

Making a drama out of a mental health crisis

Emma Williams

Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Correspondence

Emma Williams, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK.

Email: E.Williams.1@warwick.ac.uk

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Abstract

A recent production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Globe Theatre in London has foregrounded the themes of mental health and a sick society. My essay begins by exploring the controversial reception of the 2021 production. But Shakespeare's play has a number of key features that are undecidable, by design. These are directly relevant to the kinds of things we are concerned with when it comes to mental health. Perhaps the critics of the 2021 production are therefore missing a trick ... And are there not lessons for the mental health of young people today to be taken from the fact that romance seems to have withdrawn from the world of this contemporary *Romeo and Juliet*?

KEYWORDS

expression, mental health, romance, *Romeo and Juliet*, theatre, undecidability

DRAMA 2021

Where can a young person go today if they want help with their mental health? A first port of call could be websites of the National Health Service or mental health charities. Handy tricks and tips are available at the click of a button. For more help, schools are soon going to be giving all children lessons in mental health as part of the curriculum. This is designed to increase the range of resources and knowledge available to young people. It is one way of extending support to large numbers of young people, and alleviating pressure on healthcare services.

What about going to the *theatre*? That seems a less usual thing for a young person experiencing problems or distress to do perhaps. But a recent production at the Globe Theatre in London raises it as a possibility in intriguing ways. The Globe, which is a replica of the wooden stage that would have been used for performances in the early 1600s, is putting on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in a production that highlights themes of mental health and a society in crisis. Many young people, especially adolescents, will study *Romeo and Juliet* at some point at school, perhaps in an

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English Literature or Drama class. This production seems designed to speak to this contemporary generation and their concerns.

Critics, however, have been quick to object. A reviewer in *The Guardian* describes the production as 'a hair's breadth from appearing reductive and gimmicky'.¹ Interviewed by the *Daily Express*, a well-known TV and stage actor called the production 'a joke ... [W]hat they are trying to do is insulting to the mentality of theatre-goers'. The same newspaper reports mutterings by audience members leaving the theatre. 'Woke' was one of the terms used to describe it.² Is Shakespearean drama debased when it mixes with such contemporary matters and values? Or are the critics missing a trick?

Plays, like other forms of literature and art, can generate different reactions in their viewers, sometimes polarising ones. The fact of the controversy over the 2021 production of *Romeo and Juliet* reveals broader matters to do with the inherent undecidability and ambiguity within art. What if this very quality of undecidability, of openness of interpretation, were important for thinking about mental health? The production is, at the very least, an example that works on the audience in interesting ways. Let us look at some of its eye-catching aspects.

'VERONA IS SICK'

The 2021 production is one of the first plays to be shown after the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced the closure of theatres (as well as cinemas, museums and other cultural venues). By coincidence, the original performance of *Romeo and Juliet* took place in the Autumn of 1594, after playhouses had just reopened following an outbreak of the plague. The world of *Romeo and Juliet 2021* is in a state of ill-health. 'Verona is sick', the caption for the play reads:

Its structures broken and its citizens in a state of desperation. When a system favours the few, the many are left with nothing but unhealthy choices. Amidst the violence, bloodshed, fear and unrest, two teenagers find unexpected relief in each other. But will love be enough to save them from society's sickness? (The Shakespeare Globe Trust, 2021)

Violence and bloodshed abound. Tybalt and Benvolio spin heavy-duty chain locks around in the air and fight each other with machetes. The production uses gunshot sounds and fake blood to ramp up the realism. In the background, there is the sound of a progressively accelerating drum-beat. The heart races. A little later, at the Capulets' Ball the young people dance and sing karaoke to punk rock tunes. They wear Converse and hoodies, and display colourful tattoos. They drink champagne and take cocaine. Over the central stage door, beneath the Elizabethan balcony, an electronic screen lights up with the lyrics of modern music: 'I bet you look good on the dance-floor...'³

The image of an unhealthy society is projected in some other striking ways throughout the performance too. After the ball, the electronic screen displays sobering messages about mental health. When Romeo pines for Rosaline, the screen shows the message: '20% of teenagers experience depression before they reach adulthood.' During the famous Balcony Scene, it reads: 'Love is a matter of life and death to young people without a secure attachment to a guardian.' When Friar Lawrence marries Romeo and Juliet in secret, the statement 'The rational side of a young person's brain is not fully developed until they are 25' appears. In the last scene, the death of Romeo and Juliet (not the reconciliation of the two households as in the original play), we read that 'Suicide is the leading cause of death for young people under the age of 25.'

