

MEETING YOUR HEROES: THE RENAISSANCE AGE AND THE TRANSMISSION OF VALUES IN *MY HERO ACADEMIA*

The times, they are a-changin'
-Bob Dylan

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Abstract

It is hard to avoid superheroes these days. Not only do they continue their long dominance of the comic book industry, they have also saturated film, and with the release of shows like *Hawkeye*, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, and *Peacemaker*, superheroes seem set to consume the streaming services. In short, things are a lot different than they were in any previous period of comics history.

In both fandom and comics scholarship, these diverse epochs of comics (and particularly superhero) history are parsed based on shared artistic impulses and social/artistic mores, called Ages. Although there is much diversity of opinion regarding just when a how a particular age manifests, there is large agreement on the existence of the Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Dark Ages. Conveniently, these periods roughly match the stages of genre evolution posited separately by Christian Metz and Thomas Schatz. But, as initially stated, things have changed in the past two decades. Since many scholarly studies of genre end after four stages, where does that leave the superhero genre?

Peter Coogan, in his book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* proposes the existence of a fifth stage of genre evolution, which he calls the Renaissance or Reconstruction Stage. According to Coogan, during this period: The conventions of the genre are reestablished in ways that incorporate an understanding of the genre's completed cycle. Readers will be able to experience the reconstructive stories the way they did when first encountering the genre; this includes a sense of wonder or discovery, but one tied to a knowledge of and appreciation for the conventions of the genre.

While the author agrees with Coogan's assertion of the new Age of comics/stage of genre evolution, the author asserts that his understanding of the current period of comics history lacks an important element. In this presentation, I will build on the work of Coogan, Schatz, Metz, and others to argue that a central tenet of the current Renaissance Age of comics is the transmission of moral values to a new generation. The author will examine the students of Class 1-A from *My Hero Academia* as potent examples of the Renaissance Age, demonstrating not only their sense of wonder and the their/the

series' acknowledgement of the dark past, but how the anime self-consciously reflects on the transmission of values accomplished through superheroes.

Introduction

The pop-cultural landscape of 2020s America would be all but unrecognizable to a “nerd” or “geek” from any previous era. Not only are superheroes out and proud, no longer relegated to the social margins, but they dominate the cultural landscape. But beyond the simple shift from stigmatized to idolized, superheroes of the current period share distinct themes and concerns that distinguish them from the hero tales of the 1990s, for instance. Yet these stories do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in conversation with one another. Each tale in the modern era, be it cinematic, animated, or graphic, is based in part on an understanding of what went before. In this way, a genre can be said to “evolve” over time. Film scholar Leger Grindon argues that these changes occur because of a confluence of internal and external factors. The external include “commercial success, industrial compatibility, supporting cultural phenomena, and sociopolitical events” as contributing factors to change, whereas internal factors are related to the dominance of a given genre convention or trope, which becomes subordinated over time as it is repeated and becomes stale and/or predictable.¹

¹ Leger Grindon, “Cycles and Clusters: The Shape of Film Genre History,” in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 42-59; pg 53-55.

Examining the Western film genre, Christian Metz suggests that the works start by exploring the limits of the medium and establishing the conventions in what would later be considered the “classic” period, followed shortly by a movement of parody of said conventions. After the parody stage, there is a contestation of the cowboy figure, followed by an epoch of deconstruction.² Film theorist Thomas Schatz builds on this understanding to create more formal stages. He suggests that:

A form passes through an *experimental* stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a *classic* stage, in which the conventions reach their “equilibrium” and are mutually understood by artist and audience, an age of *refinement*, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a *baroque* (or “mannerist” or “self-reflexive”) stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the “substance” or “content” of the work.³

Building on the work of Metz and Schatz, comics scholar Peter Coogan maps these evolutionary phases onto the “Ages” of (superhero) comics history (Golden, Silver, Bronze, Dark, and Renaissance).

² Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1974), pg 148-161.

³ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc, 1981), pg 37-38, emphasis in original.

According to Coogan, the conventions are experimented with and initially established in the Golden Age. They are fully understood by artists and audience in the Silver Age, and Coogan notes that this understanding can be noted in episodes of parody, linking the Silver Age to Metz' "parody" stage.⁴ The Bronze Age sees the genre embellished and given more serious consideration by all parties concerned, and finally the formal elements become the primary concern and the medium is deconstructed in the Dark Age (which Coogan calls the Iron Age).⁵ In this way he aligns the evolution of the superhero genre with the schema theorized by earlier film scholarship.

