first column) and the hero (the third column) of the same story. We can see that to a certain degree a correlation between the social positions of the hero and the false hero can be detected, but this happens but in a minority of cases.

THE THREE “SUITORS” OF THE KING’S DAUGHTER

In looking for (and finding) similar motifs in myths, folk tales, and heroic sagas, Jan de Vries (1954: 156) has underscored that the difference between them is the fate of the hero – in a fairy tale the

hero gets married. So we understand why the king's daughter is an inevitable heroine from the point of view of the structure of a heroic fairy tale – the marriage is “the highest value in the hierarchy of fairy tale values” (Meletinski 1970: 284). A loving relationship between the hero and the king's daughter is foreshadowed already before the fight with the dragon, as in many versions the king's daughter “searches the head” of the hero, who has fallen asleep (for lice), that, according to Max Lüthi, means a figurative contact in a fairy tale (Lüthi 1964: 35). As in other fairy tales, the hero of “The Dragon Slayer” has often heard of the reward announced by the king, such as: one of my daughters for wife and half a kingdom; is giving his daughter for wife and also his kingdom after his death; takes one of the palaces; shall have her for wife; 10 million roubles. As a part of the formulaic reward the king's daughter belongs to the “professional benefits” of the future monarch of the state. However, on some occasions – when the hero will save the king's daughter “just so” – it could be assumed that the “mythical layer” has remained more visible.

To a listener who is familiar with the myth and has an idea of the general plot lines of the fairy tale, the conquering of the dragon in “The Dragon Slayer” may be the expected result. The false hero, however, who enters the action after the fight, can inspire a feeling of uncertainty as to the following twists and turns of the plot.

Bengt Holbek has stated in his world famous treatise “Interpretation of Fairy Tales” that, unlike the false hero, the dragon is not a competitor to the hero – as it is not trying to marry the king's daughter, but to eat her (1987: 503). In this case the most important enemy of the hero could be found in the false hero. Fairy tales often include two trials – the main “fairy tale” testing and an additional “real life” testing (e.g., cf. the studies of the Russian formalists – Meletinski et al 1969: 91). If in the case of the main testing the opponent is a character of the “fairy tale world” – and the task is an abstract task, in the latter case the character's skills are measured against a character from the human world, a “real” person (as far as a fairy tale character can be considered “real”, of course). Is not this testing towards the end of the fairy tale the most important of all when we return to the real life?

It would be too much to believe that the tellers/listeners of AT 300 regarded the fight with the dragon as metaphoric and the following

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contest with a character of flesh and blood not as metaphoric. Nevertheless, the hero who has completed a heroic deed can prove only by revealing the false hero that he can stand his ground and defend his rights even in the world of humans – that is, not only on the ideal level, but also in a practical way. If the wedding is “the apotheosis of the narrative discourse” (Holbek 1987: 411) of the fairy tale that the storytellers have “firmly in mind from the beginning” (*ibid.*: 411), then why not consider the plot that has moved from the mythical fight with the dragon into the fairy tale – first and foremost a story of finding the right suitor – or a piece of advice to the listeners of the story to stand their ground and fight for themselves.

In comparison with the original mythical initiation rites or with the fight of the Christian legend, the fairy tale “The Dragon Slayer” could be viewed as a series of attempts to woo the king’s daughter. Firstly, the king promises to give his daughter in marriage to a fabulous dragon. The dragon as a suitor is certainly an abstract figure; the promise to marry the heroine to the dragon obviously means her not getting married at all. Secondly, that a realistic character, the false-hero is considered. He resembles the hero and in a sense is even more important than the latter. However, he is not suitable either; in the fairy tale his unsuitability finds expression in unfair behaviour – with a lie the false-hero attempts to outmanoeuvre the real hero who has come from afar and is worthy of the king’s daughter. Thirdly, the heroine chooses the ‘right’ suitor – the character, who hitherto has seemed to be the least important, yet has proved his skills – a poor young boy.

Comments

The article is a condensed version of an earlier discussion of the subject published in Estonian (Järv 1999). In addition to abbreviating the text and adding Footnote 1, also the data about the Estonian archive versions of “The Dragon Slayer” has been updated. The more precise data has been specified only after the first publishing of the article, in the course of the project “Estonian Fairy Tales” that was launched at the Chair of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu in 1999.

¹ Understandably, collecting the fairy tales of “The Dragon Slayer” in contemporary Estonia is hardly likely to prove fruitful, as is collecting fairy

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tales in Estonia in general. I have been asking questions regarding my topic, e.g., when collecting fairy tales in the expatriate Estonian settlements in Western Siberia in 1998, where I heard several tales of the 'reward-and-punishment' type, but the only answer I received regarding the dragon slayer tale was that the dragon in the story had had three heads (Järv 2000: 58–59). In 2001 an informant originally coming from the Setu region in the border area of Estonia (who is now living in a modern high-rise neighbourhood in Tartu, Estonia's second-largest city) presented me and my colleague, to my great surprise, with a story of the dragon slayer that to a great extent reminded of the plot of a sacred legend (cf. Metsvahi 2002).

² H II 50, 223/33 (1) < Laiuse parish, Raaduveri village – J. Riomar < Jaan Lass (1895); H, Gr Qu, 293/301 (1) < Paistu parish, Holstre village – Jaak Reevits (1893); H II 17, 917/24 (1) < Karuse parish, Nihatü village – Friedrich Pöld (1889).

³ In interpreting fairy tales Holbek attributes phallic interpretations to the dragon, as well as to (may be too) many other phenomena; he states the same of such means of conducting the fight as the sword and the dogs.

⁴ Ranke's data are not complete, at least as concerns Estonia, yet they nevertheless indicate a proportion.

⁵ The unusual casting of the character roles by the storyteller is also indicated by an elephant appearing among the characters.

⁶ As this character appears only in Nordic versions of the story, Kurt Ranke (1934: 239) considers it a later addition: in the original form of the fairy tale it has been the coachman who has been the false hero.

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