At the end of the production, the audience is signposted to mental health supports. One of the actors tells the audience: 'if you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this performance ...', while website addresses and the phone numbers of mental health charities appear on the electric screen. 'Trigger warning', a practice that is growing in the media and commerce, and even in education too, is becoming a familiar means of helping individuals to avoid exposure to content that could incite extreme negative reactions in them. It is more usually something issued before showing extreme graphic content (such as news reports of terrible violence). It is a practice linked to risk-management

and protection against liability (to prevent someone suing a company for exposure to content that has proved damaging to their mental health).

Doesn't the issuing of a trigger warning come across as a bit odd in the context of the *theatre*? Classically, the theatre is seen as a place where people go in order to have their emotions and feelings engaged. Aristotle talked of the catharsis of the theatre: the release and relief from strong feelings through the medium of art. When we go to the theatre, then, *have we not come to be affected?* Perhaps it would have been more apt to say, at the end of the *Romeo and Juliet* production: if you have *not* been affected by the issues raised in the production, you may need help!

It is not always clear where a play begins and ends within a production. The juxtaposition between *what* is said and *where* it is said makes us less clear about where we are with the trigger warning issued at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* 2021. The same could be said of the mental health statements projected on the electric screen. Intentionally or not, the statements hang in the air ... Is this the lesson to take home from the production? Are these the big issues in society? Or are the messages parodying a kind of wisdom ... suggesting, maybe, that the foregrounding of mental health is a symptom of the problem and not the cure it appears to be?

UNDECIDABILITY AND LOVE

Issues of undecidability are matters at the heart of *Romeo and Juliet* itself. As the literary critic Northrop Frye has recognised, *Romeo and Juliet* blurs different genres and is evocative of different feelings and moods, often during the same scene. Frye describes the play as 'a tragedy so full of wit and tenderness ... [H]ere as in most forms of intensive irony, the audience may remain divided in its reactions.' It is a play 'at the most opposite extreme of plays that are mostly nearly uniform in mood' (2016, p. 159). The undecidability extends into the plot of the play in some recognisable ways. Indeed, of all the things known about *Romeo and Juliet*, one of the most familiar features is that it is a play about the unstable conditions and possibilities of love. The dynamics between the characters of Romeo and Juliet show that matters are far from settled.

Take the first exchange of words between Romeo and Juliet (during the Capulets' Ball). Romeo and Juliet enter into a shared speech:

ROMEO: Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET: Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer

ROMEO: O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do.

They pray; grant thou lest faith turn to despair

JULIET: Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake

ROMEO: Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.

(Kisses her)

Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purged

JULIET: Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

ROMEO: Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged!

Give me my sin again.

(They kiss again)

JULIET: You kiss by the book (Act 1, Scene 5)

Classically this is taken as a romantic scene. Fourteen lines lead up to Romeo and Juliet's first kiss. There is a sliding back and forth in their shared speech, which slips into the imagery of sin. The lines create a shared sonnet, which is an idealised poetic form used to write about love. But Juliet's last line is interesting.

Is it an exclamation brought forth by the question of whether her kiss with Romeo lives up to the kinds of images she has of what a kiss should be like? The idea of 'the book' presumably refers here to the romantic stories she has read. This raises some interesting questions about our lives with fictions and images, and the role they play in how we understand and interpret ourselves and the world. It raises interesting thoughts about the way that the narratives and stories we hear and read feed into the way we understand areas of our lives such as romance and falling in love in particular. It prompts us to reflect on how far the story of *Romeo and Juliet*—one of Western culture's 'most famously and endlessly recirculated icons'⁴—itself feeds our images and understandings of romantic love.

