Words for Sale: Chapters 14-26 of Phineas Finn, The Irish Member

"La parole a été donnée à l'homme pour cacher sa pensée" [Speech has been given to men so that they can conceal their thoughts] --- attributed to Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand (1754-1838)

What a cornucopia of rich suggestive political, sexual, social and familial experience has Trollope put before us in these chapters of *Phineas Finn*. The theme I'm going to use to trace the dramatized and thoughtful variations on the intersections of love and politics in these chapters is but one of those which Trollope is intent on exploring. The major theme of the book may be regarded as the intertwined education of two ambitious and at first in love (well sort of) upper class people, Phineas Finn and Lady Laura Standish. Parallels and contrasts are set up between them and two closely attached complex characters, Laura's cousin, Violet Effingham, and fierce suitor to marry Violet, Laura's brother and Phineas' friend, Oswald Lord Chiltern.

All four are embedded in or emerge from contexts thick with other tertiary (if I may call them that) characters: the rigid wealthy Scotsman, Robert Kennedy (Laura's husband), the political man of integrity (an oxymoron I know) Joshua Monk on his way to becoming Phineas' true Mentor; the working and/or lower middle class Mr. and Mrs. Bunce (a labor union man, and Phineas' landlady); Mr. Clarkson (moneylender) in whose toils Phineas' compatriot and friend Anglo-Irish politician Laurence Fitzgibbon has entangled Phineas; not to omit further important politicians, Barrington Erle (liberal Whig party fixer), and Mr. Turnbull (radical activist shall we call him, modeled on a real politician with similar political beliefs in the era, John Bright).

Let us note that in these chapters the Pallisers, Lady Glencora and Plantagenet, play a smaller role than Lord Brentford, Laura and Chiltern's father and Violet's uncle, soon to be Phineas' patron; a power-hungry journalist, Quintus Slide of the *People's Banner*, and Laurence's sharp-tongued luckily sufficiently provided for unmarried sister Aspasia Fitzgibbon. I cannot mention everyone who speaks words in a self- or socially revealing way, or we'd be here all night.

The theme we'll follow is that of speech, talk, words, the content and meaning of what characters say to one another, and, just as important, what they omit to say, what they are silent about but whose realities left unarticulated everyone who understands what's happening knows. As of course does our narrator and, if we are using 20<sup>th</sup> century conventions, a presence we may stubbornly call our implied author; but if we will listen to Trollope, and drop our own contemporary pretensions, our seemingly benignly ironic storyteller, whom I think descends from the Henry Fielding we find in *Tom Jones, The History of a Foundling*. To read *Phineas Finn* with the most enjoyment I also advise remembering the American singer, Leonard Cohen's song, "Everybody Knows." The two matchless scenes I'll begin with, which will require some narrative and thematic context dramatize when Phineas tries ever so hard but fails to speak, and then speaks to little purpose. We will then turn briefly to Laura, Chiltern, and then Violet and Laura, whom, for the purposes of this talk and seeing how the theme of what's said and what isn't works out in these chapters, become our other three principals.

Very early on in our book we were told, as Phineas says in this week's chapters "he had been sent to Parliament on the special ground of his eloquence" (Ch 16, p 122). We have been able slowly to realize that Lady Laura Standish (at the time) was drawn to Phineas at one of her father's dinner

parties; then recommended Phineas to her cousin, Barrington Erle (fixer), who, at the Reform Club (which it seems Laurence Fitzgibbon enabled Phineas to join), told Phineas of the rotten borough of Loughshane, This borough is an easy inexpensive win since it is controlled by the Earl of Tulla for whom Phineas' father, as Tulla's long-time doctor and friend, successfully appealed on behalf of his son for Tulla's candidate. From the first moment in the novel where we witness Phineas encounter Erle, Trollope has also rung a bell that Phineas' Irish background matters when it comes to party-line voting. To Erle's "disgust," Phineas declares "If I shall go into Parliament, I shall go as a sound Liberal, – not to support a party, but to do the best I can for the country" (Ch 2, p 17).

By the time of our chosen chapters, we also understand that allowing voters to use secret ballots in elections has become an important controversial political issue. At Loughlinter though (Chapter 14), we find that Phineas is yet a persuadable young man and has been led to agree with Monk and other powerful people who seem to be befriending him, and whose support he will need in order to obtain a remunerative office (which he desperately needs) that the coming Reform bill will have done enough to extend the franchise. For reasons all are mostly silent about, the Whigs are correct in wanting to pass this bill without the secret ballot. The one reason offered here and throughout Trollope's novel – voiced by Monk -- is it's cowardly or unmanly not to vote openly; what all are silent about in the novel is these upper- and middle-class people and landlords who control these boroughs can easily kick any tenant off their property or subordinate out of a position if he votes differently than the powerful man wants. To change the legal rights here would go directly against the economic and social interest of many of their wealthy voting constituents and them too (including say Fitzgibbon) (1).

