

Motherhood, Faith, Feminism and the Legacy of the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election

The unprecedented participation of female candidates in the 2008 presidential election received considerable media attention and occasioned often virulent public debate about the current status of women in American politics and the state of feminism in the country as a whole. Underlying this debate were evolving paradigms of motherhood, faith and feminism. Exploring the media's portrayal of Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin and Michelle Obama, this article examines the role of this election in eliciting debates about motherhood, the role of women in the political realm, the definition of feminism and the role of religion in political discourse. Such an exploration reveals failures of modern articulations of feminism to appeal broadly to the electorate generally and American women in particular and partially explains the failure of both parties to advance a successful female candidate. These failures suggest that as women increasingly desire and expect to see themselves reflected in the political landscape, paradigms of feminism must expand to include traditional family constructs, conservatism, faith and the complexity of life today.

Leslie Morgan Steiner's 2006 book, *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on their Choices, their Lives, Their Families*, highlighted a perceived culture war among American mothers. In its study, "Breadwinner Moms," the Pew Research Center recently documented the changing demographics that have contributed to the so-called "Mommy Wars." According to the study, between 1960 and 2011, the percentage of households with children in which the mother was the sole or primary breadwinner rose from 11 percent to 40 percent (Wang 1). In polling on public perception of this shift, the Pew Center found that though two-thirds of respondents recognized that this arrangement allowed for greater financial security, three-quarters "say the increasing number

of women working for pay has made it harder for parents to raise children, and half say it has made marriages harder to succeed” (Wang 2).

These marital and parental challenges, Steiner and others contend, have ignited tensions between women whose insecurities about their own choices cause them to denigrate those who make alternate choices. Quickly picked up by popular talk shows such as Oprah and Dr. Phil and countless trade books, tensions between mothers working outside the home or to staying at home, single mothers, and traditional families, bottle feeders and breastfeeders have been examined and, perhaps, inflamed as a result of media-driven attention and debate. Whether such culture wars between American mothers are real or products of media publicity, their central questions clearly strike a chord with American women. These perceived conflicts have also filtered into academic and political articulations of feminism as the third-wave raises questions about what types of choices affirm a feminist sensibility and advance gender equity.

As Nancy Chodorow has argued, the “reproduction of mothering” in American society transforms women’s biological functions into socialized patterns of behavior and expectation. While hardly representing the experience of every woman, the public perception of women in the public eye can reveal interesting trends in social constructions of motherhood at a particular historical moment. During the 2008 U.S. presidential election, these questions about motherhood, feminism and choice were brought to the national stage in discussions about the policy positions and personal lives of the women vying for the offices of President, Vice President and even First Lady. The debates involved in this election seemed to prove Steiner’s thesis even as they raised new questions about the state of feminism, the role of faith in national politics and the future of women’s participation in the political realm.

In examining the public images and media representations of Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin and Michelle Obama with a focus on motherhood, feminism and religion, this article will show the failure of both parties and of modern articulations of feminism to appeal broadly to American women. While no one articulation could appeal to all women, the frustration, anger and excitement generated by these three signal women’s desire to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the political landscape. These experiences sometimes include religion and conservative ideals or traditional forms of family and almost always involve a multiplicity of expressions and paradigms. For both parties and for advocates of women’s increasing prevalence in the political realm, not responding to these desires risks alienating female voters and distancing the executive office from the realities and the commitments that shape American voters’ lives and color their political worldview. For contemporary feminists, the challenge is to reflect these realities in modern expressions of feminism, particularly in regards to motherhood.

Hillary Clinton and the Limitations of the Second Wave

On January 20, 2007, Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States, reflecting an appreciation for the struggles of the women that came before her and the effect of her campaign on women of tomorrow. Clinton's rhetoric underscored the assumption that women's equal opportunity to aspire to the office of President should be assumed due to the fundamental equality of all humans. As she noted in her candidacy announcement, this conviction influenced her policy and international experience in the past—an earlier trip to China, for example, was “to affirm that women's rights are human rights.”

