The Condition of Women in Jane Austen Novels

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Introduction

In this paper we will be considering popular reading matter in the 19th century, the life of Jane Austen, and the lives of women in her social class as shown in three of her novels: Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility and Mansfield Park.

The 19th century English novel

During the nineteenth century in Britain there was a huge increase in the reading public. Literacy had become more widespread, and brought with it a demand for something to read, something that was light, entertaining, and a distraction from lives that were sometimes boring and often, for the lower classes, grim. As the Elizabethan era was considered a golden age for drama, so this period in the history of British literature is considered the age of the novel. The serialization of stories in magazines, the circulating libraries, and the growth of the railways with bookstalls on every main station, increased the demand for reading material. Such fictional categories as the regional novel (e.g. Hardy’s Wessex series, the Bronte’s Yorkshire settings, Mrs Gaskell’s industrial Lancashire stories, Trollope’s Barsetshire novels), the social
problem novel (e.g. Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* or *North and South*, George Eliot's *Felix Holt*), the scientific romance novel (e.g. H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, Trollope's *The Fixed Period*), ghost stories (e.g. Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, *The Haunted Man*), the detective or crime novel (e.g. Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, Dickens's *Bleak House*, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series), the historical novel (e.g. Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*, Mrs Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*, George Eliot's *Romola*), among others, can all be traced to this period. By 1837, the Victorian age had begun. To give an idea of the volume of publishing taking place at this time, let us look at some statistics from the Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction, which estimates that there were “around 7,000 Victorians who could legitimately title themselves ‘novelist’”, and that “there were somewhere around 60,000 works of adult and juvenile fiction published 1837–1901.” Most of these works are lost to posterity, or at any rate no longer in print, perhaps fortunately, since many novels were written to satisfy the demands of the lower working-class, who were basically literate but not discerning as to quality. The Longman Companion has entries on 878 of these Victorian novelists (566 men and 312 women) and on over 550 of their works, found by researching the British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books, the Dictionary of National Biography, or similar sources.

Today, when we think of 19th century fiction, a surprisingly few names, given all this output, come to mind: Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, William Thackeray, Wilkie Collins, Thomas Hardy, R.L. Stevenson, H.G. Wells, among the men, the Brontë sisters (Charlotte, Emily and Anne), Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot among the women. These are the authors whose books have become the enduring classics of English literature.

Temporarily omitted from this list is the author whose work is the subject of this article, Jane Austen, who was born in the 18th century (1775), but completed and published her six novels in the first two decades of the 19th century. Of all the writers publishing at this time, Jane Austen is by far the most famous and most appreciated today. Gothic fiction, with its depictions of dark deeds set among ruined castles and wild scenery, was enormously popular in Jane Austen’s day and she makes fun of it in *Northanger Abbey* with references to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe, and *The Monk* by Matthew Gregory Lewis. Another novel written at this time, which has stirred imaginations in our own century is *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley. Romance novels written by Fanny Burney, stories of Irish life by Maria Edgeworth and the
Scottish Waverley novels by Sir Walter Scott were also popular in this period. Most of these works continue to be published today.

The earlier years of the 19th century are known as the time of the Regency, that period of British history when the duties of King George III, who suffered bouts of insanity from about 1788, were increasingly taken over by his son, the Prince of Wales. By 1810, George III was totally incapacitated and the Prince of Wales became prince regent until his father's death in 1820 when he then became King George IV.

Jane Austen's books are very different from the later 19th century books mentioned above, not only because she was writing in a different age, but because she was writing in a very narrow framework, or, as she put it "... 3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on ..." Coming from an upper middle-class family based in rural southern England, Jane Austen wrote about everyday life in her own social milieu. Her stories are comedies about middle-class domestic life and manners as she saw or experienced it. Though later criticized for this narrowness (Charlotte Brontë, for one, was unable to appreciate her books), Jane Austen herself was well aware that her talent lay in the writing of domestic comedies about country families, and rejected suggestions that she should write any other kind of book. In a letter to her nephew Edward, she wrote 'No, I must keep to my own style, go on in my own way; and, though I may never succeed in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other.' She possessed a sharp eye for delineating a character in just a few words, and she avoided subjects and people that would jar her comic style. Her work also differs from that of her contemporaries. The absurdities, pretentions and melodrama found in the Gothic and romance novels are all exposed by her ironic wit. Her preferences were for good manners, self-discipline and sound morals.

