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*“Anything follows from a contradiction”**
Semantics and How Meaning Matters
in the Interpretations of
The Clerk’s Tale

“Accordingly, the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities.”

“Such an event is probable in Agathon's sense of the word: 'it is probable,' he says, 'that many things should happen contrary to probability.' ”

Aristotle, *Poetics*

Aristotle’s intellectual aptitude - to the modern reader or at least to me - is undoubtedly immense and vast whose scope covers most of the essence of modern sciences, including history, botany, Ethics, Biology, Metaphysics, Rhetoric, Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Science, Physics, Poetics, Political Theory, Psychology, Zoology, Chemistry and, on top of all, Logic. Indeed, he is the founder of formal Logic and is a pioneer in creating the Modal Logic on which modern Semantics is based. Aristotle’s rhetoric and logic, in particular, inspired many scholars in the Middle Ages; Aristotle’s philosophy seems to be reflected almost in all the Middle Ages literary genres as it still continues to shine to us now. Notable among them is the *Clerk’s Tale* in the *Canterbury Tales*.

“Anything follows from a contradiction” is a valid syllogism and it is a breakdown of *intellectus passivus*. Consider: Premise 1: It is a dog. Premise 2: It is not a dog. Conclusion: It rains everyday in Vancouver. In a possible world where both premises are ‘true’, anything follows can be ‘true’. For further information, the reader is referred to Russell 32.

This is not to assert, however, that Chaucer had some formal education on Aristotle's philosophy or that the inadequate reference to Aristotle in the *General Prologue* as we read (Gen Prol: 293-97) indisputably denotes that Chaucer had read Aristotle's works.

For hym was levere have at his beddes heed

Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed,

Of Aristotle and his philosophie

Than robes riche, or fithete, or gay sautrie.

But al be that he was a philosophre,

(Gen Prol: 293-97)

Conversely, what Chaucer had been studying or what sort of formal education he had is still debatable and unresolved. Russell refers to writing about Chaucer's education as a "foolhardy task" (6-8). This is because - Russell adds - we do not know to which school Chaucer went and for how long; and in fact there is no actual written record affirming that Chaucer went to school at all. Taking Russell's discussion into account and evaluating it against the insufficient and - permit me to add - incidental presence of "*Of Aristotle and his philosophie*" do not in any way qualify us to conclude that Chaucer had actually been adequately knowledgeable with Aristotle's works; and, for the virtue that Aristotle's works were in "the air" is not in any way a valid and logically well grounded guarantee that Chaucer had been fully exposed to them.

In fact, Russell even argues that whatever we claim that the Clerk knows must also be true for Chaucer in the first place (171 -172). So, it is not assumed here that either Chaucer or The Clerk had a fairly good knowledge of the technical modern semantic terms such as negative polarity item, supposition, intention, implicature and so forth. Even though we are told in the *General Prologue* that the Clerk had "*unto logyk hadde longe ygo*" (Gen Prol: 286), it is false to

assert that Chaucer and his character had a fair knowledge of modern Semantics. The reference to the Clerk's knowledge of Logic tells us nothing more than the fact that he completed the *trivium* (Russell 172).

Nevertheless, it is claimed here that the *Clerk's Tale* is approached more saliently if a semantic framework is employed in interpreting the tale. It is the semantic properties exhibited overtly or covertly in the tale that matter and that which I seek to expose. The semantic approach utilized in this paper unwraps significant facts about the semantic discourse of the tale, intriguing logical structures underlying the tale and, what is more, how the language (lexicons and structures of sentences) interacts in the development of these properties.

The reason I have started off with the quotations above is that they help outlining the *Clerk's Tale*. In the two quotations above, Aristotle discusses some points of agreement between the concepts of epic poetry and tragedy; at first glance, they appear to be irrelevant but they can be manipulated to address the tale. In fact, even though the *Clerk's Tale* is not an epic poem nor is it a tragedy, the first helps outlining an ongoing debate concerning Griselda's case whether or not she can be a possible human being in a possible world - semantically speaking, in a possible discourse. The second complements the first in that it is in the Clerk's sense that Griselda exists. Unexpectedly, the Clerk ends his tale with the "*Envoy*" which is contrary to the message conveyed by the tale. This also raises several questions: is it Chaucer's voice here? Is it the Clerk's? What is the moral lesson of the story? Should women obey their husbands in a manner similar to Griselda, and if so, can contemporary women handle what Griselda went through? Or should they dominate them like the Wife of Bath? This paper does not attempt to address all those questions in details. However, semantic intention and the dialogic discourse are at play

here and seem to provide a successful attempt to answer at least some questions. These are referred to and elaborated upon in the development of the discussion in this paper.

