

Study on Michelet's View of Women

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Abstract. In recent years, Jules Michelet has been increasingly studied, but most of them focus on his Romantic Historiography as a whole. As a representative figure of French Romantic Historiography in the 19th century, Michelet paid special attention to women in addition to country and revolutionary history. This paper analyzes Michelet's view of women in terms of his attitude toward women, the moral qualities he advocated, and the ideal social relations he constructed for women. Michelet justified the historically stigmatized women and emphasized the outstanding contribution of women in French history. Michelet saw tolerance and elegance as inherently virtues of women, on the basis of which the ideal woman should also be humble, chaste, and patriotic. Michelet regarded the "supernature", which is a combination of the spiritual qualities of both genders as the perfect one, and he constructed a set of gender relations in which both sides are unified, complementary, harmonious and even equal. He valued the social value of women's pregnancy and child education, and encouraged them to devote themselves to society and the nation without leaving the family in order to achieve the unity of the people. There is no denying that Michelet's view of women is limited by the times, but it is still highly progressive and noteworthy.

Keywords: Michelet; Romantic historiography; View of women; History of historiography.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

It is generally believed that Romanticism emerged at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries out of disappointment with the enlighteners' construction of the "reason kingdom". It raised doubts about the slogan of "freedom, equality, and fraternity" in French Revolution, and dissatisfied with the capitalist social order. The Romantic Historiography that had dominated the western history research was also developed under this trend. Jules Michelet is considered as one of the most representative Romantic historians of the 19th century. Entering in the 20th century, his ideas attracted the attention of famous scholars such as Hayden White and Roland Barthes, and the Annales school historian and postmodernist thinkers such as Foucault were also influenced by Michelet's Romantic historiographical thought. In recent years, the attention to and research on Romantic Historiography has increased in China, and Michelet's works have been translated into Chinese in large numbers. However, domestic scholars have mostly studied Romantic Historiography and its paradigms as a whole, and few have paid particularly attention to Michelet and his ideas. In the Revolution, women entered the stage of history and had a great social impact, which also brought about drastic changes in their social status and social roles. Therefore, Michelet showed his warm and dedicated concern for women in his writing. His characteristic view of women and historical view complement each other. The construction of the feminine figure in Michelet's works and his view of women has been reviewed and refined in this paper, in order to further understand his ideology and paradigm, which in turn slightly complements the studies of 19th century Romanticism Historiography.

1.2 Current Status of Domestic and Foreign Research

Western research on Michelet began in the last century and has been fruitful so far. The famous critic and theorist Roland Barthes⁽¹⁾ has conducted a comprehensive study of Michelet's work, which is rich in structuralism. He argued that Michelet does not promote female superiority on the premise of male/female dichotomy, but rather synthesizes the imagined qualities and strengths of each gender to create a "supernature". Based on Michelet's use of intention, Anne Vincent-Buffault⁽²⁾ believed

that he highlights the importance of emotional expression and builds a link between femininity and humanism through the image "tears".

Michelet's Romantic views in terms of philosophy, history, nature and society are presented as a complex whole in his writing. With the purpose of rationalizing the relation between the various elements of his thought, Edward K. Kaplan aimed to synthesize the views expressed in Michelet's writing on a variety of topics as natural history, love, psychology of women, the "sociology" of man, and history. Jordanova⁽³⁾ proposed that the relationship between Romanticism and natural science as presented in Michelet's work needs to be further examined, as in fact his imagination of nature does not derive from Romanticism, but is shaped by his high reliance on contemporary scientific and medical thought.

With the intention of exploring the internal and external formation of Michelet's Romantic thought, Chase⁽⁴⁾ illustrated Michelet's defense of democracy in the context of nineteenth-century French society and history. Mitzman⁽⁵⁾ discussed the formation mechanism of Michelet's thought by focusing on three transitions in his personal experience, with particular emphasis on the impact of the changes in his life. Another article "The Sexual Inspectorate: Michelet and the Republican Mission, 1868-1870"⁽⁶⁾ summarizes the pattern of Michelet's discourse by exploring the clues in the whole of "Michelet's psychosexual changes, political idealism, and French republican morality". Steedman⁽⁷⁾ explored the connection between Michelet's writing and epidemic fever. McCallum⁽⁸⁾ discussed the interruption of Michelet's academic career caused by the political conflicts and how it affected his academic life, and further referred to the unique construction of the concept of "the people" in Michelet's history writing. He also pointed out that Michelet's historiography has special significance in the structuralist and post-structuralist era and that his model of historical narrative is essential to the construction of France.

