

## SHAKESPEARE'S WHITE OTHERS

Examining the racially white “others” whom Shakespeare creates in characters like Richard III, Hamlet, and Tamora – figures who are never quite “white enough” – this bold and compelling work emphasizes how such classification perpetuates anti-Blackness and reaffirms white supremacy. David Sterling Brown offers nothing less here than a wholesale deconstruction of whiteness in Shakespeare’s plays, arguing that the “white other” was a racialized category already in formation during the Elizabethan era – and also one to which Shakespeare was himself a crucial contributor. In exploring Shakespeare’s determinative role – and strategic investment in identity politics (while drawing powerfully on his own life experiences, including adolescence), Brown argues that even as Shakespearean theatrical texts functioned as engines of white identity formation, they expose the illusion of white racial solidarity. This essential contribution to Shakespeare studies, critical whiteness studies, and critical race studies is an authoritative, urgent dismantling of dramatized racial profiling.

**David Sterling Brown** is Associate Professor of English at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, and a member of the Curatorial Team for The Racial Imaginary Institute, founded by Claudia Rankine. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including a Mellon/ACLS Scholars and Society fellowship and the Shakespeare Association of America’s Publics Award. Additionally, he is an Executive Board member of the Race Before Race conference series and he serves as dramaturg for the Untitled Othello Project, an ensemble that is reconceptualizing how theater practitioners engage with Shakespeare’s work. His research, teaching, and public speaking interests include African American literature, drama, mental health, gender, performance, sexuality, and the family. [www.DavidSterlingBrown.com](http://www.DavidSterlingBrown.com)

“Brown’s much needed study powerfully and persuasively demonstrates how the policing of whiteness within Shakespeare’s plays recruits and reproduces anti-Blackness at the heart of early modern English culture.”

– Patricia Ahkimie, Director, Folger Institute, Folger Shakespeare Library

“*Shakespeare’s White Others* is stunning in its readings of plays from *Macbeth* to *The Comedy of Errors* with respect to the ‘intra-racial color line’ and in the connections it makes to the deadly serious issue of racism. After Brown’s book, no analysis of *any* of Shakespeare’s plays will be able to efface race as a category of analysis.”

– Bernadette Andrea, Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies,  
University of California, Santa Barbara, and 2022–23  
President of the Shakespeare Association of America

“David Sterling Brown’s precise scholarship is infused with unapologizing emotion – emotion, *and* scholarship, both rooted as they are in his Black humanity. Brown’s articulate and adamant voice is the sound of indomitability shouting through the subterfuge.”

– Keith Hamilton Cobb, actor and playwright, *American Moor*

“A remarkable work of scholarship by David Sterling Brown, *Shakespeare’s White Others* is an in-depth examination of intra-racial dynamics in Shakespeare’s work that brilliantly articulates – and offers meaningful correctives to – historical practices. Dr. Brown audaciously illuminates the theatrical possibilities that emerge from a nuanced exploration of Shakespeare’s infinite variety.”

– Simon Godwin, Artistic Director, Shakespeare Theatre Company,  
Washington, DC

“With *Shakespeare’s White Others*, David Sterling Brown engages racial whiteness and provokes interdisciplinary dialogue through his rhetorically accessible ‘critical–personal–experiential’ style. The book’s unexpected final words, documenting Brown’s own racial profiling experience, anticipate the depths of this brilliantly bold Shakespearean discourse that seamlessly blends genres while reimagining the scholarly monograph mode.”

– Claudia Rankine

“Maintaining that tensions between white characters are themselves racial conflicts, this paradigm-changing book establishes that *all* of Shakespeare’s plays are about race. Rather than understand early modern race in binary terms, *Shakespeare’s White Others* attends to the intra-racial color line to reveal that whiteness is not an inalienable property, but rather an unstable commodity that is policed and confiscated through the deployment of anti-Black racism and white supremacy.”

– Melissa E. Sanchez, Donald T. Regan Professor of English and  
Comparative Literature, University of Pennsylvania

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“Premodern critical race studies is the most significant call to action for all Shakespeareans right now. David Sterling Brown’s intervention is timely, unflinching, and provocative. It advances the field by bringing forward the figure of the white other, and draws together critical, personal, and experiential modes of reading.”