The very beginning of the prologue, for instance, introduces the Clerk, establishes the semantic domain of discourse and calls our attention to some kind of possible logic in the Clerk's mind in a possible world of imagination in a specific discourse – in our case the *Clerk's Prologue* and *Tale* in the frame narrative of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (CIP: 12-20). Relevant to the first quotation, we notice that the Host justifies the Clerk's silence and assumes that he “*studie aboute som sophyme*” (CIP: 5). The reference to “*sophyme*” calls into mind a kind of logical problem whose terms Cooper points out are limited by imagination and not possibility and over which the Clerk is contemplating (194). Also, Cooper notes that while the Envoy to the Tale shows Griselda as the unimaginable possibility, the tale on the other hand functions as a piece of evidence on a proposition about patience. Psychoanalysis correlates with this logical fact too; that is the unimaginable possibility. Paris, for instance, concludes that both Griselda and Walter are “sick people in a pathological relationship” (92). Lavers, as cited by Ferster, psychoanalyzes Walter's childhood (152). Indeed, a psychotic person deviating from the norms is not a normal person and, thus, it is possible but in certain abnormal circumstances. Furthermore, comparing Griselda and Walter to the Virgin Mary and God, respectively even proves the impossibility of their existence (See, for instance, among others, Russell 180, Campbell 206, Paris 82 and Williams 126). Campbell, in particular, highlights “the impossibility of applying Griselda's example to contemporary women” (211). Russell reads Walter as a godlike figure and notes that While Walter possesses an omnipotent power in that he creates, shapes and transforms Griselda, he lacks God's omniscience in failing to see his wife's perfection. Cooper, on the other hand, compares Griselda to Job and refers to her patience in

Petrarch's version as "scarcely imitable" (190). In Chaucer's version, Cooper identifies the division between exemplum and life in which he highlights the "inportable" possibility of imitating Griselda in a real life.

For Aristotle as McClellan points out, the discourse makes the character of the speaker and in order for the discourse created by the speaker to be successfully persuasive, the discourse must be perceived as reliable and convincing. While Aristotle's framework of discourse as outlined by McClellan denotes that ethos is created by only the speaker, Bakhtin's as cited by McClellan, on the other hand, indicates a participation of both the speaker and the listener in making the speaker's ethos (474). Such a discourse brings us forth to a crucial point. That is, the semantic discourse of the tale which is alluded to earlier. This discourse is in fact outlined by the Host. Vance refers to this discourse as illocutionary in which the *Host* sets forth the criteria for the context of the *Clerk's Tale* (729). The *Host*, for instance, warns the Clerk against preaching, making them 'wepe' and putting them to 'slepe'. The Host, moreover, admonishes the Clerk to save his inflated lexicons, his figures of speech and the high style for writing to kings; that is to say, for a different semantic discourse and asks him to speak plainly for this specific discourse so "that we may understonde what ye seye.". McClellan points out that the Host's urge for the Clerk to abandon his high style alludes to a discourse that is a link between "rhetorical style and political – ethical import" (155).

But precheth nat, as freres doon in Lente,

To make us for oure olde synnes wepe,

Ne that thy tale make us nat to slepe.

"Telle us som murie thyng of adventures.

Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,

Keepe hem in stoor til so be ye endite
 Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.
 Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,
 That we may understonde what ye seye."