Life of Jane Austen

Jane Austen's life was extremely circumscribed: she was born in Hampshire, and apart from about eight years spent in Bath, and then Southampton, lived there all her life. She paid visits to relatives in London and Kent (usually having to rely on their kindness in providing her with transport), and once went to the seaside at Lyme Regis in Dorset. Otherwise she stayed home, where her life was concentrated on household affairs and local socializing such as paying or receiving morning calls, attending or giving dinner or card parties, and making day excursions to local beauty spots, besides,
of course, writing. The Austens, though well-connected socially, were not themselves rich, and therefore lived modestly and quietly, particularly the female Austens: Mrs Austen, Jane and her sister Cassandra. This is the life that is reflected in her six novels. Although she would have known of both the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars, since a cousin's husband went to the guillotine in the former and two of her brothers were fighting sea-battles in the latter, they have no place in her stories. Nor does she mention the agricultural and industrial changes that were already affecting the country.

What Jane Austen was well aware of, however, was the position of single, dependent women in her society. Her own success as an authoress came comparatively late. Her first novel, Sense and Sensibility, was published in 1813, and she completed the other five novels before her death in 1817, at the age of 41. In Jane Austen's world, to be a spinster with limited means was an appalling prospect, and marriage was seen as, if not exactly a necessary evil, at least as a reasonable career alternative. Besides marriage, the only other respectable jobs open to middle-class women were governessing or school-teaching. Interestingly, neither Jane nor Cassandra, both spinsters with small incomes, ever considered taking this path, though Jane's letters to her sister were full of the small economies they were both obliged to practice. Following the death of Mr Austen and the consequent loss of his income, four of the five Austen brothers joined to provide their mother and sisters with an extra £250 a year, which, added to Mrs Austen's own £210, made it possible for the three to live respectably. Financial matters and female economies play an important role in Jane Austen's novels. However much she treated the subject with humor, Jane well realized its importance. In a letter to her niece Fanny, she comments

"... single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony."

The Lives of Women in Jane Austen's Novels

The plots in Jane Austen's novels have a common theme—that of the trying experiences of young ladies on the path to marriage. As was mentioned above, Jane Austen kept her stories within very narrow confines, so her main female characters are not representative of a wide range of lifestyles. We have, of course, the young ladies in question, together with members of their own generation: sisters, friends, cousins,
and then we have the middle-aged generation, their mothers, aunts, or friendly advisers. Completing the picture are all the peripheral characters, future in-laws, or members of families in the immediate neighborhoods.

Let us begin with a look at the lives of Jane Austen's young ladies, heroines or otherwise. The strong points of Jane Austen novels are the conversations and character delineations. On the minutiae of what her characters are doing at any given time, she can be relatively unforthcoming, no doubt because she was writing for her contemporaries, who would not have needed detailed explanations. For example, she will quite often refer to the ladies doing their "work" without being more explicit, although we can infer that they are engaged in needlework, of the decorative kind if they are in company, of the more practical kind if they are in their own family circle. Thus, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth at home was "employed in trimming a hat", but when visiting the Bingley family at Netherfield House, "took up some needlework". Some kind of sewing activity was a frequent if not daily occupation.