– Emma Smith, Professor of Shakespeare Studies, University of Oxford

“David Sterling Brown takes us into the racial impact of an individual regarded by many as the greatest writer in the English language, presenting us with an outstanding contribution to understanding the logic of whiteness. This work is essential and insightful reading for those interested in the invention of racism in modern literature, and more generally in modern society.”

– Tukufu Zuberi, Lasry Family Professor of Race Relations, University of Pennsylvania

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OTHERS

*David Sterling Brown*

TRINITY COLLEGE, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT



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*For my vulnerable teenage self and for all the Black selves like him –  
may you survive, heal, and thrive.*

*For my parents Audreta and Kevin, and for my sister April – and for all  
the dead and the living who wrap me in love, support, prayer, and  
protection daily.*

*In loving memory of the ancestors: Great-great grandma Viola Tate,  
great grandma Essie Jefferies Hollis, great grandma Thelma  
“Big Moma” Leach, great grandma Hattie M. Leslie, Grandma  
Christine Wright, Aunt Patricia Lynn Wright, Granddaddy Forse Lee  
“Joe” Hollis, Uncle Forest Lamar “Slim” Hollis, and all whom I never  
got to know . . . I feel y’all around me.*

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*Preface*  
*“U Better Recognize”: Othering Whiteness*

Within Shakespeare studies and literary studies – and outside of those realms, as in other academic disciplines and within the real world – the white other matters.<sup>1</sup> This figure is a covert tool for maintaining what bell hooks describes in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* as “the dominator imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture.”<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the white other contrasts with idealized hegemonic whiteness; reinforces popular and evolving stereotypes about racial Blackness;<sup>3</sup> and helps reify the imagined superiority of the whiteness defining what early modern scholar Peter Erickson calls “white self-fashioning.”<sup>4</sup> More significantly, the white other indicates how attitudes toward whiteness are mediated through Blackness and black images.<sup>5</sup> Whenever necessary, in order to reinforce the goodness and supremacy of hegemonic whiteness, images of blackness appear as distant or estranged<sup>6</sup> from whiteness through the white other construct. In this book, I argue that such mediation creates racialized boundaries between white people along lines of superiority/inferiority, ingroup/outgroup – familiar social and psychological dichotomies of inclusion and exclusion that generate racialized harm.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, the white other serves as proof that the commodification of Blackness, often exploited as a dehumanized resource, can occur “in a range of everyday locations” and in the subtlest ways.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Origin of Others*, Toni Morrison observes that “one learns Othering not by lecture or instruction but by example.”<sup>9</sup> It is that easy. One learns by example. Morrison adds that “racial identification and exclusion did not begin, or end, with black [people]”;<sup>10</sup> this reality helps make sense of how and why whiteness is itself a nuanced racial category. As philosopher Michel Foucault suggests in *The History of Sexuality*, the value of racial whiteness was determined, and still is determined, through exclusionary processes of Othering that facilitated the differentiation of people along lines of blood and skin color.<sup>11</sup> By design, this kind of white

estrangement occurs at Black people's expense, historically through violence of some kind.<sup>12</sup> In a way, then, one could say that when "[Blackness or blackness] collapses into privileged whiteness" it presumably reduces the latter and thus produces the image or idea of the white other.<sup>13</sup> If it is true that "control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination," then one cannot deny that what audiences receive from Shakespearean drama participates in a racist dynamic that privileges whiteness and devalues Blackness.<sup>14</sup>

Although racially white, the white other can at times, or always, seem foreign and strange in comparison to whatever is deemed "normal."<sup>15</sup> In Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*, for instance, the hero's emblematic blackness, signified by his "inky cloak" and accompanying unmanliness, is disturbing, a stark contrast to his deceased father's celebrated valiant whiteness, which I discuss in Chapter 2 (1.2.77). Shakespeare creates distance between those white people who conform to social expectations and norms and those who do not. In other words, there are white people who register as more legitimate than others, a matter Patricia Akhimié addresses in her article "Fair' Bianca and 'Brown' Kate: Shakespeare and the Mixed-Race Family in José Esquea's *The Taming of the Shrew*."<sup>16</sup> Those people who conform or act as exemplars of hegemonic whiteness are tolerated, and even revered, whereas those who do not conform are shunned, killed, critiqued, expelled, or marginalized. Although quite different than a fictional Black figure like Aaron from *Titus Andronicus*, the white other, who occupies a liminal space between Black and white, helps sustain the racial hierarchy because their whiteness does not conform to the ideal.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the white other's role alleviates the need for a significant inclusion of Black characters in Shakespeare's canon since these racially white figures are strategically designed to embody blackness.