In keeping with second-wave feminism, Clinton steadfastly articulated the need for equal rights for both sexes but provided no paradigm for blending more traditional roles with the untraditional. Putting her political career on hold until later in life, Clinton could be said to embody the pattern Simone deBeauvoir described several decades earlier. For Clinton, then, what “prevented her taking part in the shaping of the world was her enslavement to the generative function” (deBeauvoir 117). In finding balance between the reality of motherhood and desire for personal fulfillment, Clinton was forced to decide between these dual impulses—a quandary Betty Friedan called a “problem that has no name” (Friedan 15).

Her only child a grown woman, Clinton no longer had to overcome this “problem” and avoided the scrutiny levied at younger candidates regarding her ability to balance work and home life. Yet, her maternal experience figured into her policy agendas. In her concession speech at the Democratic National Convention, Clinton included numerous mentions of the needs and concerns of families and those policy issues that involved the education and health of the nation's children. These topics took center stage in her campaign and she expressed the hope that Obama would address them in the future. As Secretary of State in the Obama cabinet, she continued in this same vein and, in July 2009, infamously referred to the behavior of North Korea's leadership as that of a child. In defying a U.N. resolution by testing nuclear devices and firing missiles, Clinton told ABC's *Good Morning America*, North Korea showed a “constant demand for attention.” She continued, “maybe it's the mother in me or the experience that I've had with small children and unruly teenagers and people who are demanding attention—don't give it to them, they don't deserve it, they are acting out” (Reuters).

Despite the evident influence of Clinton's parenting experience on her leadership style and platform, she faced criticism for denying her femininity, trying too hard to be seen as “one of the guys” and thus downplaying either the importance of feminine roles in society or the value of traditionally female

vocations in contrast to elected office. Like those that came before her, Clinton faced the double standard experienced by female politicians past. As Katie Heimer of NOW wrote, “While being criticized or perceived as ‘soft’ or ‘weak’ if they come across as too traditionally feminine, they are also accused of being too ‘hard’ or ‘strident’ if they come off as assertive and powerful – traditionally masculine attributes” (Heimer).

Even with minor alterations to her public images over the course of her campaign, Clinton retained the vision of herself as a woman standing on the shoulders of those that came before. At the end of her Presidential campaign, Clinton directly addressed her place in the history of women’s rights in much the same terms. She mentioned her role as daughter and mother, not only to underscore the debts and responsibilities she felt to those women in her life, but also to characterize the woman’s movement and women’s concerns as cross-generational and consistent in the concerns and goals expressed by the women involved. In conceding the nomination to Barack Obama on June 8, 2008, Clinton summed up the importance of her candidacy in the context of this history:

As we gather here today in this historic, magnificent building, the 50th woman to leave this Earth is orbiting overhead. If we can blast 50 women into space, we will someday launch a woman into the White House. Although we weren’t able to shatter the highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it’s got about 18 million cracks in it... and the light is shining through like never before, filling us all with the hope and the sure knowledge that the path will be a little easier next time. That has always been the history of progress in America. Think of the suffragists who gathered at Seneca Falls in 1848 and those who kept fighting until women could cast their votes.

In referencing Seneca Falls, Clinton describes her candidacy as a fulfillment of the feminist story rather than a novel or separate enterprise.

In questioning whether such a speech was truly a concession speech at all, many pundits characterized Clinton as bitter and whiny. In this spirit, Michael Tomasky, then Editor of the *Guardian America*, described the concession speech as “the most abrasive, self-absorbed, selfish, delusional, emasculating and extortionate political speech I’ve heard in a long time” (Tomasky). Such characterization of both Clinton and her supporters directly mirrored the stereotype of the angry feminist of the 1960s and 70s. Even among the politically like-minded, Clinton received a mixed response. While her second-wave rhetoric appealed to many women of her generation who saw her as the country’s last and best chance for a woman president, younger women voted

for Barack Obama in record numbers and felt, at times, alienated by Clinton's harsh tone and stage in life. She was a feminist in a more traditional sense who, through her own postponement of her political career until later in life, never directly addressed the work-life balance at the heart of many women's daily experience. Her markedly secular and exclusively liberal political and social positions alienated many religious individuals and those with a more nuanced or complex political worldview. This disconnect did not translate into enough votes to elect Clinton to the presidency.