That young ladies were expected to be accomplished was taken for granted, and the accomplishments that they were supposed to possess was the subject of an amusing scene in *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr Bingley had expressed amazement on "how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished... They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses..." Darcy commented that the word "accomplishment" was over-exaggerated and that he knew no more than six really accomplished ladies. Miss Bingley, ever ready to support him, claimed that "A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word..." Darcy added "extensive reading" to the list, thereby eliciting from Elizabeth the observation "I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished ladies. I rather wonder now at your knowing any." Elizabeth herself could play the piano and sing, but admits under questioning from Lady Catherine de Bourgh that only one other of her sisters was able to, that they could none of them draw, and that they had never been taught by a governess. She adds, however, "...such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might." Jane and Elizabeth, the two eldest daughters, were always able to pass the time rationally. Their two younger sisters, Catherine and Lydia, were not in the least interested in any kind of learning "...their minds were more vacant than their sisters", and when nothing better offered, a walk to Meryton was necessary to amuse their morning hours.
and furnish conversation for the evening." They were highly delighted by the arrival of a militia regiment which was quartered in the village for the winter, and "could talk of nothing but officers." Elinor Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility was a skillful artist and her sister Marianne was very musical; both worked hard to improve their talents. They are directly contrasted with the Miss Steeles, the eldest of whom was both vulgar and impertinently inquisitive and the younger, Lucy, "was naturally clever... but her powers had received no aid from education, she was ignorant and illiterate and her deficiency of all mental improvement, her want of information in the most common particulars could not be concealed..." The Miss Bertrams, in Mansfield Park, despite having all the advantages of wealth and good instruction also remained "entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility." Their cousins, the Prices, brought up with none of their advantages, still managed, with their uncle's help, to succeed. Sir Thomas, "saw reason to rejoice in what he had done for them all, and acknowledge the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure." Jane Austen leaves us in no doubt that young ladies who cannot learn from their mistakes and who remain ill-bred, ignorant and silly reap the rewards of their deficiencies in later life with unenviable marriages and no great happiness.

Then, as now, exercise was considered beneficial and young ladies were encouraged to take walks or ride horses. The Dashwood sisters were energetic walkers and would go out whenever possible. "The whole country about them abounded in beautiful walks. The high downs, which invited them from almost every window of the cottage to seek the exquisite enjoyment of air on their summits, were a happy alternative when the dirt of the valleys beneath shut up their superior beauties."

The Bennet girls were frequent walkers, too. From their home to the town of Meryton was "only one mile... a most convenient distance for the young ladies, who were usually tempted thither three or four times a week, to pay their duty to their aunt and to a milliner's shop just over the way." Elizabeth thought nothing of walking the three miles to Netherfield House to see Jane, who, having ridden there in the rain, had fallen ill. Accompanied as far as Meryton by her sisters, she then "continued her walk alone, crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity." The Bingley family was very surprised. "That she should have walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself, was almost incredible to Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley."
Fanny Price, not physically strong, usually took her exercise on horseback. Her health suffered when Miss Crawford borrowed the horse in order to learn to ride and was reluctant to give it back, such was the pleasure she found in riding.

Dependent young ladies were, of course, generally obliged to walk if they didn't like staying home all day. Owning a horse also meant the extra expense of a stable and a groom, and only an independently rich young lady would be able to own her own carriage. Social events often had to be manoeuvred around the availability of the family carriage, or were dependent on the generosity of the host in sending a carriage to pick the ladies up. Sir John (Sense and Sensibility) regularly sent his carriage for the Dashwood family. Lady Catherine (Pride and Prejudice) provided her physically delicate daughter Miss de Bourgh with a phaeton.

Another popular activity in those pre-telephone days was the writing of letters. In Pride and Prejudice, there is a constant flow of letters, between the sisters when any of them are away from home, between Elizabeth and her friend Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth and her aunt, Mrs Gardiner, Mr Collins and Mr Bennet, Mr Bennet and Mr Gardiner. Even the indolent Lydia writes a letter—ostensibly to congratulate Elizabeth on her forthcoming marriage, but mainly to request financial help.

