

'OH GREAT! NOW I HAVE TO DEAL WITH WITCHES?!': EXPLORING THE 'ARCHONTIC' FAN FICTION OF *TRUE BLOOD*

Erin Hollis

The phenomenon of fan fiction arises from an audience's need for more than whatever the film, TV show, book, etc. is providing. We want to know what happened before, what happened after, what happened in between. Fan fiction satisfies the craving for further adventures, explores new territory, develops characters and relationships, fills in gaps, corrects perceived errors, and even (in extreme cases) 'un-kills' beloved dead characters. Above all, fan fiction is written out of love, not for profit. (Catherine the Terrible, quoted in Pugh 2005, 218)

The above definition of fan fiction from Catherine the Terrible (an obvious pseudonym – a common occurrence in fan fiction forums) highlights several key attitudes to fan fiction that many outside the fan community choose to ignore. Indeed, it has been common for academics to respond to the topic of fan fiction with sneering derision, revealing an attitude to fan activities as being beneath the notice of academia. And even when fan fiction has been the focus of academic research in the past, it has usually been in ethnographic studies or solely focusing on the so-called 'slash' genre (a genre in which generally male/male sexual relationships are explored). Recently, however, fan fiction has been embraced for its literary and creative possibilities. Sheenagh Pugh, for example, calls it 'the democratic genre',

arguing that 'in fan-fiction the would-be readers themselves became the producers of what they wanted' (Pugh 2005, 218). Additionally, the authors in a recent collection of essays, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, seek to approach fan communities not only as scholars but also as fans, indicating a desire to approach the text they love from a critical perspective (Hellekson and Busse 2006). Catherine the Terrible's description of fan fiction can thus provide a starting point for new ways of understanding the genre. That fan fiction is 'written out of love' to fill in the gaps left in the original canon indicates not only how these authors are developing critical stances in relation to their favourite texts, but also how they continually desire both 'more of' and 'more from' such texts (Pugh 2005, 19). The burgeoning fandom of *True Blood* demonstrates just how much fan fiction authors and readers are expecting from what they love. The show itself encourages such responses as it fills in gaps from the *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* novels on which it was based. In this essay, I will explore how the series, with its focus on 'liminality' and, in particular, the coming-out of the coffin of vampires, encourages readers/viewers to fill in the gaps by looking at the fanfic-like relationship between *True Blood* and the novels that inspire it and at the content of three different websites that are, at least in part, dedicated to fan fiction of the HBO series.

***True Blood* as Fan Fiction**

Before I begin examining some specific fan fiction communities and stories within those communities, I would like first to examine how *True Blood* itself fulfills many of the characteristics of fan fiction and how it is part of what Abigail Derecho has termed 'archontic literature' (Derecho 2006, 63). Derecho draws on Jacques Derrida's discussion of the archive in his 1995 work *Archive Fever* in which he develops the 'archontic principle', that is a 'drive within an archive that seeks always to produce more archive, to enlarge itself' and 'never allows the archive to remain

stable or still, but wills it to add to its own stores' (Derecho 2006, 64). Arguing against those who might call literature based on a previous text 'derivative' or 'appropriative', Derecho 'prefer[s] to call the genre "archontic" literature because the word *archontic* is not laden with references to property rights or judgments about the relative merits of antecedent and descendant works' (Derecho 2006, 64). Derecho's partiality for defining the genre as archontic rather than 'derivative' or 'appropriative' highlights a major issue in criticism of fan fiction – critics often think of the genre as a lesser version of the original work on which it is based. Derecho's definition allows all entries in the archive to be valued equally, reflecting Pugh's claim that fan fiction is a 'democratic genre' (Pugh 2005, 223). Derecho further argues that the 'archontic' genre is not merely a new way of describing intertextuality:

It is the specific relation between new versions and the originary versions of texts, the fact that works enter the archive of other works by quoting them consciously, by pointedly locating themselves within the world of the archontic text, that makes the concept of archontic literature different from the concept of intertextuality. (Derecho 2006, 65)

