

**CHILDHOOD DISRUPTED:
MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON'S UNFINISHED
AUTOBIOGRAPHY 'BEFORE THE KNOWLEDGE OF EVIL'**

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As Mary Jean Corbett in *Representing Femininity* (1992), Linda Peterson in *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography* (1999) and David Amigoni in *Life Writing and Victorian Culture* (2006) have all noted, Victorian women could write about their lives in several ways: autobiographies, diaries, letters, journals, memoirs and disguised within their fiction. Braddon utilised several of these options, including diaries between the years 1880–1914 and an autobiographical account of her childhood that she tellingly entitled 'Before the Knowledge of Evil' (Reel 1).¹ She began writing this account in 1914, but after one hundred and eighty-five pages of typescript she had only reached the age of nine; presumably she was going to continue to write her entire life history, but she died before its completion. Autobiographies can be used in several ways, and Braddon's account will be discussed as an example of Victorian women's autobiography of childhood; as a snapshot of history in the 1830–40s; as an exploration of the inner psychology of a child; as revealing Braddon's nostalgia for a time past; and finally to explore how she makes a case for a child's right to have a childhood.

Throughout the nineteenth century, 'the child' was established as a separate entity in society and 'childhood' became a rite of passage in the process of ageing. The separation of children and adults occurred through laws that protected young children from hard labour; Lionel Rose's *The Erosion of Childhood* (1991) documents the developing legislation for factories and mines in relation to child workers and their health and education (8–18). Furthermore, many charities protected children who were left vulnerable after being orphaned, becoming homeless or being mistreated by their families. For instance, Dr Barnardo established his first children's home in 1867 (Prochaska 395), and in 1889, when the English and Irish societies amalgamated to form the NSPCC, the Prevention of the Cruelty to Children Act was founded (Rose 238). Each of these laws and charities recognised a child's right to childhood and children were consequently established as a subsection of society in their own right; Victorian society began to believe that 'all children...were entitled to enjoyment of the experiences of what constituted a "proper childhood"' (Cunningham 1). These laws and

charities mostly affected children from the lower and working classes, rather than middle or upper classes; therefore, the distinction between classes was a continuing factor that impacted how childhood was experienced and subsequently represented in literature. This is particularly noteworthy for Braddon as she was born into the middle class (her father was a solicitor), but after her mother and father separated she slipped down the social ladder. Her childhood reflections can therefore be viewed as a case study of a lower-middle class family and their views towards children's education and work.

With regard to Braddon's autobiography, her intentions are unknown. Throughout her later life as an actress, writer and editor she had tried to maintain her personal privacy; she refused many interviews (only allowing four, which were conducted by personal friends),² and she did not give photographs of herself as gifts, as was common practice at the time (Carnell 11). It seems unusual, then, that she would, at the end of her life, begin a detailed account that so strongly focused on her personal self, rather than her public personae. This change could be because her life consisted of many controversies and misunderstandings, and so she felt the need to clarify her life and reveal her version of events now that she was in a secure position with no monetary or literary pressures. Laurel Brake lends credence to this argument in her study of obituaries when she postulates that autobiographies are written in order to avoid 'the messy scramble at the point of death to control the media and avert scandal, fix representation, and to suppress, repress and displace available meanings' (167). Braddon's biographers, Robert Lee Wolff and Jennifer Carnell, have both surmised that she had subtly referenced her life within her fiction before this time³ but, at this later stage of her life, she could now set the record straight by explaining her life outright: no regrets, no characters, no metaphors, no hiding.⁴

Nevertheless, this argument reduces Braddon's autobiography to a mere justification of her sensational lifestyle and literature, which severely limits the complexities of the piece. It was usual for women writing between 1850 and 1920 to assure readers of their womanliness, which resulted in apologies, disclaimers, and words of self-deprecation (Winston 94); however, Braddon does not conform to this tradition because she does not disclose her reasons for writing her autobiography. This implies that if she intended to publish this account, she felt no need to apologise for her life, or that she was more self-assured than her sister writers. Alternatively, if Braddon wrote her autobiography for herself, to regain her lost youth, reminisce about times past and escape from the present, then she would not need to include these words of self-deprecation because it was composed for her own benefit. To complicate

this debate, Braddon could have written this account for her family despite there being no dedication; she may have wished her children to understand her life, or simply be passing on family memories to future generations for their amusement.