(CIP: 12-20)

The Clerk, humbly, abides by the rules set and outlined by the Host and gives obeisance to the Host, saying, "*I am under youre yerde;/ Ye han of us as now the governance,*" (CIP: 22-23). McClellan points out that the *Clerk's* obedience foreshadows Griselda's submissiveness to Walter (154-56). In fact, I see the entire very beginning of the Prologue that contains the Host's comments on the Clerk foreshadowing Griselda's absolute submissiveness to Walter. We are told that the Clerk is "*coy*" and "*stille*" and rides "*as dooth a mayde*" and never speaks a "*word*". These characteristics seem to be applicable to a submissive woman. They in fact foreshadow Griselda's absolute submissiveness to her husband. Also, it is argued here that while the Clerk's portrayal and obedience foreshadow Griselda's submissiveness to Walter, the Clerk is also aware of the boundary of the semantic discourse and conforms himself to it as so far as the reason demands. The Clerk puts it as "*As fer as resoun axeth, hardily.*" (CIP: 25). Indeed, the Clerk goes even further in establishing the semantic discourse of the tale. He unravels before our eyes the setting of the tale. We are told that he learned it at "*Padowe*" from a worthy clerk. This worthy clerk - we are told - is Francis Petrarch who also adopted the tale from Boccaccio (Booker 519, Campbell 191). Campbell points out the Clerk's recognition of the general semantic discourse as in the following (209):

"The Clerk's prefatory remarks also trace a geographical shift from Italy to England and thus from Italian humanism, with its

foundations in the Italian city-states, to the clericalism of the English university. The framing of the Clerk's narrative thus re-establishes the boundaries of cultural authority in both geographical and ideological terms, implicitly claiming the English university (and the cleric who represents it) as the site upon which scholarly and worldly discourses might meet."

Campbell highlights several significant points in her article. Chief among them are: the shift of the semantic discourse of the tale, the transformation of Griselda as she is being dressed and undressed and the alteration of the text of the tale as a result of multi-translation of the original text, passing from a man's mouth to another. Booker, on the other hand, closely compares Chaucer's Griselda to Shakespeare's Viola. For Booker, these female figures, Griselda and Viola can only speak within the language discourse (or semantic discourse) of their husbands, Walter and Orsino, respectively (522 – 526).

Moreover, Campbell points out the Clerk's discard of irrelevant details in Petrarch's text and notes that the *Clerk's Tale* is "a critical translation of Petrarch's tale, a translation both situated in a respected tradition of clerical authority and prepared to challenge the text upon which it is based.", which, thereby leads to taking heed to the semantic discourse. (209) Considering the fact that the actual story has been translated and re-translated, has passed from a man's mouth to another is quite astonishing and needs to be taken into consideration. First, Boccaccio's text is zeroed in for a particular group of people and perhaps bears a temporal aspect. Let us call it, Boccaccio's semantic discourse. Second, Petrarch in adopting Boccaccio's text, as cited by Campbell, sent a letter to Boccaccio, admitting some alterations of the original text; hence, a new semantic discourse. Let us call it, Petrarch's (191). Last but not least, the

Clerk's Tale, for the virtue of having the tale presented within the narrative frame of *Canterbury Tales*, unequivocally confirms having a different semantic discourse. It is Chaucer's discourse – the discourse of the *Canterbury Tales*. Indeed, several authors, namely, Brewer, McClellan, Nolan, Engle and Leicester all agree that Chaucer's voice does exist in the tales and somehow it can be discovered in the layering of voices, which in its turn, denotes a Chaucerian discourse. This Chaucerian discourse, hence, postulates a freestanding semantic domain, scope, intention, focus and perhaps separate dictions resulted from translation. This freestanding Chaucerian discourse - it seems to me - is signaled and qualified by the Clerk's emphasis on the fact that Petrarch is "*now deed and nayled in his cheste*" and also by his excessive repetitions of death and its personification. By saying Petrarch is now *dead* and *nailed* in his coffin, the Clerk invites us to ponder over and contemplate over the story in another semantic discourse. McClellan sees the Clerk's personification of death as "*a set of paradoxes to bear*" (CIT: 36-38) and to which he adds the following:

"By personifying death, the Clerk places the three figures metaphorically on the same plane, emphasizing the distance and difference between them and us. [...] The effect is to monumentalize Petrarch, distancing him from us and diminishing possibilities of communication and exchange."

Hence, a new semantic discourse does exist and that is Chaucer's framework of narratives, *The Canterbury Tales*.