Thus, unlike texts such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* that allude to earlier work but do not locate themselves 'within the world of the archontic text', archontic literature consciously announces its relationship to the earlier work and becomes a part of its archive. As Derecho argues, "'archontic" describes only those works that generate variations that explicitly announce themselves as variations' (Derecho 2006, 65). Fan fiction is not the only example of the genre. Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* highlights its relationship to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, becoming a part of *Hamlet*'s archive, and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* picks a particular character from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and retells the story from her point of view. Such literature 'allows, or even invites, writers

to enter it, select specific items they find useful, making new artifacts using those found objects, and deposit the newly made work back into the source text's archive' (Derecho 2006, 65). Archontic literature thus encourages readers to become active creators in the expansion of the archive.

Derecho further argues that archontic literature possesses the unique ability to subvert dominant ideologies often represented in mainstream literature and media. Because fan fiction is written mostly by women and other archontic literature is often written by those who have traditionally been disempowered, 'it undermines conventional notions of authority, boundaries and property. In other words, archontic literature is inherently, structurally, a literature of the subordinate' (Derecho 2006, 72). Interestingly, Derecho identifies the overwhelmingly female fan fiction population as writing 'against the media corporations whose products they consume by augmenting or sometimes replacing canonical versions of media texts with their own texts' (2006, 72). Such an argument highlights the subversive power of fan fiction to question the dominant ideology of the entertainment industry, which, as Derecho points out, has traditionally been dominated by men.

The *True Blood* series itself provides an intriguing example of archontic literature that fills in the gaps and seeks to question the ideology of Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. The quotation in the title of this essay points to a common practice in *True Blood* to parody the events of the novels. Sookie's exasperated comment about witches in the trailer for season four¹ indicates the frustration many readers feel as Harris introduces new supernatural threats in each book. Additionally, in *Definitely Dead* (Harris 2006), Sookie discovers that she is part-fairy after Andre, a vampire particularly adept at identifying fairy blood, tastes hers. In the novels, fairies were not a new element as the character Claudine had been introduced earlier and attentive readers knew well ahead of time that Sookie was part-fairy. However, in the television series, although hints about fairies appear throughout, when Sookie discovers that she is a fairy in the episode 'I Smell a Rat' (3.10), it is more of a surprise to viewers

who did not have as many hints. Sookie's response, 'I'm a fairy? How fucking lame!' specifically comments on the dissatisfaction the storyline in the book series might cause, poking fun at its source material. Just as fan fiction authors often rewrite scenes with which they are discontented, this scene from the television series does so as well. Indeed, throughout the first three seasons of the series, the creators and writers of *True Blood* recreate the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, expanding the archive of the original story. Whether it is 'un-killing' Lafayette or creating Jason's heavy involvement with the Fellowship of the Sun, *True Blood* works as an 'archontic' text that also subverts, or at least magnifies, the ideology of the novels.²

Unlike the typical fan fiction scenario in which fans respond to and often question and rework the dominant ideology created by the entertainment industry, *True Blood's* creator, Alan Ball, a successful and well-known producer and director in Hollywood, responds to a text written by a woman who is less well known. This would seemingly flip the description of fan fiction as 'literature of the subordinate', at least if one wished to reinforce a simple male/female binary. *True Blood* still functions as an example of this type of literature because of the manner through which Ball adapts the series in order to make the situations of the vampires a parallel for the current situation of the gay community in the United States. In the novels, there is definitely some reference to this parallel as well, but Ball capitalized on this undercurrent in Harris's work and makes more overt the commentary on gay civil rights. The TV series easily works in this nuance and the commentary persists in the background with news reports and interviews representing the civil rights campaign going on in the *True Blood* universe. The Vampire Rights Amendment, the frequent references to legalizing vampire marriage and the sign in the opening credits reading 'God hates fangs' all contain subtext about the current situation of homosexuals within the United States. Ball creates this stronger subtext in his show (just as slash writers create such subtext in their work) that in turn seems to influence Harris as she writes new books in the series. Her series has become markedly more willing to engage

with such subtext since the television series, making both *True Blood* and the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* source texts for one another.³ The canon for this archive is so open to alteration since it is still being written and produced and it has as its focus not only vampires, but other supernatural creatures that defy boundaries and flirt with the interstices between binaries; this openness has inspired a great deal of fan fiction that explores and questions such boundaries. In the next section, I will look at three fan fiction communities and how they contribute to this particular archive.