The people, experiences and emotions Braddon reveals in her life writing support these last possibilities because they are closely focused on in her family account. Braddon's autobiography depicts many traditional aspects of childhood, such as family relationships, education and the activities children played. Based on the different traditions of memoirs outlined by Peterson, Braddon's autobiography fits within family memoirs, rather than spiritual autobiography or an account of artists' lives in the form of *chroniques scandaleuses* (4). Peterson notes that '[t]he critical responses and rhetorical choices of Victorian editors allow us to sense the immense pressure on women to make their life writing domestic, their self-conceptions relational' (25). Thus Braddon's focus on her family could result from external pressure rather than her own desire to reveal her personal life. Again, this argument is quite limiting. A far cry from her earlier, fast-paced, plot-driven sensation fiction days, the autobiography is leisurely and contains several tangents. She discusses the different houses she lived in, the children she played with, the family she visited and who visited her, and the many trips she enjoyed, such as Chiswick Fair, the British Museum and the sailing Regatta. Several sentences are extremely long with many sub-clauses, her paragraphing is not always sound and she has no chapter breaks, suggesting that she spoke her autobiography aloud, reminiscing while someone else wrote it down (her handwritten amendments annotate the typescript indicating that she edited the document). The autobiography's meandering and dreamy pace suggests that Braddon enjoyed recounting her childhood; as Gabrielle Malcolm notes, Braddon's narrative has a stream-of-consciousness style that allows the reader to gently drift with the narrative (130). Furthermore, at the end of the nineteenth century there was a growth in girlhood autobiography, which was subsequently categorised as a genre in its own right. This newly-formed literary field included Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The One I Knew the Best of All* (1893) and Edith Nesbit's 'My School Days' (1896–97), and so Braddon could have been tapping into an emerging form of literature, as her literary career shows that she stayed up-to-date with recent innovations.

The specific date of her composition, 1914, is also important because it marks a turning point in Britain's history; the country had moved on from Victoria's 'Golden Age', through Edward VII's and on to George V's reign. By incorrectly dating her own birth year to 1837, 'the year of Queen Victoria's accession' (2), rather than 1835, Braddon

aligns her childhood with Victoria's early sovereignty. At the same time, she is writing during the emerging Modernist era that challenged the conventions of the past, encapsulating the evolving status of the child in society. Her account was also composed in a post-Freudian society, and the emerging psychoanalytic theories on the sexual manifestations of childhood had a major impact on how childhood was viewed at the beginning of the twentieth century (Freud 51). Furthermore, it was also pre-World War One, thus Britain as a nation was just about to change dramatically.

The country lost its innocence in 1914, and Braddon may have broken off her girlhood reflections because of this; the slowness and purity of the childhood that she experienced was destroyed. For instance, Braddon detailed how it was

strange to have such a memory of endless seeming days and nights, of people and events, of new frocks and new shoes, and of little treats and little troubles. Winter and summer, sunshine and rain, fog and snow, the Soho Bazaar, and Newport Market, the cows in St. James's Park, all experienced not one once, but again and again, to satiety. (5)

The repetitiveness of a childhood with no worries, new clothes and frequent outings was lost for the next generation. Thus, the rapidly declining security of her present day, intertwined with her romantic nostalgia for the past, supports the idea that Braddon was attempting to return to an earlier, happier and more stable time; she was trying to recapture her childhood and the country's innocence. This is confirmed by her contrasting the London she knew as a child to the London of 1914: 'Certainly looking back at the quiet streets I love that old London now, because it is so different from the crowded, tumultuous, noisy, and perilous London I see today' (12). This interpretation also suggests several readings of the title 'Before the Knowledge of Evil'. Wolff has suggested that the title corresponds to Eve's knowledge gained in the Garden of Eden with the introduction of Braddon's sinful father into her idyllic relationship with her mother (24). It could also relate to the knowledge of the world as reflected in her sensation fiction, which was criticised for 'making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room' (Rae 204). Moreover, when one considers the timing of her writing, it could also reflect the arrival of World War One and the pain and suffering that was consequently brought into the world.