Fanny Price, shortly after her arrival at Mansfield Park, was found sobbing on the attic stairs by her cousin Edmund. On enquiry, he found that she was wanting to write to her brother William, but did not know how to achieve this. Edmund helped her with paper, ruled her lines, gave her any needed assistance and above all "wrote with his own hand his love to his cousin William, and sent him half a guinea under the seal." He also promised to take the letter to his father for franking. Sir Thomas, as a peer and therefore a Member of Parliament, was allowed free postage and only needed to add his signature and address to any post leaving the house. At the climax of the story, there is a spate of correspondence flowing between Fanny in Portsmouth and the Mansfield Park inhabitants.

Once married, the lives of women would undergo considerable changes. Their freedom came to an end, and they were expected to devote themselves to household affairs. Elizabeth Bennet, on visiting her great friend Charlotte, now married to Mr Collins, listened without admiration to Lady Catherine, who "inquired into Charlotte's domestic concerns familiarly and minutely, and gave her a great deal of advice as to the management of them all; told her how everything ought to be regulated in so small a family as hers, and instructed her as to the care of her cows and her poultry."
for Lydia and Wickham, "their manner of living ... was unsettled in the extreme. They were always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation, and always spending more than they ought."

Mrs Grant, who came to live at Mansfield when her husband became the resident clergymen there, was only about thirty years old, but had no children. She welcomed her half brother and sister's proposal to come and stay with her because "... having by this time run through the usual resources of ladies residing in the country without a family of children-having more than filled her favourite sitting-room with pretty furniture, and made a choice collection of plants and poultry—was very much in want of some variety at home."

Lady Middleton "was not more than six or seven and twenty; her face was handsome, her figure tall and striking, and her address graceful ... though perfectly well-bred, she was reserved, cold, and had nothing to say for herself ... Sir John was a sportsman, Lady Middleton a mother. He hunted and shot, and she humoured her children; and these were their only resources. Lady Middleton had the advantage of being able to spoil her children all the year round... she piqued herself upon the elegance of her table, and of all her domestic arrangements."

In Mansfield Park, the three Ward sisters made very different marriages: Miss Maria, the second sister "had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park ... and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income." Miss Ward, the eldest, waited six years, then "... found herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune." Miss Frances, the youngest, married "... to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a lieutenant of marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly." We move on thirty years to see how their lives have changed.

Lady Bertram had become "a woman who spent her days in sitting, nicely dressed, on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put herself to inconvenience, guided in everything important by Sir Thomas and in smaller concerns by her sister." It might be said that the business of Lady Bertram's life was in doing nothing: her husband, her sister or her niece took care of everything for her. While her husband was away on business in Antigua, and her children were doing things of which he would disapprove, she sincerely felt that "... her own time had
been irreproachably spent during his absence: she had done a great deal of carpet work, and made many yards of fringe."

Mrs Norris's husband died about six years after Fanny joined the Mansfield Park household, and she then moved to a small house in the village. Her sister's indolence allowed her free rein to run the Mansfield Park household to her own advantage. She often stayed there, ate most of her meals there and frequently used the family carriage, all at no expense to herself. "As far as walking, talking and contriving reached, she was thoroughly benevolent, and nobody knew better how to dictate liberality to others; but her love of money was equal to her love of directing, and she knew quite as well how to save her own as to spend that of her friends."

For eleven years following Mrs Price's imprudent marriage, there was virtually no communication between her and her sisters. She then wrote to Lady Bertram to ask for help: she was expecting her ninth child, and her husband had no job and a very small income. This request resulted in the removal of Fanny, her eldest daughter, to Mansfield Park. We hear no more of her until Fanny visited her old home in Portsmouth some ten years later. Fanny was shocked by the noise, disorder and confusion which reigned supreme in the small house. Her mother was "injudiciously indulgent" to the children still at home and "her time was given chiefly to her house and her servants. Her days were spent in a kind of slow bustle; always busy without getting on; always behindhand and lamenting it, without altering her ways; wishing to be an economist, without contrivance or regularity; dissatisfied with her servants, without skill to make them better..." Only on Sunday did Mrs Price in any way resemble the Miss Frances Ward she had once been. The whole family attended the Garrison Chapel "in their cleanest skins and best attire." After chapel, "Mrs Price took her weekly walk on the ramparts...it was her public place: there she met her acquaintances, heard a little news, talked over the badness of the Portsmouth servants, and wound up her spirits for the six days ensuing."