In China, researchers who have focused on Michelet have mainly discussed his historiographical thought from various dimensions. Wang Lihong has devoted his research to focusing on Michelet's historiographical concept of "history and resurrection" and his contribution to the development of Romantic Historiography⁽⁹⁾. Wang Chaoqun argued that Michelet, in his interpretation of the Revolution, emphasizes the impelling effect of emotion on events, and realized the importance of emotion earlier than the Annales School and exerted considerable influence on its development⁽¹⁰⁾. Wang suggested that "the people" is the central element in Michelet's narrative of the Revolution, and "love" is the main motive for its outbreak. Michelet's revolutionary narrative is overly poetic and heroic, reflecting the limitations of his time. Liang Ximin took the perspective of history education, and emphasized the emotional elements in Michelet's historical narrative and its positive significance for domestic history education⁽¹¹⁾. Wu Yundi discussed the historical imagination in Michelet's Renaissance writing. On the one hand, visual images stimulate Michelet's historical imagination, and on the other hand, artworks serve as a projection of his imagination, enriching his historical interpretation of the Renaissance⁽¹²⁾. Tan Xuan illustrated that Michelet, like many historians of his time, attaches importance to the emotional history writing of the revolutionaries, but they all neglect the emotional factors from the socio-political elites.

In studies related to the formation of the Romantic Historiography as a theme, Michelet remains the focus of attention. Cui Jing⁽¹⁴⁾ discussed the social basis and influence of the rise of Romantic Historiography in the 19th century, and explored the rationality of the formation of the historiographical ideas of radical Romantic historians such as Michelet. Xu Ping believed that Michelet, as a representative figure of 19th-century Romantic historians, reveals both the universal and special significance of the revolution in his history writing. Moreover, the revolutionary elements that appear to have sprung from the revolution are in fact conceived throughout French history⁽¹⁵⁾.

Some scholars have also studied Michelet with the support of literary and sociological theories. Based on Roland Barthes' *Michelet*, Zheng Na used the theory of literature and art to explore the structural network based on the theme by structuralist approach, and considered the relationship between theme criticism and structuralism. Furthermore, based on the change of Barth's attitude towards the literary subject, she probed into the influence of the change of the literary subject on the

practice of literary criticism. ⁽¹³⁾ Chen Jianping discussed the discourse construction and nature writing in Michelet's prose from the perspective of ecological linguistics, and pointed out its unification of humanistic concern and social significance in human-nature-social ecology.

2. Michelet's Attitude towards Women

2.1 Eulogy and Praise

The most obvious attitude of Michelet to women is eulogy and praise. He subjectively praised women and emphasized their value, while affirming their historical contributions.

Michelet emphasized the beauty and value of women, and he celebrated both their physical and spiritual qualities. On the one hand, he extolled the virtues of women's physiology including menstruation, which plays an important role in the continuity of the nation. "The sacred passion of woman is stigmatized and despised in the Middle Ages, which is called impure; but it is why she becomes the object of poetic worship ⁽¹⁾." Michelet also used poetic language to celebrate the female reproductive function. As Roland Barthes suggested, Michelet's whale is "just a phase of woman" with the same gestation period and nursing functions as woman, and he compared the whale to woman as a perfect creation ⁽¹⁾. On the other hand, Michelet saw women as noble by nature, for others, and self-giving as their nature and mission. In fact, this is a virtue of women promoted by the male mainstream society, but Michelet regarded it as a female nature and highly appreciated it. He argued that the world depends on women for its existence, because women's generous, delicate and innocent nature can bring the two genders closer together, and ignite men's love for women. On the one hand, it creates new life to sustain nations and countries, while on the other hand, it inspires men's creativity in civilization, science and art. The nature of women to give of themselves to others makes them more sublime than men. In general, from the perspective of Michelet, "women are the fire of love and family, the cradle of the future, the school of children. In short, women are the altar of God ⁽¹⁶⁾."