Within her autobiography, Braddon dedicated a substantial amount of time to describing each of her childhood impressions of her family members; a typical aspect of Victorian women's autobiography. Braddon describes her father as

an agreeable gentleman in spotless linen...who was associated with brown paper bags of winter fruit.... I liked Papa, he was always kind... [but] Papa was nobody's enemy but his own. That was what I heard about Papa when I was old enough to be told things... [he] would give his last five pound note to a hard-up friend although he had to leave his clerks without wages on Saturday, and to leave his wife to tell them their employer had gone out of town and would not be home till Monday. (23–25)

Her father entering from outside with 'winter fruits' is a stereotypical image that depicts the hierarchies of the Victorian family in the 1830–40s: the father is associated with the outside world, work and exotic food, while the rest of the family remain indoors. However, Braddon's description is more complex than this. Her mixed account of her father reveals Braddon, as a child, working through the difficulties of life: she 'liked Papa' but was told that he was not a reliable businessman, husband or father. She repeats adult conversations and phrases ('Papa was nobody's enemy but his own'), much as Maisie does in Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* (1897),⁵ incorporating them into her own idea of who her father is. Braddon employs her inner child's psychological viewpoint to revert back to her own confused or unaware state, calling into question whether or not her childhood beliefs were her own. It was only later in life (after her mother had died) that she discovered the reason for her parents' separation (her father's infidelities), so her childhood account emphasises the lack of understanding children have about adult life.

In contrast to her father, who is mostly sidelined in her autobiography, Braddon describes her mother as a parent who had

what is called a quick temper, but as it was neither a sullen nor a sour temper it had never made her a less lovable creature than Heaven meant her to be...her generosity, her candour, her unselfishness and utter absence of vanity or self-esteem, mean thoughts or

envy, made up a character that I have rarely seen surpassed for sweetness and charm. (145)

Braddon's depiction of her mother is in keeping with the protective and cautious persona that she notes in her letters, and was also revealed by her mother chaperoning her while she was an actress to maintain their propriety. Braddon's childhood reflections continue to centre on her relationship with her mother as the most important development in her early life. Malcolm argues that her autobiography 'reads as a tribute to her mother, and Fanny Braddon comes across as the heroine of the piece' (131), conforming to the presentation of the Victorian mother as the 'angel in the house'.

In addition to her parental descriptions, Braddon states:

Among the events that mark the progress of my third and fourth years I remember the arrival of my sister from Cornwall.... Maggie was kind, and I accepted her as a sister, but she was horribly grown up, fifteen at least, and I had no use for her. (17)

Braddon's reference to the emotional distance between the sisters provides an insight into adult psychology: sibling rivalries and childhood events have a lasting impact upon children. This statement also reveals children's inner egocentric personalities—the world centres around them ('I had no use for her'). Braddon's brother, Edward, was closer to her in age, so their relationship did not suffer this same problem, although this can also be attributed to their gender difference. Braddon notes:

It was always happiness for me to have my brother, who was nearer and dearer than my sister...everybody else admired him tremendously, and I, perhaps, most of all. To be with him was the highest privilege. I was allowed to have my cot next to his bed one night, and he told me a story. (39)

These two descriptions present contrasting views of sibling relationships—one close and one distant—reflecting the two approaches to childhood autobiography as outlined by LuAnn Walther. The first type is motivated by 'the need to emphasize childhood adversity, to portray oneself as not having been spoilt by overindulgence' (69), and this relates to Braddon's estranged relationship with her sister because she was not 'overindulg[ed]' as the youngest child. Walther's second

approach is having ‘the desire to present childhood as an Edenic, blissful state, a time of past blessedness’ (69), and is represented by her loving memories of her brother’s special treatment of her, possibly because he is connected with family holidays. Thus, Braddon does not conform to either of these stereotyped approaches to childhood autobiography; instead, she represents her difficult and unusual childhood as one encompassing both good and bad elements—a balanced consideration in keeping with the tone of someone looking backwards. Neither Edenic nor altogether unpleasant, Braddon manages not to frame her childhood in either category, instead offering a dual perspective that marries the desire to idealise childhood with the concerns of adulthood.