But there is another way of reading Juliet's line, 'you kiss by the book'. It could be heard less as an exclamation of pleasure, than an expression of something she has found perplexing, a questioning of what the kiss has revealed to her. Perhaps the kiss was *a little too* perfect? Was it so perfect that it felt *mechanical*? 'The book' here could mean something more like 'the manual'. Juliet could be suggesting that Romeo knows all the right lines; he knows how to spin the story to get what he wants. She could be calling into question the genuineness of his feelings. Is Romeo prone to these intense flurries of romantic feeling that quickly fade once the chase is over? We remember that at the start of the play Romeo was pining for another woman!

Another iconic image of love is offered by the Balcony Scene. But the conversation here, too, is heavily laden with questions of love and genuineness. Take Juliet's response to Romeo's declarations of his feelings and the action he is planning to take:

JULIET: Thou know'st the mask of night is upon my face,
Else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek
For that which thou hast heard me speak tonight.
Fain would I dwell on form. Fain, fain deny
What I have spoke. But farewell compliment!
Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say 'ay'
And I will take thy word. Yet if thou swear'st
Thou may prove false. At lovers' perjuries,
They say, Jove laughs. O gentle Romeo,
If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully
Or if thou think'est I am too quickly won,
I'll frown and be perverse and say thee nay,
So thou wilt woo. But else, not for the world.
In truth, fair Montague, I am too fond,
And therefore thou mayst think my 'havior light
But trust me, gentleman, I'll prove more true
Than those that have more coying to be strange.
I should have been more strange, I must confess,
But that thou overhead'est, ere I was 'ware,
My true-love passion. Therefore pardon me,
And not impute this yielding to light love,
Which the dark night hath so discovered. (Act 2, Scene 2)

The questions Juliet is asking about Romeo's feelings after their first kiss seem to extend through this scene. Juliet asks Romeo directly 'Dost thou love me?' but then talks herself out of the question. She seems to realise that however Romeo answers, the words will be insecure ('if thou swear'st/Thou may prove false'). The speech also shows Juliet struggling with the way she herself is being recognised and understood by Romeo. She seems aware that her expressions and actions may betray her and lead Romeo to think of her in ways she would not like or want.

Juliet starts her speech with the line 'the mask of night is upon my face'. Is this an expression of relief for the dark lighting, so Romeo cannot see her face blushing at her embarrassment that he has heard her private thoughts? (The Balcony Scene begins with Romeo secretly listening in to Juliet as she is talking to herself.) But we can also read the line another way: perhaps she feels she got carried away with the moment at the ball ... or has been carried away now in this romantic secluded setting? In the morning, she may feel differently. Was her (so she thought) secret speech more a matter of testing things out to see how they would sound? We wonder: how clearly does Juliet know her own mind and feelings at this point? Perhaps Juliet is also struggling to recognise herself. The soliloquy form is itself unstable.

The questions being raised here are not matters that could simply be resolved. Resolving them is not the point, and it is not why they are interesting. The point is that the play reveals to us something of the position we are in in relation to love. If we follow these thoughts a little further, we will find that these predicaments are widespread in our lives in language.

FAILURES OF EXPRESSION

Does what I have just said imply that there is no 'right' (as in correct) way of reading the lines of the play? But surely, again, there *must* be an answer, an interpretation that is correct? Likewise, Juliet's predicament, such as it is, could just be a matter of her not having knowledge of something that would settle things either way. To think in this way is to take it that there is a truth of the matter about Romeo's feelings. It is just (as it happens) that Juliet cannot see it. It is hidden from her. Admittedly this seems a big problem, because we cannot see into another person's mind. But if we could, we would know how things stand.

But the nature of theatre complicates, or at least interrupts, the momentum of this way of thinking. Of course, the person craving 'the answer' may go on to say that, when we are talking about Juliet, we are talking about an *actress playing Juliet*. As we are when we refer to Romeo. So which minds are we suggesting we/Juliet needs to see into? It will be helpful here not just to dismiss the objection but to show how it misses the point. We need to see how certain objections go the wrong way. For the point is not that in the theatre we are in an unusual position in relation to matters of appearance and reality. The point is that the theatre is staging, showing, how things are for us more generally: 'all the world's a stage.'