Sarah Palin and the Possibility of Conservative Christian Feminism

Answering some of the demographic and ideological problems faced by Clinton but introducing others still, Sarah Palin demonstrated that the presence of strong females in political life was not limited to the Democratic Party in the 2008 election. On August 29, 2008, John McCain announced Palin as his running mate. While Clinton upheld traditionally feminist stances on issues such as abortion rights and same-sex marriage, Sarah Palin advocated conservative positions on these very issues and others, all while upending conservative notions of the vocation of motherhood. Such a seemingly contradictory position made her a difficult figure for conservatives and liberals to understand or criticize. In concert with social positions that made many feminists cringe, Palin modeled a rearticulation of motherhood as an intrinsic part of being female and a potential source of inspiration, fulfillment and inspiration. While Palin continued to operate within a decidedly patriarchal worldview, her use of her maternal role as motivation for her candidacy complicated her image. Palin's particular brand of motherhood elicited a deluge of articles, editorials, and commentaries on what her image meant for the definitions of motherhood in the contemporary age, the state of feminism and the relationship between this new more socially conservative brand of feminism, and the conservative base of the republican party. This uproar peaked in September 2008 as Palin made the talk show circuit and found herself the subject of considerable media scrutiny.

At issue were her experience, her bravado, and her complicated family situation. On one side were women like the working mothers who defended Palin while in Northern Virginia attending a McCain-Palin rally in September 2008. As one woman noted, "She justifies what we do every day.... She's just as flawed as we are ... she does it all" (Fisher). Another woman identified Palin's gender as reason to overlook her limited governmental experience: "I know people who have experience who are totally incompetent.... And I know people who have no experience who step in and get it right. I mean, women can do amazing things" (Fisher). To these women, the complications of Palin's life seemed to validate the complications of their own, thus allowing these women to identify

with Palin in a way they never could with Republican candidates of the past.

Palin herself affirmed the possibility of “doing it all” in several interviews. By combining political career, the demands of family life—pregnancy, a child with Down’s syndrome, four other children, one an unmarried pregnant teen—with the demands of her office, Palin shrugged off suggestions that leading such a life successfully was impossible. In an interview with *People* magazine, Palin remarked, “We don’t sleep much. Too much to do. What I’ve had to do, though, is in the middle of the night, put down the Blackberries and pick up the breast pump. Do a couple of things different and still get it all done” (Westfall). In an interview with Charles Gibson of ABC News that same month, Palin answered Gibson’s question about balancing motherhood and a career by commenting, “I’m part of that generation where that question is kind of irrelevant, because it’s accepted. Of course, you can be the vice president, and you can raise a family” (Luo).

In these statements, Palin identifies a modern sensibility that a feminist vision like Friedan’s sells women short and underestimates all she can do. Whereas Hillary Clinton embraced her career with an empty nest, Palin seemed to suggest that such concessions or qualifications were not necessary. Palin thus exuded confidence that a modern woman could do it all on no sleep and without sacrifice. She thus frustrated liberal-leaning feminists who also struggled to find balance but with different results. Palin’s confidence in her ability to find such a balance struck many of these women as unrealistic and unfair rather than empowering. Though these women also yearned for a world in which a woman could be as active in the lives of her family as a stay-at-home mom while managing a successful career, they found such an ideal to be impossible. To suggest otherwise, they argued, sets women up for disappointment and guilt.

As Katherine Marsh wrote in *The New Republic* a couple weeks after Palin’s ABC interview, by “turning herself into Everywoman, Palin is significantly misrepresenting most every woman.... Palin’s parenting story is not about sacrifice or even the unrealistic—it devalues the job” (Marsh 9). The point missed by media and supporters alike, according to Marsh, is that Palin can only be a “supermom” because of the vast networks of support that keep her family running—resources not available to “Everywoman.” In this way, she portrayed herself “as a spunky can-do Republican-style feminist mom who meets challenges head-on instead of whining about them” (Marsh 9). The effective result was a slap in the face to those women who struggled to find the same success and perhaps needed to change their situation in order to maintain sanity. As one Obama-supporting mother of two was quoted as saying, “You can juggle a Blackberry and a breast pump in a lot of jobs, but not in the vice presidency” (Kantor).