This dual perspective of the child subject and the adult writer is also depicted in Dickens’ semi-autobiographical novel *David Copperfield* (1850), when Copperfield states: ‘[t]his was the state of matters, on the afternoon of, what *I* may be excused for calling, that eventful and important Friday [the Friday I was born]’ (3). The adoption of a dual perspective here is significant, because Braddon was strongly influenced by this novel. As Malcolm postulates:

Dickens’ portrayal of a pattern of childhood experiences in his opening chapters is the *template* for Braddon in 1914. By drawing direct comparisons and mapping her true experiences against David Copperfield’s fictional ones, she is claiming her own early Victorian childhood as her greatest influence. (129; emphasis added)

Braddon’s identification with a fictional male child demonstrates that she internalised the books that she read, which in turn influenced her own sense of self and her subsequent writing. Malcolm further stipulates that Braddon’s childhood upbringing also informs her later Romantic, picaresque novels. Instead, I argue that Braddon’s representation of her childhood echoes her realistic portrayal of children in her fiction for children and adults, such as in *The Christmas Hirelings* (1893), as she emphasises their sense of loss, anger and confusion. This outlook confirms Braddon’s own view that childhood is an important part of a person’s development, thus she makes a case for a child’s right to have a happy and secure upbringing.⁶

As her autobiography reveals, Braddon’s endless reading of books,⁷ alongside her association with fictional characters and emotionally distant relationship with her sister, presents Braddon as a child who was isolated for most of her early years. Braddon was born seven years after

her brother, and eleven years after her sister, meaning they were respectively at preparatory school and living with other relatives while she was growing up (15). As a result of this, she describes herself as ‘a solitary child’ (58, 86), and even as ‘an only child’ (68), although having no playfellows did not make her ‘unhappy’ (15). As Valerie Sanders has argued:

If we were to identify one single theme that unites all the major autobiographical texts, including novels, written by women in the nineteenth century, it would be consciousness of solitude. (69)

Braddon’s loneliness is emphasised by her continuing references to the ‘endless seeming days and nights’ of her childhood (5), as well as the ‘boredom’ (33), ‘vexation’ (6), and the ‘inexpressible melancholy—the vague sadness of a child who does not know what sorrow means, and yet is sad’ (7), caused by her lack of friends: ‘I had plenty of dolls, but no small companions, nor any cat or dog to adore and torment after the childish fashion’ (10). ‘Consciousness of solitude’ may be the theme that unites women’s autobiography, but boys also felt this isolation, as John Ruskin noted:

The law was, that I should find my own amusement. No toys of any kind were at first allowed... [and so I] could pass my days contentedly in tracing the squares and comparing the colours of my carpet;—examining the knots in the wood of the floor, or counting the bricks in the opposite houses. (11–12)

These descriptions of the slow progress and boredom of childhood demonstrate children’s lack of understanding about time, and their lack of control over their own lives because they are subject to the wishes of their parents.

Braddon further describes misunderstandings of her feelings of isolation during her first experience of the theatre:

I was taken there to see some performance of dogs and monkeys, with mamma, my godfather, and Mrs. Allen. At the music of the band, and the beat of the drums, and the lights and wonder of it all, my first theatre was too much for me, and I burst out crying, whereupon Mamma thought I was frightened and I was handed

over to Mrs. Allen, to be taken home, ignominiously hustled out of that wonderful place to walk through the lamp lit streets with my nurse. (18)

Braddon's contemporary, Anna Jameson, writes that a child 'can give no account of that inward, busy, perpetual activity of the growing faculties and feelings which it is of so much importance that we [as adults] should know' (117). Thus, Braddon's inability to explain her emotional outburst as excitement rather than fear, as her mother assumes, reveals another reason for a child's inner sense of solitude: adults cannot fully understand children because they (now) have an imperfect comprehension of what it is like to be a child.