Furthermore, this Chaucerian discourse is even heightened and is firmly fixed by having the "envoy" at the end of the tale. As Booker asserts, Chaucer invites us to contemplate deeply over the case of Griselda and that things may be much more complicated than what might be

thought of (522). The final “envoy” not only seems to introduce a new intention other than what is already expressed in the tale but also complicates the tale and blurs our understanding of the tale. Semantic intention and the dialogic discourse are at play here and provide an answer.

Several authors, namely, McClellan and Booker, among others, argue that the Clerk’s Tale and Prologue are best analyzed by adopting Bakhtin’s theory of dialogic discourse. Briefly, they identify three notions representing Bakhtin’s theory of dialogic discourse: double-voicedness, the prior word and the polemic. They also highlight three groups of dialogic discourse: uni-directional discourse, and two types of double-voiced discourse. According to them, any utterance in the above mentioned discourses has more than one voicing or intentional force attached to it. In the uni-directional discourse, both the semantic intentions of the author and the original voice move in the same direction. The other types of double-voiced discourses, on the other hand, move in opposite directions. According to McClellan, the last stanzas have three voices (483 – 84). Petrarch’s voice can be heard clearly in the very beginning of the first ending (CIT: 1142-48) and this is the serious voice which represents the moral lesson of the story.

This storie is seyde nat for that wyves sholde
 Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
 For it were inportable, though they wolde,
 But for that every wight, in his degree,
 Sholde be constant in adversitee
 As was Grisilde; therefore Petrak writeth
 This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth.

(CIT: 1142-48)

The second voice is the Clerk's. It is the voice of pathos which features the feeling and the common experience and whose mode is "mimetic" rather than "symbolic". The second voice can be heard in (CIT: 456 – 462). The third voice is the voice of Chaucer. It is the voice of parody which is "playful" and "irreverent". It can be captured in the final song, the "envoy".

What follows does not argue against what McClellan and Booker point out in regard to the discourse of dialogism mentioned above. Their analysis is highly solid, comprehensive and substantially fruitful. Indeed, their essays are very formidable, but this is to explore the dialogic discourse found in the tale following a new approach. Semantic properties and Logic are sought as an alternative method in order to cement our understanding further of the dialogism manifested in the tale.

The logical structure of the language employed in the tales is very coherent and exhibits a sound argument. Chaucer made his characters very conscious of logical entailments (logical implication) and implicatures, highly alerted to logical presuppositions and extremely sensitive to the logical flow of the arguments conveyed in the *Canterbury Tales*. For instance, as we read the *General Prologue of Canterbury Tales*, we are introduced to the Host. Long before assigning the *Host* as a judge or as a referee, the narrator tells us in advance that he is qualified to be a master of ceremonies in a hall "A *semely man OURE HOOSTE was withalle/For to been a marchal in an halle.*" (Gen Pro: 751-52). Being an excellent master of a ceremony implies and presupposes that the *Host* is an excellent judge and, therefore, he might be assigned as a judge or a referee. Equally, being an unsuitable master of a ceremony implies an unqualified judge or conductor and thus he or she might not be assigned as a judge. Thus, if the Host is "*a marchal in an halle.*" held to be a 'true' statement, appointing him as a judge or a referee sounds reasonable

and valid (For more information in regard to entailments, presuppositions and implicatures, the reader is referred to Grice 78-88).

Similarly, Walter's marital status is quite significant. The people's desire that Walter becomes "*a wedded man*" entails that he is an adult bachelor. So, if we hold the people's desire that he gets married to be 'true', his marital status as an adult single male must also be 'true'. It can not be the case that they desire him to be married and he is already married in the discourse of Christian doctrine. Likewise, if we consider the fact that he is a lord to be 'true', its presupposition and implication that he is wealthy is also 'true'. As a matter of fact, the entailment of a bachelor is embodied in Walter's excessive desire for sporting entertainment. As an affluent bachelor following his caprices, he obsessively likes to hawk and to hunt rather than to get married. These can be captured in (CIT: 30-33).

But on his lust present was al his thought
 As for to hauke and hunte on every syde.
 And eek he nolde -- and that was worst of alle
 Wedde no wyf, for noght that may bifalle.