Undeniably, whiteness is a dominating force, *the* dominating force, in the racial hierarchy. By aiding the white superiority narrative, the white other enables racial whiteness to become more noticeable, particularly the positive symbolism of whiteness. I say that because Shakespeare offers correctives to the troubled moments where the dominant culture's standards of whiteness are not upheld: for example, the difference between *Titus'* fair-skinned, virtuous Roman Lavinia and fair-skinned, lascivious Goth Tamora, whom we might consider socially dead because of her barbaric, blackened identity; because of Tamora's sexual association with Aaron, a Black Moor; her "defeated enemy" status; and her "alien culture."<sup>18</sup>

Within Shakespearean drama, one can witness white privilege operating among groups of exclusively white people.<sup>19</sup> Produced through a "white

supremacist orientation,”<sup>20</sup> such harder-to-detect operations of white privilege make the white other a powerful mechanism of white racial, and racist, construction.<sup>21</sup> Occupying a space between whiteness and Blackness, the white other’s presence generates and solidifies anti-Black sentiments. This figure is a literary, and perhaps real, force that transports ideas about white racial superiority, and the metaphorical superiority of whiteness, within a given play’s framework. With respect to anti-Blackness, othering whiteness also exposes what is wrong with promoting notions of colorblindness.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, othering whiteness complements discourse suggesting that colorblindness is harmful in social, cultural, political, pedagogical, and theatrical practice, as Lisa M. Anderson, Ania Loomba, Ayanna Thompson and other critics stress in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*.<sup>23</sup> Shakespeare repeatedly embeds figurative blackness in his white characters, or places blackness on their bodies somehow. Other characters then see this blackness and respond to it accordingly, negatively. They do not deny the presence of blackness because acknowledging it benefits whiteness. The acknowledgment of the white other’s blackness, I posit, induces symptoms of ontological insecurity because these othered white characters destabilize white norms and generate racialized anxiety in the dominant culture.<sup>24</sup> These moments of insecurity call attention to the privileging of whiteness as a dangerous trope. Moments of white privilege, or what Claudia Rankine has suggested we call “white dominance,” do not always register as such, since people are not conditioned to consider this phenomenon from an *intra*racial standpoint.<sup>25</sup> *Shakespeare’s White Others* asks you, dear reader, to do the hard antiracist work.

Regarding racial construction, the white other is generative from a critical standpoint because this figure’s presence challenges the argument that race, as we understand it, is only a modern phenomenon denoting Otherness or non-whiteness.<sup>26</sup> Rather, as Ian Smith explains, “Race, as a worldly thing, not only denotes a complex of institutional, cultural, and intersubjective processes, but also the collective exchanges and deliberations – the dialogues and conversations pursuant to racial literacy whether through reading, scholarship, conference deliberations, classroom learning, or theatrical performance – that envision fully invested participation, mobilization, and change.”<sup>27</sup> By revealing tiers in whiteness, and sometimes through white tears, the white other exposes the intricate workings of white solidarity and complicates white supremacist ideologies. This figure reminds us that even in premodernity not all whiteness was acceptable whiteness, as the plays examined in this book illustrate. Additionally,

tiering whiteness erases the need for focusing exclusively or predominantly on Black characters to understand race or racism or even the powerful impact of white centrality.<sup>28</sup> The white other's presence shows that Shakespeare's plays have a vested interest in negatively critiquing a certain kind of whiteness while simultaneously uplifting hegemonic whiteness. The plays police whiteness. And since attitudes toward that racial category are mediated through blackness in the dramatic literature, it goes without saying that these early modern texts add to the historical policing of Blackness. Such policing occurs outside of the texts, and it occurs *because* of these texts, in Black people's lived realities.