The classical formulation of the problem of other minds (also known as other-minds scepticism) in philosophy is provided by René Descartes in his *Meditations*. In the history of philosophy, the issue has largely been interpreted as an intellectual problem to be addressed by the branch of philosophy known as epistemology (the theory of knowledge). But writing in the late 20th century, the philosopher Stanley Cavell drew attention to a different way of understanding the problem and what it reveals. For Cavell, scepticism over other minds can be seen not as an intellectual problem I need to solve so much as an expression of the position we are always in, as human beings. The vital step we need to take to make sense of Cavell's reading is that of shedding the illusionary beliefs (established by philosophy, no less!) that we have an 'inner' life of thoughts and feelings that is separated off from and distinct from 'outer' expressions. On this reading of the inner and the outer, the inner is sacrosanct, immediately evident to us and the outer is merely the external clothing. Why is this an illusion? Because for Cavell (as well as for other philosophers who have followed the 'linguistic turn'), it is out of language that our thoughts and our world become possible in the first place. Words lead the way in how we think and our relations to others, and words are matters that are public, shared, open to recirculation. It is within language and expression that we must seek understanding of ourselves and others. Hence, 'our working knowledge of one another's (inner) lives can reach no further than our (outward) expression' (1979, p. 341).

Jacques Derrida's thinking on the instability of language connects well with Cavell's ideas. Derrida's work, in particular, draws attention to the way that language works through the repeatability of words, their inevitable availability to others, and their capacity to be put to use in new contexts. Derrida, like Cavell, is alert to the precarious position our language puts us in in our lives. As Derrida would put it, the openness to reuse that characterises language is at once what makes meaning possible (you couldn't have language if it was not shared and public), and what makes meaning something that is always beyond my own control. Language can fail me in ways I do not anticipate or expect. Derrida links language to the notion of the *pharmakon*.⁵ The *pharmakon* is a concept widely used in Ancient Greek culture, and it means something like the word 'drug' in English. The point about the *pharmakon* is that it has the characteristics of being beneficent or maleficent, alternatively or simultaneously. Language is like this because the reusability of language broaches and breeches meaning. Interestingly, or tellingly, the idea of the *pharmakon* is invoked in *Romeo and Juliet* too. Friar Lawrence uses it in relation to the herbs that are to be used in the faking of Juliet's death: 'within the infant rind of this weak flower/Poison hath residence and medicine power' (Act 2 Scene 3).

The undecidability of our words, and the precarious position it puts us in with respect to ourselves and others, cannot be extracted from language without us destroying something of what language is. That is, it cannot be extracted without the range of possibilities of human expression and relationships ceasing to be what they are. While these philosophical ideas may seem like heady thoughts, read in the context of what happens in *Romeo and Juliet*, we can see how these predicaments show up for us in a much more everyday sense and in our lives with others. How often is it fully clear to the other person, or to myself, what it is I am trying to express when I am expressing how I feel? How precarious and provisional is my recognition of how the other person feels about me? More importantly, what would it be like to think these matters are *not* provisional, to think that I fully know what the other person feels, and what I feel? How often, in a related sense, might I feel that what I am expressing is not quite right, that I am repeating lines, re-using phrases and images I have seen or heard before. What might it be to offer expressions that are sincere, genuine, when my words that are always in some sense shared and borrowed?

CLICHÉ AND MENTAL HEALTH

Plays, like words, are repeated, reproduced and reworked. The producers of *Romeo and Juliet* 2021 must have struggled with these issues themselves. Indeed, what play is *more* iconic than *Romeo and Juliet*? When it comes to love, for many in Western culture (many more than those who have seen it or even read it), *Romeo and Juliet* is 'the book' invoked in Juliet's speech. It would be easy for a straight production of this play to fall into cliché.

There would have been this risk for Shakespeare too. In the late 1500s, notions of copyright and authorial rights had not developed into the practices we know today, so many possibilities for expressing and representing love would have been available for reuse and reproduction. The play itself would have emerged out of this context: in this sense there is no 'original' script.