It should be briefly noted before continuing that there is no exact consensus on the dates of the Ages of comics. As is typical of a fan community, every fan, creator, and scholar has their own set of dates, and some deny the existence of a given Age entirely. Comics author and commentator Grant Morrison, for instance, marks the end of the Dark Age in 1997, based on the publication of his mini-series *Flex Mentallo*, while scholar Bradford Wright notes the events of 9/11/2001 as a watershed moment for the end of the "darkness."⁶⁷ For the purposes of this examination, the dates used are as follows:

⁴ Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: Monkey Brain Books, 2006), pg 193, 195.

⁵ Ibid, pg 193-194.

⁶ Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), pg 267-269.

⁷ Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pg 288-289.

the Golden Age, 1938-1956; Silver Age, 1956-1970; Bronze Age, 1971-1986; Dark (or Iron) Age, 1986-2000; Renaissance Age, 2001-present.

Having noted these dates, an astute reader will have noticed that the theorized stages of genre evolution end with the baroque/deconstruction/Dark Age, whereas superheroes have continued for over twenty more years. In part this discrepancy is due simply to the context of some of the work done on genre evolution: Schatz, for example, was examining works from the Western, gangster, and musical genres, all of which have waned drastically in popularity from their heyday, and so have lost some of the motive force of audience interest/commercial success that drives genre evolution.⁸ Superheroes, on the other hand, have stayed largely commercially viable, despite dark spots, for over 80 years, and so have continued to evolve. Coogan is one of the few scholars to deal with this extension beyond the four-stage evolution of a genre, referring to what he calls a "reconstructive stage" that occurs in comics as the "Renaissance Age." He asserts that, during this period:

The conventions of the genre are reestablished in ways that incorporate an understanding of the genre's completed cycle. Readers will be able to experience the reconstructive stories the way they did when first encountering the genre; this includes a sense of wonder or discovery, but one tied to a knowledge of and appreciation for

⁸ Grindon, pg 53-54.

the conventions of the genre. The conventions of a genre are made to work again, and the stories told regain a positive and generally prosocial outlook, albeit with the inclusion of elements that had been problematic in the baroque stage, typically figurations of race and gender as well as the conventions of a genre...[The Renaissance Age] should incorporate a positive outlook, a belief in superheroes as agents of good, and a straightforward approach to the conventions.⁹

In other words, superhero narratives of the Renaissance Age promote the values of the Golden, Silver, and Bronze Ages, but not unthinkingly or uncritically. Instead, they engage with the critiques of the Dark Age and are therefore positive in a critical way. Coogan's understanding of this reconstructive stage is accurate as far as it goes, but it misses a distinctive element of the current era: a focus on transmission. Superhero stories during this period are often self-reflexive in their promotion of "heroic" values, and therefore regularly revolve around the passing of "heroism" to successive generations. This can be seen in many of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, especially the Tom Holland Spider-Man franchise, the characters of Miles Morales (Spider-Man), Iron Heart, and Jamie Reyes (the Blue Beetle), and even in the reimagining of established stories for new generations in Marvel's Ultimate universe. While these elements of critical positivity and reflection on transmission can

⁹ Coogan, pg 198.

be seen in any number of comics, films, or cartoons, one of the best examples is, fittingly, a recipient of American heroic values. The anime/manga *My Hero Academia* exemplifies the Renaissance Age of superheroes through its positivity, its rehabilitation of Bakugo, and its emphasis on the transmission of values.

Written and illustrated by Hirokoshi Kōhei, *My Hero Academia* began as a manga published in *Weekly Shonen Jump* in 2014. By 2016, it was adapted into an anime by the animation studio Bones (and dubbed and published in the United States by Funimation). The series follows young Midoriya Izuku, a young, powerless student in a world where approximately 80% of the people have some sort of superpower, called a "quirk." Although he lacks superpowers, Midoriya wants to be a hero just like his idol All Might, the world's number one hero. One day, after his best friend/bully Bakugo Katsuki is captured by a villain, Midoriya rushes to help without thought of his own safety. This impresses All Might, who had briefly met Midoriya earlier, and he chooses the young boy to inherit his power "One for All" and become the new "Symbol of Peace." After this, Midoriya gains entry into UA High School, the premier hero academy in Japan, and the series follows him and the rest of his superpowered Class 1-A as they train to become heroes and deal with attacks from nefarious villains.