Michelet also valued the historical contribution of women. In his *History of France*, he "resurrected" Joan of Arc in detail from her revelation to martyrdom. Michelet highlighted her outstanding contribution to the country. Joan of Arc in his writing is a saint in heaven, a heroine on earth, and a representative of France and its people. In *History of the French Revolution*, he also attached importance to highlighting the contribution of women in the Revolution. Michelet saw women as exerting unprecedented social influence in the Revolution and forerunners, and even as leaders of the male revolutionaries: "Nobody knows whether the men would have marched toward Versailles without women at the head of the line.....The people with the most popular spirit-I would say the most intuitive and aware group-is undoubtedly the women ⁽¹⁸⁾." Michelet regarded the Revolution as a time of unprecedented unity and love among the people, so he considered the Revolution as the culmination of human history, and the women at the forefront as part of the people, the leaders of the people, the greatest women of all. Michelet fondly exclaimed for the female revolutionaries: "What a noble time it is! These women deserve to be loved and enshrined by men as the embodiment of their ideals, their homeland and their virtue!... They will also be immortalized ⁽¹⁸⁾."

2.2 Sympathy and Compassion

Michelet narrated history and talked about women sympathetically. His sympathy for women is mainly reflected in his defense and de-stigmatization of women who have suffered injustice in history.

In his work, Michelet resolutely defended the "witches," who were historically and premeditatedly slaughtered. In the context of traditional religion and demonology in Europe, witches are usually old, widowed or unmarried women who are evil, cunning and dangerous agents of the devil. They are the epitome and concentrated embodiment of the fact that women are weaker and inferior than men ⁽¹⁹⁾. But in Michelet's view, although witches are composed of women, it is by no means entirely feminine. Rather, it combines the strengths and advantages of both genders. "The witch has all the characteristics of the androgynous principle... a superbly integrated gender that combines the

strengths of both sides ⁽¹⁾." At the same time, Michelet believed that women's keen nature and intuition make them more psychic, but that such gift does not generate evil, but the origin of religion and science, "Nature turns them into witches', all due to women's gift and their disposition. Periodic fanaticism leads to her being born a prophet. The beginnings of religion and science are so simple, so touching! Thereafter, all things are divided into categories... However, in the initial season, woman used to be everything ⁽¹⁾."

On the other hand, Michelet is keen to emphasize the great contribution of the "witches" to the preservation of women's health. In the Middle Ages, women took the risk of being stigmatized as witches, making medicinal herbs from slightly poisonous plants in order to cure women's diseases: "As the first work on the subject, his (referring to Balasazar) book on women's diseases is admirable and brilliant, which is so profoundly moving: and I have no doubt that it comes especially from the experience of women themselves, the women to whom people appeal for alms: I mean, the witches who go around the country and deliver babies... especially for women. They are the only doctors⁽¹⁾ ." Michelet has always stressed the crucial role of female pregnancy in the perpetuation of the human race, and given the outstanding contribution of the so-called witch community to the preservation of female reproductive health, to the promotion of production, and thus to the maintenance of the race, witches should not only not be distorted as the embodiment of evil, but should receive moral praise for their kindness and goodness.

3. Michelet's View of Women

3.1 Michelet's Construction of Gender Relations

A slight discernment of Michelet's construction of gender relations is a prerequisite for a specific exploration of his view of women. Michelet always believed that the ultimate unity of man, man and nature, and man and God is entirely possible, and all things are in an organic whole ⁽²⁰⁾. Therefore, he constructed a unified relationship between the two genders: The two sides are fundamentally different, not alike, but they complement each other as a whole, and what unites them is love. Michelet argued that all the causes of gender separation should be rejected, including, but not limited to, the luxury and corruption of aristocratic women, the addiction of men to tobacco and alcohol, and even the advance of urbanization and industrialization in France.

In Michelet's view, the two genders are fundamentally different and complementary: men are creative and rational, while women are intuitive and instinctive, and there is no distinction between the two. First of all, a complete human being should combine the strengths of both genders, of temperament and reason, of instinct and thought, just as he himself is. And a true heroic figure should have the strengths of both genders, "Michelet's heroes are all androgynous beings... See Joan of Arc, a heroic woman who is not entirely female on her own, but because she is a woman with both genders of the spirit. None of Michelet's other heroes and heroines possesses this combination." Similarly, the people that Michelet celebrated are also transcendent, not as a definite collection of social classes but as the best combination of abstract wisdom and instinct, so that the subject of "the people" Michelet portrayed is very close to absolute justice.