Of course, during Shakespeare's time, audiences and producers would not have had the same bombardment with stories and images that they and we face today, as a result of our media and image-saturated world. Given the proliferation of images of love that confronts young people today, it is perhaps not surprising that the producers of *Romeo and Juliet* 2021 decided to *downplay* the theme of romance in the production. Did I say 'downplay love'? In *Romeo and Juliet*? Yes, that's right. Take the Balcony Scene, that pinnacle of romantic spectacle, which, in the Globe production, is actually played for laughs. Romeo clings to a ladder in the stalls as he hears Juliet speaking to herself. He plays up an open-mouthed, can't-believe-his-own-luck response. 'Shall hear more?' 'Or shall I speak at his?' gets a big laugh from the audience. Take also the way the production in fact cuts out the shared sonnet which is Romeo and Juliet's first exchange and the classic image of their falling in love. In other ways too, romance is parodied in the production. When Paris tries to woo Juliet with a corny love-ballad ('Hello ... is it me you're looking for?'), Juliet makes out that she is going to throw up. We laugh (and we have sympathy with her!).

In place of love—where love normally is in the play—the Globe production puts mental health. Could we say: the position we are in with respect to love, especially concerning the risks of cliché and expression, *allegorises* the position we are in with respect to mental health?

It may not be too difficult to envisage how cliché can linger over the ways we talk about matters relating to mental health, as it does with our expressions of love. I hinted at this possibility earlier on in relation to the statements being projected during the Globe production. The statements include mental health 'buzzwords' and statistical ways of representing the crisis that have now become commonplace ('20% of young people under 25...'). They also invoke prominent pictures and metaphors that emerge from psychological ways of talking ('secure attachment'; 'emotional side of the brain'). These ways of talking can all-too-easily channel our understanding of the nature of the problems young people are facing, and of what our mental lives are like. They can also lead to reductive understandings of what the 'problems' and the 'solutions' are. Perhaps Romeo's problems could have been solved if he had had access to a counsellor at school or a good therapist!

Young people sometimes look for formula phrases in mental health, too. To talk about one's suffering or negative experience in terms of labels such as 'depression' or 'anxiety' offers a ready-made way of making sense of them. Sometimes coming to have a label such as anxiety or depression is something to be worn as a badge of honour. Certain therapeutic practices can foster this kind of relation to words and to certain formulations that we adopt in order to regulate and make sense of our mental lives. Education in mental health might also encourage young people to adopt such scripts.

Young people receive these narratives from elsewhere, too. There is a proliferation of personal stories from leading figures, celebrities and even footballers talking about their struggles and difficulties with mental health. These kinds of disclosures are not necessarily bad, although they can be sensationalised in problematic ways. It may be that something important is being attempted here, such as breaking the narrative of what a footballer should be like, or how a member of the Royal Family should act. But at the same time, these ways of talking about mental health can easily become over-layered, and they start to feed a sort of fantasy about oneself and encourage self-preoccupation. The widening of the 'mental health conversation' that has worked to raise awareness of the contemporary crisis and bring it to our attention might in this sense work to the opposite effect: It may bring about a narrowing in our forms of expression and an unthinking overusage of certain formulations and scripts for making sense of our problems.

The predominant ways of talking about mental health today draw from languages used in psychology and its related modes of therapy, as well as from medicine. But perhaps in fact we might find richer forms of expression if we think of the issues young people are facing in connection with the issues discussed earlier in relation to love: struggles with feeling oneself exposed to another, and struggling with the separation one may feel from the other. Stanley Cavell once connected the emergence of adolescence as a concept with an historical time when the idea of subjectivity started to be under threat.^{vii} At least part of what Cavell has in mind here is the way that the struggle to express oneself and the difficulties one may feel in finding oneself known and recognised by others are not to be dismissed simply as 'teenage hang-ups'. The struggle in being known is part of what we struggle with in our expressive lives. But it is only in committing ourselves in the risky space of expression that we have the chance of finding ourselves known. Cliché is part of the risk we run in our speech, but it is only if we take on the risk that we have the possibility of meaning what we say.