***True Blood* Fan Fiction**

In a discussion of fan fiction in the *True Blood* fan forum on Television Without Pity,⁴ one fan, 'never enoughjam', identifies the complicated nature of the burgeoning *True Blood* fan fiction, arguing that it is difficult to determine what is proper 'canon' for the series because of the dual nature of the canon:

In the case of *True Blood*, your question is complicated by the fact that these characters exist both in the form we see them on TV and in the books by Charlaine Harris. The characters we see onscreen are often very different from the ones we read in the books. So the question of whether a fanfic version is 'true' to the originals may depend on which 'originals' you are dealing with.⁵

This dual canon creates three sets of fans: *True Blood* fans, *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series fans and fans of both the novels and the television series. Because these three types of fans exist, different fans have varying expectations from fan fiction. Some seek to read fan fiction that portrays characters only as they are represented on the television show or in the novels, while others use knowledge of and references to both series. Many fans of the book series have strong objections to how many of the characters are depicted in the television series,

objecting when characters are changed too much from the original novels' canon. One fan comments on a blog about the frequent changes the television series made to the book series: 'I'm getting totally irritated with where the show is leading. Supposedly based loosely on book 3, season 3's only likeliness are the name [*sic*] of the characters. Eric in the book would never have locked Sookie in the basement shackled like an animal.'⁶ The dual 'archontic' nature of the series thus runs the risk of alienating fans who are loyal only to the book or the television series. However, in common with other fandoms such as *Doctor Who* (1963–89, 1996, 2005–ongoing, BBC, UK) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977, USA) that have several 'official' entries in their archives, fans who choose to embrace both the television and written series can use the archontic nature of both series to create more complex character studies in their works, making allusions to both series without having to detail explicitly what they are referring to. Most writers in the *True Blood* fan fiction community appear to be a part of this third group.

In addition to having the quality of a dual canon from which to write, most *True Blood* fan fiction focuses on relationships between characters; such stories are classified as 'shipper fic'. Indeed, on the same Television Without Pity discussion forum, 'tennisgurl' asks, 'Does anyone know where to find good NON SHIPPER fics? Honestly, I can't find any.' Fans of the *True Blood* series primarily focus on Sookie's relationships with the various male characters that she encounters in both the book and the television series. Without a doubt, Eric is the most popular character in *True Blood* fan fiction, even more popular than Sookie. Three different fan fiction websites⁶ demonstrate this focus on both relationships and Eric within *True Blood* fan fiction.

Fanfiction.net

Fanfiction.net is one of the most popular fan fiction websites on the Internet. It allows fan fiction for a variety of media, including books, video games, movies and television shows. Created in 1998 by Xing Li, as of 2002, the site had 'some

115,000 members. A third of them are 18 and under, and about 80% are female' (Buechner 2002). Anyone can upload stories to the site, although there are some restrictions on more mature material. *True Blood* fan fiction is a burgeoning community on the website. As of 22 April 2011, there were 1,915 entries related to the television series. Compared to the *Harry Potter* fan fiction community on the site, which had 501,958 entries as of the same date, the *True Blood* community is small indeed, but appears to be steadily growing. Of the 1,915 entries, 1,212 entries feature Eric, 672 feature Sookie and 191 feature Bill. In terms of focus on relationships, the Eric/Sookie relationship appears to be the most popular, with 472 entries featuring both characters and only 85 entries featuring Bill and Sookie. Sometimes, writers respond to challenges issued within the community or at other sites on the Internet. One such response is Nyah's fic, 'The Suit Makes the Man'.