The interconnected race relationships among Shakespeare's plays are united through whiteness. There is not one Shakespeare play that excludes white people. The white other emerges as a figure of symbolic racial difference. The white other is not born, only created or imagined and imaged, thus emphasizing the malleability and mutability of racial boundaries and constructions.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, this figure is a social organizing tool that stabilizes established attitudes toward blackness, normalizing color-based racism and, of course, anti-Blackness.<sup>30</sup> Beyond contributing to developing racist discourse, what has perhaps made this figure a challenge for people to identify is its ability to be an absent presence. Although the white other exists in plain sight, scholars have not yet thoroughly reflected on this figure's role. Therefore, there is room to consider how plays that, on the surface, do not appear committed to perpetuating racism and white supremacy silently do similarly racist work as harmful as that which *Othello* does on and in front of its audience.<sup>31</sup> This harm, in the form of anti-Blackness that intersects with issues such as toxic masculinity, misogyny, sexism, and classism, to name a few, necessitates that antiracist readers, teachers, performers, and activists call out the white other's hazardous presence. This harm necessitates that those who support the cause, those who support antiracism, choose to see and read the white other in its image on the page and on the world's stage. This harm necessitates examination because of its dangerous "ideological intent."<sup>32</sup> Without conscientious interrogation, this kind of harm could one day mean, and be, the death of me.<sup>33</sup> Simply put, the white other is a threat to *our* survival.

### Notes

- 1 In rapper Sam Sneed's 1994 single "U Better Recognize," produced by hip-hop icon Dr. Dre, the phrase "think you better recognize" is repeated throughout. And at one point Sneed raps, "Open your eyes, I think you

- better recognize.” I allude to his lyrics as a way to introduce this book’s call to action for its audience: See, feel, hear . . . use whatever senses you have access to in order to recognize the enduring impact that the Shakespearean white other has had locally and globally as a maintenance tool for (anti-Black) racism and white supremacy. For background and information on Sneed’s song, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U\\_Better\\_Recognize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U_Better_Recognize). The notion of othering whiteness is also addressed in the *Shakespeare Studies* Forum I co-edited with Patricia Akhimié and Arthur L. Little, Jr. See our co-authored Introduction: “Seeking the (In)Visible: Whiteness and Shakespeare Studies,” *Shakespeare Studies* Vol. 50 (September 2022), 17–23. “Whiteness is more than skin color,” as Ian Smith claims. He adds, “It is an ideology that saturates and an epistemology that creates its own fictions and ways of seeing the world and texts.” I expand on this definitional discourse in my Introduction. See Ian Smith, *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 15. Also see Arthur L. Little, Jr., “Is It Possible to Read Shakespeare through Critical White Studies?,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 268–280; 269.
- 2 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015), ix.
  - 3 My usage of capitalized “Black”/“Blackness” (racial, ethnic, cultural sense) and lowercase “black”/“blackness” (referring to color, specifically) follows AP style. See “Explaining AP Style on Black and white” (July 20, 2020), <https://apnews.com/article/9105661462>. When referring to white(ness), I will use adjectives to help readers determine when I am referring to race/skin color or using the term figuratively to denote color symbolism.
  - 4 Peter Erickson, “‘God for Harry, England, and Saint George’: British National Identity and the Emergence of White Self-Fashioning,” in *Early Modern Visual Culture: Representation, Race, Empire in Renaissance England*, eds. Peter Erickson and Clark Hulse (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 322. For an explanation of “self-fashioning” and its “governing conditions” see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 8–9.
  - 5 hooks, *Black Looks*, 1.
  - 6 Paul Gilroy asserts, “Black and White are bonded together by the mechanisms of ‘race’ that estrange them from each other and amputate their common humanity.” See *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 15.
  - 7 See David Sterling Brown, “Don’t Hurt Yourself: (Anti)Racism and White Self-Harm,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (Anti-racism miniseries) (July 6, 2021), [https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/antiracism-in-the-contemporary-university/#\\_ftn2](https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/antiracism-in-the-contemporary-university/#_ftn2).
  - 8 hooks, *Black Looks*, 21–23. See Urvashi Chakravarty, *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 6. As Octave Mannoni argues,