In addition to engaging debates over whether Palin's image as a "Supermom" makes her an inspiring or unrealistic and harmful model, political pundits raised questions about Palin's parenting decisions. As Jim Geraghty reported in the *National Review*, television media from CNN to CBS to MSNBC inflamed this debate by labeling reaction to Palin an example of the "Mommy Wars." This move rendered appropriate discussion and debate on whether Palin was a fit mother or whether a mother with her responsibilities could or should run for the vice presidency (Geraghty 28). Despite Palin's rather untraditional approach to motherhood and the controversy this introduced, her religious convictions and the social positions they supported kept her firmly aligned with the conservative evangelical base of the Republican party. In her memoir *Going Rogue*, Palin discussed how experiences of sexism, motherhood and faith shaped her entry into politics. In her Wasilla mayoral campaign, Palin remembers a "well-meaning good ol' boy" who told her: "The three strikes against you are Track, Bristol and Willow." Palin writes, "Oh man, the Mama Bear in me rose up then" (Palin 71). Yet, just as her maternal instincts energize her, so too do they bring her doubt. Remembering one night when she was rocking her infant daughter to sleep, she felt the political drive surge in her and asked it to "simmer down." Discussing the biblical story of Jeremiah, she writes that this drive was inevitable, part of God's plan and therefore impossible to deny (Palin 103).

In defense of Palin's decisions to carry her last son to term and to support her daughter as she unexpectedly became pregnant, conservative evangelical voters commended these decisions as pro-life and pro-family. One such woman said, "The whole family is pro-life, and they put that into practice even when it's not easy" (Fisher). Indeed, Palin combined her unique brand of feminism with her pro-life convictions in describing the successes of her daughter. She writes, Bristol "graduated from high school on time with great grades, while raising her son and working two part-time jobs to pay for his diapers and formula, and then immediately started college classes" (Palin 371). With Bristol's example in mind, Palin characterizes pro-choice advocates as anti-feminist in suggesting that strong young women cannot both care for a child and achieve their personal dreams.

And here is the paradox of Sarah Palin. Conservative women who might never self-identify as feminist support a candidate who proudly identifies as a working mother and relies heavily on her husband, older children and community to care for her children. Liberal women question her parenting and suggest her cavalier attitude might hinder women more than it empowers them. Her religious convictions reassure conservative voters as they mystify liberals. These paradoxes and the tensions surrounding paradigms of motherhood that they highlight have been described by Judith Warner as the "Mommy Mystique" –

a play on Friedan's articulation of feminism in a contemporary context. This "mommy mystique," Warner writes,

Tells us that we are the luckiest women in the world—the freest, with the most choices, the broadest horizons, the best luck, and the most wealth. It says we have the knowledge and know-how to make “informed decisions” that will guarantee the successful course of our children's lives. It tells us that if we choose badly our children will fall prey to countless dangers ... To admit that we cannot do everything ourselves, that indeed we need help—and help on a large, systematic scale – is tantamount to admitting personal failure.... We are consumed with doing for our children in mind and soul and body—and the result is we are so depleted that we have little of ourselves left for ourselves. And whatever anger we might otherwise feel—at society, at our husbands, at the experts that led us to this pass—is directed, also, just at ourselves. Or at the one permissible target: other mothers. (32-33)

Perhaps this is why, as the editor of the feminist website *Jezebel* writes, “Sarah Palin incites near-violent rage in normally reasonable women” (Jessica G.). As Jessica G. writes, “for a certain kind of feminist, Palin is a symbol for everything we hoped was not true in the world anymore. We hoped that we didn't have to hide our ambition or pretend that our goals were effortlessly achieved” (Jessica G.). Sarah Palin provided no solution to this very real tension. She appealed to different and new types of voters in ways that surprised pundits on both sides of the aisle. Yet, her divisiveness limited her ultimate success as a political candidate and has made it difficult for her to wage a sustainable new campaign in the years since.

Michelle Obama: Insights from a Non-Candidate

Hillary Clinton failed to address the broader face of feminism in the 21st Century and Sarah Palin proved divisive and polarizing in unexpected ways even as she articulated a feminism rooted in conservative and religious values. Michelle Obama's personal story, media portrayal and approach to motherhood and feminism illuminate yet another aspect of the current state of feminism in relationship to motherhood, faith and politics. A graduate of Princeton and Harvard Law School and an experienced public servant, Obama has been portrayed by the media as a multi-sided woman – career woman, athlete, mother and devoted wife. She has also been the subject of much anticipation, expectation and, at times, disappointment in feminist circles.