Nyah's story responds to a LiveJournal (another popular gathering place for fan fiction communities) Eric/Sookie challenge in which the 'parameters were cold, calculating Eric, jealous Sookie, banter, a strip club, and a cigarette' (Nyah 2011). The story takes place after the end of season two, depicting Sookie's interaction with Eric as she tries to get him to help her find Bill, who had been kidnapped at the end of the season. Nyah replicates the voices of the characters well, especially Eric. She also gives Sookie a new habit, smoking, that she had begun after Bill's disappearance; in part, this new habit surfaces to meet the challenge parameters of including a cigarette, but Nyah does keep Sookie in character, even with this uncharacteristic habit. The story picks up on the subtext between the characters that occurs throughout the series from their first meeting and also expands the characterization of Sookie, highlighting her stress at Bill's disappearance. Nyah also maintains the aura of mystery and arrogance that surrounds Eric in the series. He is dressed up for Halloween as Clark Kent – a costume he proudly spent little time on – and he calmly talks to Sookie even as he is interacting with a stripper. The story is told, as are the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, in Sookie's voice. Eric remains an indefinable

and mysterious character in the story, reflecting the attraction of the boundary-crossing vampire to fan fiction writers.

Truebloodwiki

The *True Blood* fan site, truebloodwiki.wetpaint.com, was once the official HBO *True Blood* fan fiction website. It was originally located at truebloodwiki.hbo.com, but has since been separated from HBO's official *True Blood* page. The FAQs for the site describe it as the 'official wiki for the HBO show *True Blood*' (truebloodwiki.wetpaint.com 2011). Unlike fanfiction.net, this site includes series-related discussion forums and other material such as episode and character guides. On the site, those who write *True Blood* fan fiction are referred to as 'Truebies' (truebloodwiki.wetpaint.com 2011). Potential writers must apply to be a writer and be approved by a site manager. The site allows mature material and readers must be over 18 to read the stories. The site has six different categories of fan fiction, most of which focus on relationships in the series; the categories are 'Bill & Sookie, Eric & Sookie, Vampwich, Sookie & Others, Mixing it Up, and My Life as a Fangbanger' (Truebloodwiki.wetpaint.com 2011). 'Vampwich' focuses on plots in which Sookie cannot choose between Bill and Eric or on a Bill/Sookie/Eric threesome, 'Mixing it Up' focuses on relationships without Sookie, such as Bill/Pam or Eric/Bill, and 'My Life as a Fangbanger' allows writers to insert themselves into the world of *True Blood* as so-called 'fangbangers' and their experiences at Fangtasia. This last option is surprising given that within most fan fiction communities it is considered anathema to write oneself into the story. Such a phenomenon is called a 'Mary Sue' and has long been widely discouraged in fan fiction. Unsurprisingly, this is one of the least popular of the categories, with only 14 entries as of 22 April 2011. The 'Vampwich' category also has only 14 entries, but the least popular category is 'Sookie and Others', with only four entries. By far the most popular category is 'Eric & Sookie', which has 88 entries. 'Bill & Sookie' has 47 entries, while 'Mixing it Up' has 22. While this site has far fewer entries overall than fanfiction.net, stories about Eric are, once again,

the most popular. Eric is almost twice as popular as Bill in this community, indicating that something about Eric is attracting fan fiction writers in droves.

Two stories that focus on Eric are 'Remember What I Told You' by Leah Raphael and 'While Awaiting Sunday ...' by CavalierQueen. Leah Raphael specifically describes her story as a 'version of what SHOULD have happened before Pam interrupted' Eric and Sookie in the episode 'I Smell a Rat' (Raphael 2011). Such a rewriting of a particular scene is incredibly popular within fan fiction communities as fans seek to alter the story to their own desires. This story, in particular, could be characterized as 'Plot, What Plot' or 'PWP'. In such stories, the author mostly fulfills a fantasy of two characters getting together sexually. Leah Raphael rewrites a particular scene from the show so that Eric and Sookie are uninterrupted and can engage in sexual intercourse, reflecting her own fantasy for Eric and Sookie to be together. CavalierQueen's 'While Awaiting Sunday ...', which is listed on truebloodwiki.wetpaint.com, but is linked to fanfiction.net, has many of the same qualities as 'Remember What I Told You', being mostly a 'PWP' story that imagines a sexual liaison between Sookie and Eric. Unlike Leah Raphael's story, however, CavalierQueen is not seeking to rewrite a scene that frustrated her desires; rather, she writes the story in order to pass 'the time until Sunday night, waiting to see Sookie slap Eric, Eric get in her face, and take her to Dallas with or without Bill' (CavalierQueen 2011). She classifies the story as 'UST/PWP' (Unresolved Sexual Tension/Plot, What Plot) and writes the story to fill up her time between episodes of the show. These two stories highlight the twinned desires of most fan fiction authors to want both 'more from' and 'more of' the object of their fandom (Pugh 2005, 19). The dual nature of the canon allows fans to insert themselves more easily into the text and play with events in order to satisfy such desires.