As Sanders further postulates, this sense of isolation leads many nineteenth-century women autobiographers to 'recall...having lived a dual life in their childhood and adolescence, preserving the imagination or ambitious daydream world from the knowledge of sceptical adults' (58). This split of the self is illustrated in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's fictionalisation of her childhood, *Aurora Leigh* (1856), where Aurora outwardly conforms to her aunt's constraints while inwardly constructing a separate world in her mind:

I kept the life, thrust on me, on the outside
Of the inner life, with all its ample room
For heart and lungs, for will and intellect,
Inviolable by conventions. (1.477–80)

Braddon's autobiography demonstrates this split self when she notes that 'I was always silent about things that interested me profoundly—silent even with my mother' (85). By not even revealing to her closest companion what she found 'profound', Braddon demonstrates that, from an early age, Victorian women writers learnt the necessity of separating their private and public lives. Nevertheless, in his autobiography *Father and Son* (1907), Edmund Gosse notes he too 'found a companion and confidant in myself.... There were two of us, and we could talk with one another' (33). Gosse's statement reveals that this split between inner and outer selves during childhood is not gender specific; all children realise that what they are told by their elders and what they discover for themselves can be two contrasting opinions or facts, and so they learn to hide what they know. In relation to Gosse's split self, Howard Helsing notes that '[t]he rest of his childhood is dedicated to the preservation of that secret self' in order to maintain his individuality (58), while Braddon not only preserved her childhood split self, but developed

multiple personae later on in life (Mary Seyton, M. E. Braddon, Mary Maxwell, Babington White and Aunt Belinda), so that as a literary celebrity she could remain hidden from public view.⁸

The distance between adulthood and childhood emphasises one of the main problems with autobiography: memory and its destabilisation. Despite Braddon's repeated assertion 'I remember' (6, 27, 94, 165), she alludes to this problem through the misunderstandings and memory lapses she had while writing her autobiography; for instance, she writes '[a]t this distance in time I cannot be sure' (122). She also makes reference to herself retrospectively filling in the gaps of her narrative when she reminisces 'but I can imagine now' (98). 'Before the Knowledge of Evil', therefore, replicates the process of memory, destabilising her sense of self within the narrative, as well as making the reader question her narrative's truthfulness and reliability. This is compounded by her passive use of 'I remember' in sentences such as 'I can remember nothing in the room that interested me' (7–8) and 'I seem to remember' (71, 93), as well as her using other people's memories to inform her account—she states: 'I remember them as repeated by my mother and sister, rather than as heard in my seventh year' (62). Charles Darwin also used this technique. Writing to a friend, he stated: 'I have been told that I was much slower in learning than my younger sister Catherine' (16). This echoing of other people's thoughts throughout her autobiography indicates that Braddon's sense of self may be constructed more by members of her family than from her own memory and learning.

Braddon's sense of self is brought forth in her autobiography, though, through the embedded, fleeting references to her older self. Because Braddon did not document her adult life, these allusions to her older self are worth exploring, especially because she discloses intimate details about parts of her life that she had, before now, tried to suppress. After a detailed account of her uncle and his relationship with her when she was a child, Braddon reveals that

thirty years after when I had a fever and was delirious—one of my dreams was of my Uncle William coming home, and of our going to meet him as he came up some long narrow passage out of the ship. That long dark passage was the way from a better world, for he had been dead many years when I dreamt that dream. (129)

Braddon's mention of the 'fever' that made her 'delirious' refers to her attack of puerperal fever from 1868–70, which occurred after the deaths of both her sister and her mother (she also gave birth to her daughter Rosie in this period). At the time her partner and publisher, John Maxwell, covered up this illness by finding another author to finish the novel Braddon was writing. Now, however, Braddon describes this part of her life openly as she no longer needs to hide behind her pseudonym to maintain a high volume of publications to support her family, indicating that her autobiography gave her an outlet with which to express herself as she saw fit.

Sanders proposes that,

autobiography must do more than report; it must explore the meaning of a person's life, and interpret it, so that both the writer and reader are enlightened by the study of an individual's growth to philosophical, as well as physical maturity. (4)

While it is difficult to arrive at this interpretation due to the unfinished nature of the work, the 'maturity' Braddon found through her autobiography at this later stage of her life is the (re)conceptualisation of herself through her inner child's psychology. Braddon may have been writing her autobiography for many different reasons: as a memoir for herself and her children; as a means of breaking into a new genre; as a justification for her earlier sensational writing and to publically defend her reputation by shaping and controlling her self-image; or to cement her popularity and construct her legacy her future readers. But, more importantly, her autobiography prioritises and defends a child's right to a childhood like the idyllic and peaceful one she had. As an avid fundraiser for children's charities and an author of children's literature, Braddon presents childhood as a formative period that should be kept sacred. Nevertheless, Braddon's narrative of nostalgia for a time past was just on the cusp of a radical social change, and so her childhood autobiography ultimately serves as a snapshot of history of the 1830–40s, a time of peace that the reader shall never be able to reclaim.