Her intelligence and early career success make her a woman of great promise and yet, she willingly put her career on the back-burner in response to the trajectory of her husband's career and the effect it would have on their children and family life. In interviews and written accounts, both Barack and Michelle Obama have reflected on the difficulty of these choices and the strains they put and continue to put on their marriage. In his 2006 book *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack writes of the birth of his two daughters and the real tensions that grew as the couple managed two demanding careers, political aspirations and the needs of a newborn. After years of incomprehension in the face of Michelle's anger and frustration, Barack writes of his growing realization that though he had always valued her dreams as his own, it was she who made the majority of sacrifices to make their family work. Tying this in to the lives of many American mothers, he noted that the ability to afford resources such as reliable childcare to assist in this balance helped tremendously and is not a reality for all people. Above all, he recognized that the balancing required of Michelle meant she never felt fully successful in either her job or her vocation of mother.

In many ways, Michelle exemplified the dilemma theorized by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg at the beginning of her 2013 book, *Lean In*. Realizing that "having it all" is a myth that sets women up for frustration, Michelle was forced to determine how to continue her own career path in the face of the restrictions that come through marriage and motherhood as well as by just being female in a career long dominated by men. For her part, Michelle has never glossed over the difficulty these choices have caused in their relationship and for her as an individual. In a 2007 *Vanity Fair* interview, she characterizes the campaign as a window of opportunity that warranted sacrifices that might otherwise seem unreasonable. Talking about early anger at the sacrifices she made, she describes a decision to let that anger go once the decisions had been made. Just as she modified her own career goals along the way, she also pushed back by, for example, refusing to move to Washington, D.C. when Barack was elected senator.

Though recognizing the uniqueness of her own situation, Michelle Obama has often connected her own challenges to those of mothers and career women everywhere. In an interview with *The New Yorker* in 2008, Obama pointed to the balance between career and family as one of the foremost challenges facing women—a challenge that she has urged her husband to address in policy. Publicly acknowledging the stresses that she and Barack have faced in their marriage in balancing the simultaneous demands of high-powered careers and childrearing, Michelle noted, "That is our life We have challenges, and struggles, headaches that everybody else is going through" (Collins). These challenges are not simply the peculiarities of their exceptional lives but

the reality of countless families across the country. By example and by word, Michelle Obama revealed that “having it all” is impossible, sacrifices must be made and there are rarely easy decisions involved but that greater community and governmental support for mothers in particular and families in general might make such a balance more possible, even for those without the financial and family supports she herself enjoyed.

After Barack Obama was reelected in 2012, Michelle became the target of scrutiny for her performance as First Lady thus far. In a *Politico* describing how Obama failed to meet Sandberg’s challenge, “Leaning Out: How Michelle Obama Became a Feminist Nightmare,” Michelle Cottle derided Michelle Obama for sticking to “safely, soothingly domestic causes” that wasted her education, intelligence and national platform. Here Cottle articulates the significant disappointment on the part of the feminist community that Michelle had not only failed to advocate a strongly feminist position from 2008 onward but that she did not even take that opportunity once the reelection had been achieved. Disagreeing and characterizing Cottle’s article as “Lazy Journalism,” Roxane Gay responded in *Salon* by calling Cottle’s work “a rankly condescending piece of shallow provocation.” Criticizing her for operating with a white and inappropriately monolithic definition of feminism, Gay chided the article’s suggestion that a focus on education and even motherhood is shameful and beneath any woman of intelligence and feminist proclivities.

Though Obama has revealed no simple solution to Friedan’s “problem that has no name,” she has managed to model more traditional views of motherhood and family infused with strength of character and a deep commitment to equality. In this, Obama’s lived paradigm of motherhood answers the call of Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1976). It is not the biological restrictions of motherhood that oppress women as de Beauvoir might have it, but the social construction of motherhood born of a patriarchal society and an inadequate societal support system. The modern feminist, then, must not reject motherhood but must re-imagine it, reclaim it and use it as a vehicle for liberation and as part of her personal fulfillment, even as she nurtures dreams and vocations apart from motherhood.