Ericnorthman.net

Given Eric's overwhelming popularity on the previous two sites, it is not surprising that a fan fiction site devoted entirely to stories

about him exists. Ericnorthman.net focuses solely on stories 'featuring the vampire viking Eric Northman' (Ericnorthman.net 2011). As of 22 April 2011, the site has 1,214 members, 373 stories and 149 authors. Many of the stories on the site are classified as 'adult' and readers must be over 18. The site puts the stories into seven different categories: general, romance, drama, mystery, humour, all human and poetry. By far the most popular genre is romance, which has 276 entries. Poetry is the least popular with only five entries. Sookie commonly appears in many of the stories. The site puts almost no restrictions on the stories, telling potential authors that 'If Eric Northman is in the story, the story is allowed. This includes "Alternate Universe" stories, etc.' (Ericnorthman.net 2011).

One story in particular, 'Let Love In' by Terri Botta, which has been posted on this site as well as numerous other sites, has become a 'classic' in fan fiction according to participants in the Television Without Pity forum (Television Without Pity 2011). The story is 27 chapters long and develops a fully realized plotline. Indeed, in its entirety it is much longer than books in the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series. The story is mostly in response to the representations of Eric and Sookie in the novels, but it does demonstrate several intriguing aspects of fan fiction in response to the television canon as well. Botta explores what happens between a 'blood-bonded' Eric and Sookie; in *All Together Dead* (Harris 2007), Sookie was forced to take some of Eric's blood in order to avoid drinking another vampire's blood. Because she has drunk Eric's blood before, her drinking of his blood for a third time results in a 'blood bond' that connects Eric and Sookie both physically and emotionally. She begins to feel happy whenever he is near and she also desires him more physically. Botta capitalizes on this 'blood bond' and creates an entire story in which Eric and Sookie go on a retreat-like vacation in order to sort out the bond. They end up closely connected and professing their love for one another only to return to a Louisiana fraught with danger as new vampires try to kill Eric. Before their return, Eric was given three items to protect him – a necklace to protect him from silver, mint leaves to allow him to remain awake

during the day and a ring to allow him to go out in the sun. The story is intricately developed and includes new creatures and situations for the characters. However, until the later parts of the story, Eric is mostly transformed into a typical romance novel character who is wrapped up in his love for his partner. Since it is set in a demon retreat where he can relax, Eric does not act like his typical self. Indeed, he acts like the amnesiac Eric from season four and *Dead to the World* (Harris 2004), demonstrating a desire among fans to remove the dangerous aspects of his character. His personality is greatly changed in the story until Sookie and Eric return to Louisiana when he begins to reassert his vampire authority. This story fulfills the desires of readers who want a more available and attainable Eric, paradoxically removing the very qualities that have made him so popular. However, fans are able to play with characters and their representations so much in this series because of the dual nature of the canon, empowering fans to recreate characters and impose their own ideologies onto the canon. That fans repeatedly return to Eric in their writing demonstrates a desire to define the unknown. And unlike Bill who is consistently described as mainstreaming and depicted as more human than vampire, Eric more fully embraces his vampire liminality, allowing readers numerous gaps to fill in with their own desires and fantasies.