- “Exceptional cases of inferiority occurring in a homogenous community have nothing to do with skin colour, but are due to individual feelings of inferiority of various kinds. As with Europeans, any difference can cause a feeling of inferiority, once certain psychological and sociological conditions are fulfilled.” *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 39. Frantz Fanon also considers the psychological impact of racism and colonization, asserting, for example, that “all colonized people – in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural identity has been committed to the grave – position themselves in relation to the civilizing language. The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness, the whiter he will become.” See *White Skin, Black Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 2–3.
- 9 Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 6.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 21–22; 24.
- 11 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 147–149.
- 12 See Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 81–82.
- 13 Bernadette Andrea, “Black Skin, The Queen’s Masques: Africanist Ambivalence and Feminine Author(ity) in the Masques of Blackness and Beauty,” *English Literary Renaissance* 29.3 (1999), 246–281; 248. Access to the privileges of whiteness can be gained and/or taken away. See Dorothy Roberts, “Race,” in *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, eds. Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, and Jake Silverstein (New York: OneWorld, 2021), 45–61; 48.
- 14 hooks, *Black Looks*, 2.
- 15 Morrison, *The Origin*, 29.
- 16 Patricia Akhimie, “‘Fair’ Bianca and ‘Brown’ Kate: Shakespeare and the Mixed-Race Family in José Esquea’s *The Taming of the Shrew*,” *Journal of American Studies* 54.1 (2020), 89–96, esp. 93–94.
- 17 Little, Jr., “Is It Possible to Read Shakespeare through Critical White Studies?,” 271.
- 18 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 37–38.
- 19 Alice Mikal Craven, *Visible and Invisible Whiteness: American White Supremacy through the Cinematic Lens* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.
- 20 Claudia Rankine, *Just Us: An American Conversation* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2020), 327.
- 21 We see something similar in communities of color with colorism. I suggest that something akin to colorism is going on among the white communities in these plays.

- 22 See Philip A. Mazzocco, *The Psychology of Racial Colorblindness: A Critical Review* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23–25.
- 23 See Ayanna Thompson, ed. *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xiv, 1–2, 89–92. Mazzocco argues “that racial colorblindness is on the whole a socially harmful ideology – a claim consistent with a 1997 report of racial colorblindness issued by the American Psychological Association.” See also Mazzocco, *The Psychology of Racial Colorblindness*, vii. Neil Gotanda questions the “disturbing implications” of colorblindness in “A Critique of ‘Our Constitution Is Color-Blind’,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 257–275; 268.
- 24 See The Racial Imaginary Institute, *On Whiteness* (SPBH Editions, July 2022), 13.
- 25 See Claudia Rankine, “I Wanted to Know What White Men Thought About Their Privilege. So I Asked,” *The New York Times Magazine*, (July 17, 2019), [www.nytimes.com/2019/07/17/magazine/white-men-privilege.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/17/magazine/white-men-privilege.html). From a sociological perspective, Matthew W. Hughey, to whom I defer for a useful definition of whiteness in the Introduction, has explored intraracial dynamics and the symbolic boundaries that can emerge between white people. See *White Bound: Nationalists, Antiracists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 68–69, 74–75.
- 26 Smith, *Black Shakespeare*, 3–4.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 188.
- 28 Since Valerie Traub observed in 2016 that, “despite [the efforts of early modern scholars], the uptake of criticism on race in the broader field of early modern studies has been slow,” significant progress has been made in early modern race studies as scholars tackle whiteness more robustly and regularly in the race conversation. See *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 20. Founded by Ayanna Thompson, and consisting of an Executive Board with leading premodern race studies scholars from different colleges and universities, the Race Before Race conference series and professional network has contributed to the advancement of pre-1800 race studies. For more information, see <https://acmrs.asu.edu/RaceB4Race>.
- 29 Patricia Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 13; Martha R. Mahoney, “The Social Construction of Whiteness,” in *Critical White Studies: Looking behind the Mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 330–333; 330.
- 30 Also outside of this project’s scope is an exclusive focus on people of color. However, I do want to note that if added into the intraracial color-line paradigm, people of color would further expand that racial hierarchy and further distance Black people from white people.

- 31 In a 2019 NPR podcast, “All That Glisters Is Not Gold,” Ayanna Thompson names *Othello* as one of “three toxic plays that resist being progressive texts” (*The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew* are the other two): [www.npr.org/2019/08/21/752850055/all-that-glisters-is-not-gold](http://www.npr.org/2019/08/21/752850055/all-that-glisters-is-not-gold).
- 32 hooks, *Black Looks*, 5.
- 33 See Kimberly Anne Coles, *Bad Humor: Race and Religious Essentialism in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), ix.



## *Acknowledgments*

These acknowledgments start where *Shakespeare's White Others* ends, in South Norwalk, Connecticut. Thus, I begin by offering gratitude to the community that helped shape me. Immense thanks are due to my grandmothers Lenora Hollis and the late Christine Wright, my parents Kevin and Audreta, and my sister April, who poured strength, faith, and love into me so I could finish this book. I appreciate how you lifted me up and held me up when I needed it most.

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