Michelet believed that men should respect and love women, and women should respect men, because they complement and fulfill each other. From his perspective, men shape women, creating everything for them including food, wealth, and happiness, while women likewise shape men, bringing joy and inspiration for them to create innovations. "Nature closes life with a triangle of dead sections: man, woman and child. People will always die and can only be redeemed by uniting together ⁽¹⁶⁾." Michelet proposed that the family members should be united, just as he considered the unity and harmony of all human beings as the ideal, and the family is the core unit of society, so the unity and harmony of men, women and children is essential to achieve unity and harmony in society as a whole.

3.2 Michelet's Feminine Morality

Michelet valued the moral qualities of women. On the one hand, he believed that nature has shaped women's praiseworthy nature, such as tolerance and delicacy, grace and purity, simplicity and chastity, which the women should practice. From his perspective, a woman's natural morality should continue from early childhood to adulthood that helps to close the relationship between her and men, and "a woman should be completely tolerant and graceful... Nature has created her and given her the tolerance. She also attributes it to human nature, which makes the masculine attractive and brings a divine smile to the whole society ⁽¹⁶⁾." On the other hand, Michelet argued that women should love their country and their nation, which is "your second mother, your great mother, is your motherland ⁽¹⁶⁾." Such quality is inspired by "maternity" and "love". The great patriotism sublimates women's morality, and their devotion to the patriotic cause makes them masculine, supernatural heroines, whose personal virtue defects as women can be ignored and redeemed by the glorious quality of patriotism. Such is the case with his portrayal of the female revolutionaries and moral example, Madame Roland.

Michelet considered Madame Roland as a perfect moral example, and he dismissed all bad reviews of Madame Roland as smears. He portrayed Madame Roland as a woman who adheres to society's demands for feminine virtue, who is morally faithful to the end, but also independent in her thinking and in her love for her country. "She is on the straight but never idle and fanciful as other women, and she does not wear out her will by doing nothing. She is diligent and energetic, and for her, work is the guardian of morality. The beautiful creature lived and died with a sacred sense of duty, even to the end of her life ⁽¹⁸⁾." The only doubtful flaw in Michelet's morality is the issue of her relationship with Boncal, for one of Michelet's great requirements for feminine morality is that a woman must be faithful to her husband in marriage. But with the outbreak of the Revolution, "she reverts to thinking of the world, of her country and her people... From then on, her country becomes her only lover ⁽¹⁸⁾." Through patriotism, republicanism and revolution, Madame Roland also transforms from a dignified but ordinary woman into a heroine with perfect supernatural and masculine qualities. It not only realigns her relationship with her husband from an unharmonious couple who are about to lose their love and fidelity, to a comrade-in-arms who fight and sacrifice together, but also greatly preserves her virtue as a woman: purity.

3.3 Michelet's Ideal Social Relationship for Women

3.3.1 Women in family

The key of the ideal social relations for women constructed by Michelet is that women cannot be separated from the family, which is the core of all social relations for women. As for the reasons, on the one hand, he believed that women are too weak to survive without the family. On the other hand, "love" and "maternity" are both the nature and the responsibility of women.

Michelet believed that women could not live independently from their families without the protection of their families and men, and therefore they could not survive. Industrialization has changed the fate of European women and made them miserable. For those single women workers, "there are only two major industries that they could work in: weaving and sewing. No other work could be taken into consideration." But industrialization and the replacement of human labor by machines brought a huge loss to them, "How many women suffer from a death blow by the merciless weaving machine and sewing machine? Millions. They all starve to death, and that is the end of it ⁽¹⁶⁾." The single women intellectuals face the same difficulties, who are scrutinized everywhere and even face threats to their personal safety. Therefore, even from the point of view of seeking their own happiness, women should return to their families and place themselves under the protection of their husbands, so they need to get married.