(CIT: 30-33)

Instead of getting settled, Walter prefers to wander about freely without restraints and refers to marriage as a confinement of his "*liberte*", a liberty which "*seelde tyme is founde in marriage*" (CIT: 145-147). Walter's reference to marriage as the confinement of his "*liberte*" is also intensified and qualified further by the inclusion of being "*in servage*" when being married. He considers marriage a penal servitude, an enslavement of his freedom. Walter is very obsessed with his freedom. As Paris puts it, "*Walter is more concerned with freedom than with*

domination, which is but a means to his end. Griselda's submission insures that he can still follow his whims" (84).

Also, Walter's justification of his obnoxious and hideous act in taking away his children is laid upon his people. He condemns and blames his own people even though we are told earlier in the tale that he has not allowed them to choose his wife "*To chese me a wyf, I yow relesse*". In fact, inasmuch Walter is "*a markys*", he is in a position to blame them in either way. Being "*a markys*", a lord or a king implies he has some power over his people.

Furthermore, having assigned and agreed upon the Host to be the judge, and taking Walter's status as a "*noble markys*" into account, each of whom is given authoritative words and statements that agree with his position and status. This final point will be referred to and elaborated upon later.

Walter, according to Williams, tests his wife in order to assess her womanhood. Williams highlights that Walter's virtue of womanhood is signaled by Griselda's absolute submission (122-3).

And folk that ootherweys han seyde of me,
I warne hem wel that I have doon this deede
For no malice, ne for no crueltee,
But for t'assaye in thee thy wommanheede,

(CIT 1072-75)

Williams' argument seems to hinge on "*t'assaye in thee thy wommanheede*". Even though Williams refers to Walter's trials as to "*tautologically*" tests his wife, he does not mention the indirect reasoning Chaucer employs underlying these tautological trials nor does he investigate the *term* "*tautology*". In testing Griselda, Chaucer makes Walter utilize, in proving the

expression as a tautology, a sort of *indirect reasoning*, which is also called *reduction ad absurdum* in Propositional Logic – a branch of Semantics. A tautology is a complex expression that always bears the semantic value ‘true’ regardless of the truth-value assignments to the simple sentences which make up the sentences of discourse (Allwood, Andersson & Dahl 50 - 56). In the *Clerk’s Tale*, it is fairly obvious from the very beginning that Griselda is submissive to her husband. Semantically speaking, it is always true such that Griselda is submissive to her husband. However, Walter sometime states that she is still not or claims that the trial is not good enough to test her womanhood and continues on testing her. As long as it is a tautology, it always bears the semantic value ‘true’ and can not be proven otherwise or else it will not be considered to be a tautology. This has also been shown when it comes to Griselda’s case regardless of Walter’s false assumptions of his wife to be otherwise.

The dictions Chaucer employed in the tale and how they interact within the context also bear significance worth mentioning. The *Clerk’s Tale* is packed with what is so called *Performative Acts*. Austin in “How to Do Things with Words” categorizes them smartly and neatly in details. Discussing Austin’s classification of them in this paper is a red herring, unnecessary and might lead to confusion. To put it simple, according to Austin, utterances either constate or describe and thus can be either ‘true’ or ‘false’. *Performative Acts*, on the other hand, are types of expressions that bear no ‘true/false’ value assignments and the utterance of such expressions is part of performing an action. In addition, Austin provides rules for such utterances (25 – 38). Relevant to this paper are the following two rules:

“A.1. *There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.*”

“A.2. The particular persons in circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedures invoked”

Austin’s rules quoted above highlight important points regarding performative utterances. These points include but not limited to the following: an accepted convention in executing a certain act is a must, the executer of such an act must be the appropriate person, and the act executed must be done in a certain accepted manner, and must be in the appropriate circumstances. One can not, for example, give some one some thing and he is not the proprietor or owner of the thing given. One can not, for instance, name a child and he or she is not the parent of that child. Now, let us examine the *Clerk’s Prologue and Tale*. Observe (CIP: 9-19) in the *Clerk’s Prologue*.

“Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey!

For what man that is entred in a pley,

He nedes moot unto the pley assente.