Transgressing Boundaries: The Liminal Vampire

From John Polidori's *The Vampyre* to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to more contemporary examples like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *True Blood*, the figure of the vampire has consistently portrayed characters existing in the 'in-between', neither living nor dead, but rather undead. Because vampires can be perceived as both human and monster, they have the unique ability to subvert typical boundaries and definitions. Vampires have thus often been used as a metaphor for transgressing borders and living in a sort of in-between space, or what some would call a liminal space. In his book, *The Location of Culture*, postcolonial

literary theorist Homi Bhabha defines liminality as 'in-between space' that 'provide[s] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate[s] new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (Bhabha 1994, 2). The undead vampire provides a particularly apt example of liminality. Vampires are at once dead and not dead, alive and not alive, existing in the so-called 'in-between' where transgression and subversion of conventional societal expectations can occur. As Bhabha argues, such engagements with liminal spaces 'may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress' (Bhabha 1994, 3). Thus vampires have historically reflected cultural anxieties about the transgressions of such boundaries.

Since vampires are so shifty, they also provide an opportunity for fans to participate easily in their portrayal. The liminality so common to the vampire allows fans a gap through which to enter the text and become participants. Fans attuned to unexplained actions or undeveloped characters can easily monopolize the nature of the vampire in their fan fiction. Indeed, the figure of the vampire with its play with liminal space provides a model for understanding the practice of writing fan fiction. Since those who participate in fan fiction are both writers and readers, they easily swing from one role to the other, occupying a sort of in-between role as writer-readers and reader-writers. That they recognize that the two categories are not mutually exclusive helps them to subvert and reinvent such roles. Thus, just as vampires bring into question the distinctions between life and death, fan fiction writers trouble the distinctions so often made between writer and reader, by both reading and writing the text for which they are fans. It is not surprising, then, that series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003, WB, USA), *Angel* (1999–2004, WB) and *True Blood* have inspired such a dedicated fandom, given that their own subject position as writers/readers is metaphorically reconstructed through the image of the

vampire each time they interact with the series. Eric Northman, with his aura of mystery and his ambiguous motives, provides a clear space for fans to insert themselves into the text because he so easily and consistently flirts with the interstices between human and demon, good and evil and lover and fighter, which, in addition to his physical attractions, is why he has become the most popular character for fans to write about.

True Blood, along with its inspiration *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*, provides an especially fruitful avenue for fan fiction authors. Because the canon of the series is so uniquely open, given that both series are still being created and consistently comment on one another, fans can more easily intercede in the canon. More than any other text, these texts provide fans with a fluidity of canon that encourages participation with the texts, creating an archive that fans can persistently access and expand in order to satisfy their own desires for 'more from' and 'more of' the series. Further, that the figure of the vampire is central to the series allows fans even more gaps to explore as the vampire represents a liminal figure that occupies the 'in-between' of being both human and demon, both dead and alive. It is precisely this 'in-between' in which fan fiction works best, and the *True Blood* archive will continue to grow and alter as more fans fill in the gaps or create new gaps in the particularly liminal space of the fan fiction of *True Blood*.

Notes

- 1 Viewable at <http://www.hbo.com/true-blood/about/video/season-4-trailer.html>. (Accessed 1 June 2011.)
- 2 Such archontic texts go beyond mere adaptation to a more critical relationship with the source material. While adaptation suggests the source material is more valid than the adaptation, archontic literature embraces all deposits into the archive equally. Thus, readers/viewers are more likely to become upset with changes to the source material if they approach subsequent texts as adaptations rather than as archontic literature.
- 3 This phenomenon is most clearly at work in *Dead and Gone* (Harris 2009), in which the Were community decides to reveal themselves. The intolerant responses of many of the non-supernatural community mirror the responses homosexuals sometimes experience when coming out of the closet.

- 4 Available at <http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/>. (Accessed 20 August 2011.)
- 5 See the 'True Blood Fan Fiction Forum' at <http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/lofiversion/index.php/t3187475.html>. (Accessed 22 April 2011.)
- 6 See *The Wall Street Journal* Speakeasy True Blood Blog at <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/08/22/true-blood-season-3-episode-10-i-smell-a-rat-guess-whos-a-fair>. (Accessed 27 April 2011.)
- 7 These are: www.ericnorthman.net. (Accessed 22 April 2011; www.fanfiction.net, accessed 22 April 2011; truebloodwiki.wetpaint.com, accessed 22 April 2011.)

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