Another reason why Michelet argued that women cannot be separated from the family is that maternity and love are their mission. She has a sacred responsibility correspondingly including taking care of the household, pregnancy and children education, and allocating her energy to her husband to keep their love. Michelet pointed out: "To raise a daughter is to raise society itself. Society is made

up of families, and the important role for women is to bring harmony to the family⁽¹⁶⁾." He suggested that to love children is innate in women, and that from the cradle women exude a fervent maternal nature. Michelet's mother and children in his writing are mutually indoctrinated and interdependent: if the child does not have a mother, it will surely die, and the mother depends on the child to live. He also believed that love is the mission of women, and that "the goal of women on earth, the obvious one, is love⁽¹⁶⁾", while love is closely linked to maternity: "To become a mother, is the best state of love⁽¹⁶⁾."

Michelet saw maternity as the root and basis of almost all the actions from women. On the one hand, women's natural maternity is the source of their love for the opposite gender, and "even in the blindest impulses, the maternal instinct still dominates everything⁽¹⁶⁾." Therefore, women do not lack love. She is the giver of love, assuming the responsibility and obligation to give love to men, and when men do not want to love her, her love returns to maternity and turns to the care of children, which may well make her a child educator. On the other hand, maternity is the main incentive for women to participate in social revolution, such as the female revolutionaries, who joined the revolution to protect the lives of their children: "Many of them has not eaten for three days. But the women cannot resign themselves to their fate, and they have children waiting to be fed! They are on patrol like lionesses. In every riot, the women react most violently and frantically, making even the men ashamed of their slowness and procrastination⁽¹⁷⁾." Similarly, in Michelet's view, women's unique talents are intuitive but not inherently rational, and women's subjective acceptance and learning of reason is often accompanied by a maternal drive, "(Women) start their free thinking through education, hope and the strength of maternity by thinking about the questions that have been in a woman's mind since the birth of her child... Long before a woman has a child of her own, she cries out in her mind: 'Ah! May this child grow up happy and well! May he be set free! The sacred freedom made by the heroes of old, will it shelter my child?' This is what women consider, and that is why when a mother or a sister keeps watch over a child playing in the garden, they are always contemplating and reading⁽¹⁸⁾."

3.3.2 Social Value of Women Behavior

Michelet believed that the primary social value of women lies in promoting family harmony, pregnancy and children education. Because "society consists of the family⁽¹⁶⁾", so the value of women in the family is inherently an important part of their social value.

In fact, Michelet placed special emphasis on the social significance of pregnancy. On the one hand, Michelet regarded the normal functioning of female pregnancy as a sign of a functioning society, and when women "undergo some kind of metamorphosis that leads to infertility," it is evidence that society is at a standstill and hopeless. He even argued that women who commit crimes should not be subjected to conventional law in order to maintain normal female pregnancy. "No serious approach can be used to suppress a woman... Nature places love and the perpetuation of the race above all laws... They are responsible, but unpunishable⁽¹⁾."

Michelet also suggested that women should further their social responsibilities without separating from their families, as this is conducive to achieving unity and solidarity among the people. He thought highly of the women who actively participate in social work and contribute their values. In order to show the character of the ideal woman in his mind, he depicted a female philanthropist and social reformer, namely Carolina Jones, whom he described as the only saint in Australia⁽¹⁶⁾. Michelet celebrated her remarkable contribution to the protection of women in the disordered Australia, as well as her passion and persistence in her cause. Moreover, Michelet emphasized that such a remarkable woman is not separated from her family, which she values and takes care of in an orderly manner.

But Michelet also did not believe that women should be forbidden to leave their families and participate in the social affairs. On the contrary, when the state and the nation are in danger, a woman can also leave her family to save the country, who is then transformed from an ordinary woman to the "supernature". Such is the case with Michelet's Joan of Arc: her attempt to leave home in search of the Prince provokes her father's fierce anger, but neither declarations to drown her nor temptations to marry her can shake her determination to break free from family authority, obey revelation and

stick to her personal mission. But in Michelet's context, Joan of Arc, who separates from her family, can no longer be considered simply a "woman". Instead, she is the perfect "supernature" who combines the strengths of both genders. By means of revelation, she is transformed from an ordinary country girl into a heroine, a symbol of the French nation and people ⁽²¹⁾.