But precheth nat, as freres doon in Lente,

To make us for oure olde synnes wepe,

Ne that thy tale make us nat to slepe.

"Telle us som murie thyng of adventures.

Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,

Keepe hem in stoor til so be ye endite

Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.

Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,”

(CIP 9-19)

As it has been pointed out earlier, having assigned and agreed upon the Host to be the judge, and taking Walter's status as a "noble markys" into account, each of whom is given authoritative words and statements that are in harmony with his position and status. In (CIP: 9-19), the Host warns the Clerk against "*Heigh style*" and commands him to speak in plain English and not to preach. In doing so, The *Host*, acknowledging his authoritative figure, utilizes expressions of *Performative Acts* such as "*preye*" and "*assent*". These performative utterances are appropriate for his status. As a judge, he commands, interrupts and gives orders, and, after all, he expects to be obeyed. The Host can be thought of as a referee in a soccer game. When a player is ordered to go "out" by the referee, he is out he/she can not say "no" and judge the statement of command to be "false". The Host uses similar examples. He asks the Clerk to speak in plain English and asks him not "*precheth*". Realizing the Host's status and in response to the Host's command, the Clerk says, "*I am under youre yerde;/ Ye han of us as now the governance,*" which is appropriate for a political discourse (McClellan 155). The Clerk, as a clerk he is, fully cognizant of the realms of the semantic discourse, acknowledges the status of the Host as is agreed upon and acquiesces to the Host's order. Another example of the Host's authority can be found in *Sir Thopas* when the Host interrupts Chaucer, the narrator, and asks him to stop and say another. Chaucer, realizing the Host's status, agrees and does not argue (Thop: 919 - 925).

Likewise, Walter as a "*markys*" and a noble lord is permitted to employ expressions of performative acts that suit his status. As a lord, he commands, interrupts and gives orders, and, after all, he must be obeyed. A tremendously huge number of performative act expressions are found in the speech exchanged between Walter and his own people. To cite few of them, when people ask "*to chese*" his wife, for instance, he commands them to leave him "*allone*" in

“chesynge” his “wyf”, he “relesse” them of that obligation and ask them to “cesse” making that offer. In preparation to pick out a wife of lower class, Walter takes assurance from his people that they must “worshipe hire”, must never go against his will and he asks his people “speketh namoore of this matere”. The people, in realization of his social status, not only “sworen and assenten” to his will but also “Knelynge upon hir knees ful reverently”. Also, the exchange of speech between Walter, Griselda and her father contain a good number of performatives. Chief among them are the following. Walter asks Griselda to “swere” their alliance, “assente” to his lust and he “preye” that she accepts his proposal. Griselda, acknowledging Walter’s nobleness, has done as the people have done before and never argues and “swere” her alliance too.

In recognition of her lowness, Griselda never dissents but always accedes to the lord’s wishes, his Highness the *lord* who has transformed, “translated” and shaped her. “In swich richesse”, she has been transformed entirely to the extent that it is totally bleary, indistinct and hazy to tell: is she the Virgin Mary or is she some kind of a beast? She can not be both; that is for sure. She can be compared to Job in a certain discourse; that is, her father’s, Janicle’s discourse. In regard to the moral story of the tale, she is the antithesis of the Wife of Bath. Hence, wives must be submissive to their husbands, whereas in the “Envoy” discourse, wives must not be submissive to their husbands. In terms of dialogism, at one level she is the symbol of virtuous patience which echoes Petrarch’s voice. The level of voices blurs as does the level of discourse, intersecting one another and creating inconsistency till nothing remains but a “valid syllogism” to solve. Chaucer, pondering over what readers might think of him, wrote the *Clerk’s Tale* **intentionally** with two possible yet contradictory premises in mind. These two premises masquerade the semantic intention, discourse and the directionality of voice and thereby veiling his true intention and his real self. **Premise 1:** I am an antifeminist. **Premise 2:** I am a feminist.

If we hold both premises to be ‘true’, whatever modern readers might think does not really matter and can be ‘true’. Chaucer is now dead and nailed in his coffin. Chaucer is not to blame after all. “*Anything follows from a contradiction,*” or if we do not like what follows, we must turn the page!

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