The business of Mrs Bennet's life in Pride and Prejudice was in finding husbands, preferably rich, for her five daughters. Her household ran smoothly enough since she had a housekeeper and other servants, both indoor and outdoor, to do the actual work. However, though comfortable, the Bennets were not rich. Mr Bennet's estate was worth only £2000 a year and was, moreover, entailed to a male cousin since there were no sons. If Mr Bennet died, any income accruing from the estate would be lost and the living standards of the female members of the family would drop sharply.
In light of this, Mrs Bennet's desire to get her daughters married creditably was entirely understandable. At the same time, though, she was “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper”, whose main pleasures were visiting family and friends, giving and receiving invitations, and gossiping. She would be fretful and nagging when not getting her own way. She was a constant source of embarrassment to her second eldest daughter, Elizabeth, for her ill-chosen remarks, and her lack of control over either her own or her younger daughters' behavior was to prove almost disastrous to the family's well-being. We never hear of her reading or sewing, and she was “quite unable to sit alone.”

Whatever their differing pursuits at home, there was one activity which involved young and old alike and was equally important to both: that of socializing. Any neighborhood happening would require talking over and a rash of visiting would break out. Protocol demanded that a dinner party attended should be followed by a dinner party given, and dancing was considered a most acceptable form of entertainment, from private balls to public assemblies. Owners of large houses, such as Sir John Middleton, or Mr Bingley, or Sir Thomas Bertram, would be expected to hold balls and invite all the families that they were on visiting terms with. Indeed, the Middletons' whole life revolved around their guests, prompting Marianne Dashwood to remark “The rent of this cottage is said to be low; but we have it on very hard terms, if we are to dine at the Park whenever any one is staying either with them or with us.”

An ability to play some kind of indoor or card game was also a social asset. After dinner parties, card tables were usually set up: for people to play piquet, cribbage, whist, speculation, vingt-un, loo, lottery tickets, or casino. Billiards and backgammon were also popular. The Bertrams and their guests played at whist and speculation, Mr Bingley and Jane agreed that they both preferred vingt-un to commerce, and Lady Middleton was very fond of casino.

Protracted visiting was not uncommon. Since travel was still not so easy, and since hosts in this social class all employed servants to take care of the work, weeks or months at a time were spent visiting friends or relatives. The Miss Dashwoods were two months at Mrs Jennings's house in London. Elizabeth Bennet spent six weeks with the Collins family at Hunsford, and was pressed by Lady Catherine to extend her stay by another fortnight. Fanny Price's three-month stay at her former Portsmouth home was almost disastrous to her health and well-being, but was certainly not considered excessive as to time.
Making trips to well-known places is an activity much enjoyed in our own age. Given all the amenities we enjoy, such as swift transport and convenient hotels and restaurants, it may come as a surprise to learn that it is not a 20th century phenomenon. Visiting famous (or not-so-famous) places was also an activity much enjoyed in the 18th and 19th centuries. In *Sense and Sensibility*, there was a plan formed by the Barton Park party “for going on the following day to see a very fine place about twelve miles from Barton... The grounds were declared to be highly beautiful... they contained a noble piece of water, a sail on which was to form a great part of the morning's amusement...”