'THERE AIN'T NO ROMANCE AROUND HERE'⁶

Cliché is not simply an incidental upshot of the widening 'mental health conversation' or of the circulation of our images of love in society (although the new opportunities for circulation and recirculation surely can contribute it). Cliché is not something we can wholly avoid. It is a matter that requires our attention. When cliché abounds without our being concerned by it—or when the problem of cliché does not appear—it is a sign that something is wrong in our culture. Expression is in decline. Society has become unhealthy.

All this should make us wonder whether we also need to reflect a little more on the *withdrawal* of romance from *Romeo and Juliet 2021*: the twisting of the Balcony Scene towards the comedic; the cutting out of the shared sonnet; the punk styling and soundtrack that accompanies the production. Punk seems the antithesis to romance: 'Oh there ain't no love, no Montagues or Capulets/Just banging tunes and DJ sets and Dirty dance floors and dreams of naughtiness.' If love has become *impossible* in this (and is that *our?*) world of *Romeo and Juliet*, what does that mean for mental health?

Love and romance depend on undecidability. Cliché, as we have seen, is not something to be eliminated but something we should struggle with. In the production, love seems to have been replaced by a cynicism and a wised-up attitude. Has the modern teenager lost faith in the struggle? Nihilism is the perception of the loss of meaning and value from the world. It goes along with feelings of futility and emptiness: a sense of the world as forsaken. Amongst the other things people today live with, in the threatened environment, intimations of death and destruction are more apparent than ever. But to lose faith in words is to lose faith in the world. Is it any wonder that romance is hard to find?

Nihilism, however, can take different forms. One version is rebel nihilism, where the perception of meaninglessness sparks an attitude that we should do what we like and not care about the consequences (the punk styling is perhaps a nod to this). But another version is passive nihilism, exemplified in Nietzsche's character of 'the last man'.⁷ The last man knows nothing of the passions, love and suffering. When he is told about these things he blinks, blankly. They are no longer part of his understanding of the world. Rather he lives with a clean and orderly management of his life. He has become extremely successful at this management, and successful in life as a result. But he has become anaesthetised to the kinds of risk and undecidability under discussion in this essay.

The messages on the electric screen that accompany the performance of *Romeo and Juliet 2021* could manifest a similar tendency towards the ordering and management of our emotional lives. *Romeo and Juliet* falling in love is attributed neatly to a biological or physical cause: 'The rational side of a young person's brain is not fully developed until they are 25.' A young person in the audience might think: that will explain the strange and difficult feelings I am having! I feel troubled because I have not yet fully developed the ability to think logically. The point is not that the biological explanation is necessarily wrong. The point is that these forms of expression start to gain momentum and start to direct the understanding that we have of ourselves. Then, we start to live our lives in terms of certain mantras that provide us with a false sense of security about what we are doing and where we are. Undecidability is foreclosed. It is interesting, in light of this, to revisit the image of the 'trigger warning' and the mechanical way it encourages us to think about the nature of our emotional lives. If the trigger is pulled, a shot will be fired. There is no ambiguity here.

The production of *Romeo and Juliet 2021* draws our attention to the role of theatre, including Shakespeare's plays, in helping us to think about the nature of what we are concerned with in matters of mental health. It can also teach us where we would be better focusing our attention, if we are to respond to the crisis in mental health amongst young people today. I could risk saying at this point: 'Verona is sick' in *Romeo and Juliet 2021* because the possibilities for expression are being thwarted. Medicalised and biological ways of understanding ourselves are being given prominence, and the risky spaces of expression have become the subjects of anxious mockery. If this is a crisis we are going through in our contemporary age, then the current approaches to mental health envisaged for schools do not look set to address what needs to be addressed in our time.

ENDNOTES

¹ Arifa Akbar 'Romeo and Juliet Review' in *The Guardian*, 09/07/2021

² Stephen Moyes and Amir Razavi 'Wokey and Juliet' in *The Sun*, 19/08/2021.

³ Lyrics from the song 'I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor' by the band The Arctic Monkeys, which is used during the production. The song includes lyrics about the 'Montagues and Capulets'.

⁴ Derek Attridge, 1992, p. 414.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, 2011, p. 76

⁶ This is a line taken from The Arctic Monkey's song 'A Certain Romance'.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, 2003, p. 45-47

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