NOTES

¹ 'Before the Knowledge of Evil' is a typed manuscript with numbered pages. All page numbers reference the version housed in the Harry Ransom Centre, Austin, Texas.

² The interviews she gave were to Edmund Yates—‘Miss M. E. Braddon (Mrs. Maxwell) at Richmond’ (1877); Joseph Hatton—‘Miss Braddon at Home. A Sketch and an Interview’ (1887); Mary Angela Dickens—‘Miss Braddon at Home’ (1897); and Clive Holland—‘Fifty Years of Novel Writing. Miss Braddon at Home. A Chat with the *Doyenne* of English Novelists’ (1911).

³ For example, Carnell notes that Braddon’s father’s dishonesty and disreputable behaviour ‘set a pattern’ for the fathers in her fiction (5), that the early years of her life as outlined in her autobiography are to be found represented in her novels *The Story of Barbara* (1880) and *A Lost Eden* (1904) (8–9), and that her eight years as an actress were utilised in many of her stories that detail the lives of those in the theatrical profession (11–86).

⁴ Some details are incorrect, like her birth date and the name of the road she lived on as a child, but these mistakes are few.

⁵ In James’ *What Maisie Knew*, Maisie’s parents’ divorce leads to her living with each parent for six months of the year. Maisie listens to what each parent says of the other, picking up their cruel jibes, colloquial phrases and name-calling, and repeats them to the other parent. The narrator notes that ‘it was astonishing how many [words] she gathered in’ (63).

⁶ Braddon was actively involved in many charitable children’s organisations in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. William Babington Maxwell, her son, notes: ‘[w]ith the wide publicity afforded by *Truth* my mother started the very first of the funds for giving country holidays to poor children. Known as “Mrs. Maxwell’s Holiday Fund”, it grew rapidly. And when my mother handed the management over to Lady St. Helier its growth was well maintained’ (138). Braddon’s own diaries for the years 1894–1911 also have entries referencing the children’s charitable work that she undertook. For instance, on 20 January 1894 she writes: ‘Children’s Tea at Reading Room—58 Children’ (‘Diaries’ Reels 7–10).

⁷ The books that Braddon read as a child as referenced in her autobiography are: fairy tales such as ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ (3), ‘Cinderella’ (117) and ‘Beauty and the Beast’ (144); ‘Berquin and his enchanting stories’ (144); *Aesop’s Fables* (170); Bryon’s poems, specifically ‘The Bride of Abydos’ (29); the poet Moore (29); Psalms and the Gospel of St. John (34, 84); Dr. Wett’s milder hymns (84); a book about a little girl going for walks (37); ‘a small flat quarto’ of English kings and Queens (45); a book of ‘English History’ (80); Pinnock’s ‘history, English, Roman, and Grecian’ text (144); Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (130); a book of ‘common

things, the business of everyday life, metals and glass' (81); 'little bits of grammar and little bits of geography, in fat little books' (138); Walter Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather*, *Kenilworth* and *The Betrothed* (144, 169, 170); Shakespeare's *King John* and *Romeo and Juliet* (147); Maria Edgeworth's *The Parent's Assistant* (169); Amy Robsart (169); Charles and Mary Lamb's *Mrs. Leicester's School* (169); 'Belzoni's Egyptian explorations' (170); Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (170); Johann David Wyss' *Swiss Family Robinson* (170); and Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Sketches by Boz* (171).

⁸ See Colleen Denney's *Women, Portraiture and the Crisis of Identity in Victorian England: My Lady Scandalous Reconsidered* (2009) and Beth Palmer's *Women's Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies* (2011) for analysis of Braddon's later split selves and their relation to her literary career and private life.

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