So, if the actual realities are not broached in "The Debate on the Ballot," what is? Let's go to Chapter 20, (pp 146-55). I assigned this book twice to American college students and both times, someone in the class took us to this chapter – they marveled at it. It begins with Phineas practicing his speech: "he could not continue to keep his seat unless he spoke. He had been put there that he might speak." We watch him decide what are the "heads of topics" he will deal with, "tax his memory" for apt quotations: "he had learned verbatim the words which he intended to utter under each heading." He has thought about how speech is spontaneous and that he cannot predict what will be said, so he has invented "intercalatory parts" he will insert if need be. He has worked very hard going over and over what he will say. He did know what Monk's line of argument would be ("no evil can come from daring" to vote publicly), but not that Monk would say everything that he planned to say; Phineas also thought he could give a turn to his speech which would "crush" Turnbull. But then what does Turnbull do: he attacks Monk personally, "*ad hominem*." Nothing about the issue or turn Monk gave it.

What is needed then is a defense of Monk as a sincere uncorrupted man. And it seems on the spur of the moment, Phineas, so emotionally confused in front of prestigious men by the demand he put himself forward that he can barely see the people around him, cannot do it. Erle must turn to Mr. Bonteen (a weathered politician) who has no problem defending Monk's "patriotism" (one of the words used here) but apparently with little "warmth." As he sits there in the chamber, Phineas feels Monk is looking "round at him as though with reproach" (p 151).

How to endure this? Phineas desperately needs a validation that shows understanding of what he has gone through. Lady Laura is the only person who will understand the failure as a significant personal matter, concede with him that he failed, and excuse him on the partial but real grounds that he has "thought too much about it," and thus buoy him up on the grounds of inexperience, which means he will be better at next time (pp 151-55). He finds her alone -- in the TV serial sitting in the

dark, dressed in black. With her there, Phineas can "perceive from the course of the debate that if he spoke at all his speech must [have been] very different from what he had intended." Unfortunately, the conversation then degenerates when Laura brings up her own personal obsessions, which at that point take the form of defending Kennedy who would (she says) pronounce "justly" on what happened. Luckily, Violet comes in, and counters by voicing a reality,"Mr. Kennedy never tells one anything" (pp 152-54).

Our second scene, Phineas' "First Speech" (Chapter 26, pp 191-99) arises directly from what seems to be a mass demonstration of working men with police everywhere, during which people are angered by the knowledge their gigantic petition has just been turned aside by parliament, incited and excited by window breaking, stone throwing and, after another speech on behalf of the ballot, by Turnbull coming out among them. The reader is pulled in personally by the dramatized example of Mr. Bunce unfairly taken into custody. We have heard Mr. Bunce say he must go out because if people like him do not, there will never be a secret ballot, and now we hear his insistence how he has broken no law irritates an already irritated sergeant. Phineas now discovers he can elicit no useful sympathy on behalf of the demonstrators, which of course here means Mr. Bunce (2). Then by the time the speechifying again begins, the purity of his liberal principles have again been jarred, or undermined, this time by Mr. Slide's tempting offer to Phineas that he write vigorously on reform for the People's Banner. What's interesting is how torn Phineas is while he sits supposedly listening to Palliser say that ballot is now beside the point, for the bill is for franchise and borough reform, and become restless as he barely tolerates a Mr. Western "pleading against any Reform with all the old arguments:" "Twice he was on his legs before Mr. Western finished his slow harangue," and risked "ridicule." The name Western may well be an allusion to the retrograde mad-Tory squire of Tom Jones.

Phineas is finally recognized, stands up in front of them all, and has much on his side: "a powerful and pleasant voice" (don't underestimate that), "a handsome presence," "modulated" manners, and "friends in the house who were anxious that he should do well," but he finds that again he forgets what he thought he had "at his fingers' ends," and begins to go from platitude to platitude, pressing on with "nothing to say for the bill except what hundreds had said before," until a "dangerous hope" tells him he could "still save himself from ignominy [**ig**-nuh-mi-nee] by the eloquence of his invective against the police." I love him for this but [now I quote the text]

He could not explain his idea that the people out of the House had as much right to express their opinion in favor of the ballot, as members in the House had to express theirs against it; and that animosity had been shown to the people by the authorities because they had so expressed their opinion. Then he attempted to tell the story of Mr. Bunce in a light and airy way, failed and sat down in the middle of it (p 199).