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet and the Gardiners had a plan to make a journey north as far as the Lake District. In the event, they were unable to travel that far due to Mr Gardiner's business, so they went no farther north than Derbyshire, travelling by way of “Oxford, Blenheim, Warwick, Kenilworth, Birmingham, etc.,” and visiting “…all the celebrated beauties of Matlock, Chatsworth, Dovedale, or the Peak.” In Derbyshire, however, there was also Pemberley, Mr Darcy’s splendid residence. Mrs Gardiner proposed a visit there, since it was within five miles of where they were staying. Elizabeth, her last encounter with Darcy still vivid in her memory, felt “obliged to assume a disinclination for seeing it. She must own that she was tired of great houses; after going over so many, she really had no pleasure in fine carpets or satin curtains.” Of course, she went, and the rest is history.

In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny’s horse having been borrowed by Miss Crawford for a trip to Mansfield Common with all the young people except Fanny, “…four fine mornings successively were spent in this manner, in showing the Crawfords the country, and doing the honours of its finest spots.”

**Conclusion**

At the time Jane Austen was writing, her landed gentry class were still leading comparatively secure and sheltered lives. They lived on their own estates from which they derived much of their income and most of their food. She doesn't give us many details of what would have been commonly accepted knowledge in her readers, but does mention the timber, fruit-trees, and stewponds at Delaford (*Sense and Sensibility*), the poultry and cows of Charlotte Collins, the trout-fishing and fruit (grapes, nectarines and peaches) at Pemberley (*Pride and Prejudice*), and the pheasants and timber at...
Sotherton (Mansfield Park). Labor was obviously cheap, since even a family as poor as the Prices could afford two indoor servants. Eldest sons, the usual inheritors of landed property, were expected to preserve it, and hand it on, enhanced if possible, to future generations. Enlarging property by the buying of neighboring farms or land, and improving or landscaping it, was very much in vogue at this time. John Dashwood makes much of such expenses when speaking to his half-sister Elinor..."enough to make his poverty clear, and to do away the necessity of buying a pair of ear-rings for each of his sisters..." Younger sons, if not independently rich, would opt for the army or navy (officer rank only), the Church, or the law. Any other profession or business was not considered honorable for a gentleman. Not for nothing was this called the "leisured class". Mr Bingley's sisters condemn the Bennets for having "low connections" with one uncle an attorney and another in trade in London, conveniently forgetting that their own fortunes originated in trade.

Women were expected to get married and then produce large families (infant mortality was high) so that the succession of the property was assured. Mrs Bennet had five daughters, but no son to inherit the property, Ladies Bertram and Middleton four children each. (Jane Austen's own mother had eight children, her brothers Edward and Francis had eleven children each, her brother Charles had eight, and her niece Fanny had nine). Once married, therefore, time was quite reasonably taken up with family and household affairs.

Young ladies spent their time gaining accomplishments which in turn made them more attractive on the marriage market. Family approval of matrimonial plans and alliances of fortune to fortune were considered most desirable. Such permutations occupy much of Jane Austen's novels, but she allows love to win out over mercenary motives: Darcy and Elizabeth, Bingley and Jane, Elinor and Edward, Marianne and Colonel Brandon, Fanny and Edmund. The others must take their own chances: Wickham is bribed into marrying Lydia, Willoughby rejected Marianne and opted for Miss Grey, her £50,000, and a few regrets. Charlotte Lucas, twenty-seven years old and unromantic, accepted Mr Collins's offer of marriage because "it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune." By doing so, her brothers were "relieved from their apprehension of Charlotte's dying an old maid," and since Mr Collins would succeed to the Longbourn estate on Mr Bennet's death, her family considered it an excellent marriage.

Charlotte is allowed to be practical, but this was not to Jane Austen's own taste.
In her letters to her niece Fanny, she wrote, “Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection,” and “nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without Love.” Adhering to this principle, she herself remained single, and, fortunately for us, utilized her time to leave us with a picture of her world, a gracious society that was so soon to be affected by all the upheavals, sociological, technological, industrial, of the later 19th century.

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