My Hero Academia builds on the heroic traditions of prior ages to create a pro-social, pro-heroic message. In fact, the series is not only pro-superhero, it is pro-superhero-fan. Beyond his inherited quirk, one of Midoriya's central abilities upon which he

relies is his fanboyish, *otaku* analysis of all the heroes. At multiple points throughout the series, especially during class competitions, Midoriya is shown hunched over a notebook analyzing the moves and abilities of his peers and teachers, which nerdy obsession inevitably plays a role in his victory. Beyond the appreciation for fans and their obsession, the main heroes of *MHA* exemplify the positivity of the Renaissance Age. One of the central characters is All Might, Japan and the world's greatest hero, the so-called "Symbol of Peace," and as scholar Alek Sigley notes, "the supreme signifier of America within the manga. His bodysuit is red, white, and blue. He has blonde hair and blue eyes, with a heavysset jaw. Ever since his days as an exchange student in California, he has punctured his speech with English phrases."¹⁰ Besides being a readily recognizable pastiche of Superman and Captain America, even All Might's attacks pay homage to the United States, amending American state and city names to the word "Smash," such as "Texas Smash" or "Detroit Smash." All Might exemplifies the power of the American superhero, bursting onto the scene with a grin and a cry of "I am here!" All Might represents the best that a hero can be in the world of *My Hero Academia*, and serves as a role model to numerous characters, students and pro-heroes alike. Yet, despite the overall positive tone of All Might's heroism, there is darkness and destruction inherent in his story. In the first episode of the anime, it is revealed that All Might suffers from a

¹⁰ Alek Sigley, "Next It's Japan's Turn: Nation and Otaku Masculinity in *My Hero Academia*," *Mechademia* 14, no 2 (2022), pg 81.

devastating injury that destroyed his stomach and other internal organs, which has left him unable to use his power except for a few hours a day, and has left him brutalized in many ways.¹¹ Through All Might's situation, the manga/anime acknowledges the pain and destruction that featured so heavily in the Dark Age, while still maintaining the heroic attitude of the Bronze, Silver, and Golden Ages. Despite his suffering, All Might continues smiling as he rescues the people, and his very presence serves to deter crime around the country and the world.

All Might's revelation in the first episode is far from the only time that Hirokoshi openly admits the darkness and potential failures of heroes. In the third season, for example, the students of Class 1-A (and Class 1-B) go to a summer camp to train their powers, and Midoriya meets a young boy named Kota who hates heroes. It turns out that Kota's parents were a superhero team that were killed by a villain, so he now lives with his cousin and resents all heroes, young and old. When Midoriya learns this, he states "In that moment, I had no reply," yet he ultimately saves Kota and inspires him to see the good heroes do, and that his parents died saving others.¹² This again shows that, despite the darkness that underlies many hero stories, they are still

¹¹ *My Hero Academia*, season 1, episode 1, "Izuku Midoriya: Origin," directed by Tsukada Takurō, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired April 3, 2016, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

¹² *My Hero Academia*, season 3, episode 40, "Wild, Wild Pussycats," directed by Tomo Ōkubo, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired April 14, 2018, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

ultimately positive things and to be valued, firmly making *My Hero Academia* reconstructionist in attitude.

Interestingly, Alek Sigley notes that the series serves a reconstructionist role not just in relation to American superheroes, but also in terms of Japanese *shonen* (or “young male”) manga. He suggests that *MHA* exists in conversation with the postmodern irony and reflexivity of works like *Evangelion*. *Evangelion*’s main character is Shinji, “who spends half the original series moping and refusing to fight, [and] is the polar opposite of the brave, enthusiastic, and fight-ready masculine exemplar manga readers are acquainted with.”¹³ According to Sigley, the superhero manga borrows some of these elements, reflecting on *otaku* culture, making postmodern references to earlier works, and so on, but “despite such distinctly postmodern reflexivity, pastiche, and consumerist abandon, *My Hero Academia* is a conventional *nekketsu shōnen* manga in the *Dragon Ball* and *Naruto* tradition, with a hard-working and determined fourteen-year-old protagonist who surmounts challenge after challenge.”¹⁴ Ultimately, the series reinforces the positive, pro-social elements of *shonen* anime/manga while still acknowledging the issues and concerns created by the deconstructionist stage.