In this way, Obama demonstrates elements of third wave feminism in her attempts to create a balance between her role as wife and mother and her career without sacrificing either in whole. This openness to a variety of life choices necessarily complicates the use of the phrase “third-wave feminism.” As Lisa Jervis observed, “what was at first a handy-dandy way to refer to feminism’s history, present and future potential with a single metaphor has become shorthand that invites intellectual laziness, an escape hatch from the hard work of distinguishing between core beliefs and a cultural moment” (Jervis 13). Perhaps the difficulty of definition lies at the heart of what contemporary feminism is

all about. Though Astrid Henry's discussion of third-wave feminism noted its divergence from earlier forms of feminism, the difference was in its resistance to essentializing (Henry 1). Instead of acting as a concrete guideline for living a fulfilled life, feminism should be the means by which women would feel validated in their own experience and "break free of society's many rules about women's proper place" (Henry 1-2). Without a clear sense of what the proper place, goals or life journey of a woman might be, women are experiencing greater freedom to choose but also the stress, tension and in-fighting that can come from the weight felt to lie with each of those choices. It is this tension that some have called the "Mommy Wars" and that Obama has described as the realities of contemporary family life.

Looking Forward

Adrienne Rich wrote, "Motherhood—unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism—has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism" (33). If motherhood has a history and ideology, these women demonstrate how contentious and varied that history continues to be. Indeed, the 2008 Presidential Election and the unprecedented prominence of women on the party tickets brought the issue of motherhood to the forefront of discussions of women's place in contemporary America. According to many in the media, the controversies surrounding these women as mothers indicate this is merely another phase in the "Mommy Wars." Women faced with many pressures and many possible models turn their anxiety and passion on one another in defense of their own choices and way of life. However, the description of the controversies as "Mommy Wars" does not seem so simple.

In her study of conservative religious women and their views of feminism, Christel Manning argues for a new awareness in political, feminist and religious circles of the "complexity and diversity in the traditionalist religious worldview" (238). The paradoxical and complicated figure of Sarah Palin demonstrated this complexity in a public and polarizing manner. Though Palin avoided questions about her status as a feminist in her first years in the public eye, she expressed confidence in her ability to successfully reach her personal and professional goals. At the same time, she embraced conservative political ideologies and emphasized the importance of a mother's role in her family's daily life. If we take reaction to Sarah Palin as a sign of the times, the traditional categories of conservative and liberal and the "family values" and gender roles advocated by each no longer neatly fit the stereotype. A religious and conservative woman can seek career advancement and can claim to have it all.

In particular, the example of the heated and often polemic discussions of Sarah

Palin's decisions as a mother and fitness for public office demonstrates not the continuation of these battles but a shift in the conversation that involves religion in interesting ways. Were this a simple battle between conservatives advocating traditional gender roles and liberals advocating the principle of "having it all," one might see this as yet another example of the "Mommy Wars." However, the lines do not fall clearly between conservatives and liberals, religious and secular, stay-at-home moms and working moms. As the figure of Sarah Palin shows, feminism can no longer be defined by career choice or family structure and religion can no longer be seen as synonymous with patriarchy.

The same might be said about articulating a feminism that reflects the authentic experience of motherhood and womanhood today. Religion, for some, may serve as a way to either reimagine or move past the patriarchal legacy of the family of faith and create new paradigms of motherhood that are more authentic to the lived experience of American Christian women. For others, validating the reality that "having it all" cannot be possible without considerable spousal and community support will ease the tensions that have occasioned the fabled "Mommy Wars" and the existential angst and anger many women experience.

The virulence with which the American public responded to Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin and Michelle Obama suggest that broader understanding of motherhood, faith and feminism may be required to advance a successful female candidate for the executive office. Beyond politics, more fruitful discussions of feminism will emerge when we follow the urgings of Naomi Wolf and "finally start *treating* motherhood and caring for children in general as if it were truly the most important task of all" (287). Such a paradigm shift might lead to the structural changes in families and society that might make a female president possible and true liberation a reality.

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