4. Limitation and Transcendence of Michelet's View of Women

As a nineteenth-century historian, Michelet's view of women's issues does show the limitations of his time, which cannot be denied. On the one hand, women were already seen as irrational and "uncreative" from the Enlightenment, and Michelet continued this view. He denied that women are naturally capable of thinking and creating as men, claiming that women do not value the creativity and ignore men's creative motivations ⁽¹⁶⁾. He argued that most women do not even want to understand what creativity is and do not have the ability to create. Michelet appreciated those women who have the ability to think and create, such as Olympe de Gouges, but saw them only as women with male characteristics. The "instincts and intuitions" that Michelet considered to be feminine strengths in his thought are also extremely important and in no way less valuable than male reason, thinking and creative intelligence, but he still considered women to be emotionally impulsive and irrational. Obviously, the improvement of women's status in Michelet's writing is largely based on the Romantic historian's reflection and reaction against enlightenment and reason, which causes the weakening of the value of reason and the enhancement of the value of "intuition, instinct, and emotion" in his writing. In addition, Michelet did not see women as fully independent human beings. However, he believed that women are made for "others," perhaps for children, husbands, or even the country, but not for themselves ⁽¹⁶⁾. The so-called core demands of women that Michelet highlighted, such as maternity and love, are based on his observation and imagination from a male perspective, which is a one-sided, monotonous and solidified view of femininity. At the same time, Michelet overemphasized the distinctions between the two genders, denies the sameness and that women are rational and capable of thinking, which is not essentially different from the traditional view of women in French society and the view of women proposed by enlighteners.

However, the transcendence of Michelet's view of women is undeniable. On the one hand, Michelet affirmed the nobility of the feminine community in defense of women, and their outstanding contribution to the maintenance of the nation. He considered women as an important part of "the people" and the subject of history-making. This greatly enhances the status of women in the historian's history writing and gives women the role of historical subjects and even history makers. In addition, Michelet's intention to build a harmonious and complementary gender relationship between the two genders elevates women to relative equality with men, and women are given a more noble possibility than men. Those who dare to be pioneers could even become the leaders of men in noble undertakings. It undoubtedly breaks through and impacts on the ideology of Western European society since the Middle Ages, which devalues women and misogyny. In addition, in measuring women's personal morality, Michelet overthrew the moral standard that women's attempt to enter the public is considered immoral. His moderate and even appreciative attitude toward women's struggle for rights and even political gender equality can be seen in his discussion of the early feminists, Olympe de Gouges and Odile, in *The History of the French Revolution*. Michelet did not regard women as absolute subordinates of men, but his ultimate goal in encouraging women to be given freedom is to give full play to women's qualities of comforting, healing, and soothing men while inspiring male love, thus promoting social harmony. He did advocate giving women certain rights of speech and saw the positive significance of women's freedom in achieving social harmony.

5. Conclusion

Michelet's Romantic view of women is both conservative and transcendental. His attitude toward women is consistent with his attitude toward the people, which is the subject of history in his mind,

namely, praise and sympathy. As a historian, based on his preliminary understanding of natural science, he justified the long-standing stigma of women in Western European history based on the principle of truthfulness, while recognizing the outstanding contribution of women to the development of France. Michelet's connotations of "supernature" and "the people" highlight his celebration of what he saw as the best qualities of women. In his history writing, Michelet valued wholeness and dialectical unity, and thus saw women and men as complementary unities, outlining a set of harmonious gender relations in which the two genders learn from each other and respect each other with rich romance and imagination. Michelet's view of women is constrained by the times, there are also stereotypes that overemphasize the biological value of women and consider women as irrational and uncreative ones, and even weaker than men. However, his recognition of the social value and historical contribution of women's activities, his advocacy of giving women freedom and voice, and mutual respect, love and harmony between the two genders also demonstrate considerable uniqueness and advancement. Michelet's concern for women is a manifestation of his concern for the marginalized in the main historical narrative and his historiographical thought of "history as resurrection," which also implies his spirit of truth-seeking and universalism as a Romantic historian, and is still inspiring even today.

In addition, it must be admitted that there is still room for enrichment in the following aspects. First of all, this paper fails to grasp the whole evolution of French history and French women's social status and role. Secondly, it has a shallow understanding of Michelet's romanticism, and fails to make clear the relationship between his view of women, history and nature. In addition, the ideological origin and social influence of Michelet's view towards women are not discussed. Due to my limited ability, I hope that you will not hesitate to give me more suggestions for this paper.

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