The interplay between tragedy and heroism, darkness and positivity, is replete throughout *My Hero Academia*. Horikoshi does not shy away from showing trauma and tragedy, such as in the backstories of 1-A class member Todoroki Shoto, who was

abused by his superhero father and viciously scarred by his mother.¹⁵ Similarly, the villain Shigaraki Tomura accidentally brutally killed his entire family, and interestingly his story mirrors the transmission of heroic (or in his case villainous) values.¹⁶ Yet perhaps the most interesting single character who relates to the “darkness” of the Dark Age is Bakugo Katsuki, one of the primary deuteragonists and a rival of Midoriya. In many ways Bakugo represents the cynical, violent Dark Age, and through redeeming him the series reinforces its Renaissance positivity. The viewer first meets Bakugo in the initial episode of the anime, as he attends the same school as Midoriya. Able to fire explosions from his palms, Bakugo is certain of his future as a pro-hero and plans to be the number 1 hero so he can be “rich and popular.” In this way, the fiery student represents the cynicism of the Dark Age, which focuses on personal motivations over the generic “do-gooding” of previous Ages. Beyond simply being self-serving, however, Bakugo is a violent bully. He regularly abuses, attacks, and denigrates Midoriya, calling him a “quirkless loser” and threatening to kill him if he even *tries* to apply to UA.¹⁷ Although, to be fair, Bakugo maintains this attitude through all his interactions, and threatens to kill almost

¹³ Sigley, pg 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pg 88.

¹⁵ *My Hero Academia*, season 2, episode 23, “Shoto Todoroki: Origin,” directed by Setsumu Dōkawa, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired June 3, 2017, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

¹⁶ *My Hero Academia*, season 5, episode 111, “Tenko Shimura: Origin,” directed by Takayuki Yamamoto, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired September 11, 2021, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

¹⁷ *My Hero Academia*, episode 1.

everybody, to the point that, when he is trying to motivate his classmates for a performance for the school festival in Season 4, he shouts “Let’s murder everyone at UA with killer music!”¹⁸ At his core, Bakugo is violent and self-centered, closely echoing the cynic “jerk heroes” of the Dark Age such as Guy Gardner or Lobo. As Grant Morrison describes the heroes of this Age:

Villains now had to compete with the heroes for tags like Deathshard or Blood Pack. Image [Comics] superheroes led the howling horde with permanent enameled snarls and pinpoint eyes. Consumed by rage or grief or rage or sometimes grief, they romped across outlandishly nonnaturalistic artistic landscapes, rippling with muscle meat and steroidal attitudes.¹⁹

The comparisons to Bakugo are self-evident. Yet, despite Bakugo’s “Dark” nature, he is still viewed as a hero throughout the series. Although he starts as a bully, and later becomes almost psychopathic in his determination to beat Midoriya after the latter suddenly gains superpowers, the angry young man grows throughout the series. As the show progresses, Bakugo admits that he, like Midoriya, was inspired to become a hero by watching All Might, although he saw the red, white, and blue hero as someone who

“always wins.”²⁰ And despite his brusque, arrogant personality and self-centered goals, Bakugo is shown to be a true hero, just like his idol. When he is captured by the League of Villains in Season 3, they offer him a place of freedom and power if he will join their team and betray the heroes. Spitting his defiance, Bakugo tells them to “Go throw yourself in a lake” and later declares “I’ll never join your League of Bastards.”^{21 22} Although he is rude and violent, Bakugo remains a hero and refuses to throw in with the villains. And his ability as a hero only grows, as he is shown to evolve into a capable leader and tactician in the Season 5 competition with class 1-B (where Bakugo’s team is the only one in the anime to best their foes in a single episode; all the others take two to complete the match).²³ This is an important facet of Bakugo’s character, as it reinforces the reconstructionist nature of the series. Even a jerk like Bakugo can be redeemed and seen as a true hero, and in the same way any Dark Age hero can be read through a Renaissance lens as a valid hero,

²⁰ *My Hero Academia*, season 2, episode 18, “Cavalry Battle Finale,” directed by Setsumu Dōkawa, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired April 19, 2017, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

²¹ *My Hero Academia*, season 3, episode 46, “From Iida to Midoriya,” directed by Setsumu Dōkawa, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired May 26, 2018, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

²² *My Hero Academia*, season 3, episode 47, “All for One,” directed by Yūsuke Kamata, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired June 2, 2018, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

²³ *My Hero Academia*, season 5, episode 97, “Early Bird!,” directed by Tsuyoshi Tobita, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired May 22, 2021, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

¹⁸ *My Hero Academia*, season 4, episode 81, “School Festival,” directed by Setsumu Dōkawa, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired February 15, 2020, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

¹⁹ Morrison, pg 244.

despite their violence and flaws. Even if he is not the “pure” hero like All Might or the prior generations, Bakugo is a hero nonetheless. The Renaissance Age values multiple iterations of the “superhero,” even including the cynical, deconstructionist Dark Age.

The Renaissance Age exists in conversation with the Dark Age, but it also deals with the other Ages that came before it. Most importantly, the period focuses on the idea of the transmission of values. While “legacy” heroes have existed since the Silver Age at least, the passing of identity, power, and the values of being a “hero” are central to the Renaissance Age in a way that they have not been before. The question of how values of past heroes influence future generations is central to the period of reconstruction, as creators and fans alike reflect on and question how they have been influenced by the heroes of their youths. In typical Renaissance fashion, these ideals are subjected to the deconstruction and criticism that marked the Dark Age and are ultimately endorsed as being valuable for all groups, especially those previously underrepresented in superhero narratives.

This transmission is central to *My Hero Academia*, taking place as it does in a school for the next generation of superheroes. Indeed, the central conceit of the show is that All Might passes his quirk, “One for All,” to Midoriya, and serves as a mentor for his journey to superheroism. Moreover, All Might serves as inspiration for the whole world, including many of the students of Class 1-A, as well as numerous professional heroes. He is such an inspiration and bestower of heroic virtue that, as the Symbol

of Peace, his very existence deters crime. And All Might is far from the only hero to inspire his followers. Top pro-heroes Endeavor and Hawks are shown to promote heroic values like determination and defense of the defenseless in their fans and assistants.²⁴ ²⁵ Similarly, Class 1-A student Kirishima Ejiro learns about courage in the face of fear from his hero Chivalric Hero: Crimson Riot.²⁶

The transmission of heroic values is central to the story of *My Hero Academia*, but the series also reiterates this Renaissance concern at the meta-textual level. The passing of power and the role of the Symbol of Peace from All Might to Midoriya has interesting cultural parallels. Alek Sigley notes that All Might is rugged and physically powerful, similar to most American superheroes and other models of fictional masculinity (and when using his power he physically bulks up, similar to Shazam or the Hulk), whereas Midoriya glows and sparks when he uses his power, in a similar vein as Goku from *Dragon Ball* or Naruto from the eponymous series.²⁷ All Might, as a clear indicator of America and

²⁴ *My Hero Academia*, season 4, episode 88, “His Start,” directed by Setsumu Dōkawa, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired April 4, 2020, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

²⁵ *My Hero Academia*, season 5, episode 93, “Operation New Improv Moves,” directed by Tsuyoshi Tobita, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired April 24, 2021, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

²⁶ *My Hero Academia*, season 4, episode 72, “Red Riot,” directed by Shōji Ikeno, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired December 19, 2019, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

²⁷ Sigley, pg 88-90.

the American superhero, passes his power on to Midoriya, who represents Japan.²⁸ In one of the most dramatic moments of the series, All Might spends the last of his heroic reserves to defeat his nemesis All for One. Flooring the villain with an ultimate attack (called “United States of Smash,” just in case anyone forgot who All Might represents), the blond hero shrinks to a shell of his former vigor, then points dramatically at the watching cameras and states “Now, it’s your turn.”²⁹ This scene is not just the Symbol of Peace passing the torch on to his chosen successor, or a powerful hero of the past giving way to the next generation, it is also the American (coded) hero passing his status as Number 1 on to the Japanese successor. In this way the series is not only about the transmission of the “hero” from one generation to the next, but from one culture to another, making it a Renaissance text on the global scale.

It is interesting that one of the best exemplars of an Age of American superhero narratives is Japanese in origin. The comic-book superhero is quintessentially American in origin, and the fact that this status is being passed to another nation and culture is remarkable. Yet as securely as it is placed in the tradition of *shonen* anime/manga, *My Hero Academia* still builds on the world of American superheroes, borrowing elements from Superman and Captain American to make All Might, paying homage to figures like Spider-Man, and basing the entire world

on the premise of X-Men. *MHA* is a hybrid product that combines elements of its native culture with the global figure of the (American) hero in a way that poses it on the cusp of the future. And perhaps that is the message for the future. No matter the troubles that occur, no matter the political division and strife, no matter how dark the “Dark Age” is, the ideals of the hero will not die. The standard of the superhero will be picked up by another generation, or by another nation, and will continue onward into the future. That is the hope of the Renaissance Age. The is the promise of the superhero. And that is why it is worth understanding this Japanese *shonen* manga as a continuation of the evolution of American superheroes.

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²⁸ Ibid, pg 90-91.

²⁹ *My Hero Academia*, season 3, episode 49, “One for All,” directed by Setsumu Dōkawa, written by Kuroda Yōsuke, aired June 16, 2018, <https://www.hulu.com/series/my-hero-academia-b4859a95-39ba-4051-a550-256c42e70a1d>.

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