Phineas is cheered as apparently new members were then usually cheered, but feels suicidal, can keep himself under control only because just afterwards Mr. Monk joins him and tells him he "has not made an ass of [him]self, -- that is, in any special degree" (p 199).

One of the lessons learnt here in both scenes is the centrality of personal feelings, alliances, and identifications. Far from not mattering, they are here shown to be at the core of political stances, which are also shown to be a function of the kind of personality each person is.

How does talk, what is said, and what is not said, work its way through the education of Lady Laura Standish, now Kennedy and now just begun. She has been deluded by adhering to the political talk

she has heard all around her, and has refused, or been unable to see that no action, not even that of secondary influence, belongs to her unless she is attached to a man who permits this (3). We are told that she scorns the vote and presumably rhetoric on behalf of women's rights. I take it she is perhaps overly proud because of her class identification. Fitting Trollope's theme, in Laura's way of talking to or about Mr. Kennedy we see her looking to voiced principles and not personalities. She assumes she can ignore the sexual aspects of marriage. Now Sundays with Kennedy as her husband are teaching her neither reality, bodily and social – her being a woman, and now a married woman - can be ignored.

A lot has been written about the cage of femininity Laura finds herself locked inside, and it's true that the reader of this novel might well have been aware the year 1866 when *Phineas Finn* was composed, John Stuart Mill presented the first women's suffrage petition to Parliament, and in 1867 when Phineas Finn began publication in installments, Mill introduced the first parliamentary debate on the subject (4).

Her brother, Chiltern is a troubling figure. Among the first things we are told about him are Chiltern nearly "strangled" one man and again "nearly killed another with his fists" (Ch 11, pp 83-84). Listen to his reply early on to Laura's on how to persuade Violet to accept him as a husband:

Lady Laura: "Tell her of the sort life which you would live with her. Tell her that all is changed." Chiltern: "Am I to tell her a lie?" (p. 88).

He too is quickly placed as to how he uses language. His letters are comically short (e.g, Ch 15, p 108); he never wastes a word; we learn he has no respect for politicians; he sees what they do as dishonest, so will not go into politics. Thus, Brentford's borough is open for Phineas to take. In the continuum of masculinity of the novel he contrasts to Phineas' other male associate, Fitzgibbon: the last thing Chiltern is capable of is fleecing Phineas through manipulation as we have just seen Fitzgibbon do. But what is his life's work then? he says he can or will do nothing but hunt (p 142). So, Trollope shows him hunting. In Chapter 24, "The Willingford Bull," his behavior is brutal: towards the horses, violent, and unnecessarily cruel ("the horse began to tremble in every muscle"), and towards Phineas irresponsible. By hunt's end the horse's shoulder is "smashed" and the horse killed. Yet by Chiltern's bedside Phineas becomes "very fond of his patient" (p 182). I find how the character is presented and treated especially troubling due to why Trollope excuses him. It's more than he's a male and males are like that; Chiltern is excused on the grounds of his rank, that he is the heir to the Brentford property (5)

Given this portrait, his sister Lady Laura's silences and words used to Violet, her cousin, to whom she professes to be a loyal woman friend, are strongly problematic. Laura's reasons why Violet should marry Chiltern are: he loves her, he is someone for whom she felt strong affection and gratitude as a child, marrying him would help the Standish family economically and maybe Chiltern's character too. Violet's replies include: "all your reasons are reasons why he should marry me; -- not reasons I should marry him; "I am not a man, and I must take care of myself. The wrong side of the post for a woman is so very much the wrong side ... I am afraid to be his wife. The risk would be so great." It's more than that she does not want enact life as any man's "dear duck of a thing," but she does not want to be subjected to this man's proven violence (Ch 10, pp 76-82) (6).

We might also be troubled about the whole portrait of Violet. At first her talk (especially in these chapters) is explicit candor itself; but if we read carefully Trollope is already beginning a turnaround similar to the one we saw in *Can You Forgive Her*? where a young woman (Lady

Glencora) who protested having a man she felt nothing for and did not seem compatible with imposed upon her as husband becomes a smiling (almost jeering) advocate of violating women's (Alice Vavasour in this case) autonomy. Violet Effingham merely (I use the adverb ironically) begins to falls silent – so may be said to stay within character and the norms for speech we are watching in this book.

We could say about Lady Laura that her character flaw is naivete when you think about how she neglected to take into consideration what contracts and legal demands men could make and she none, but I suggest more important here are her intense loyalty to her brother as heir, and Trollope's depiction of the relationship of brothers and sisters across his novels. With respect to Violet, what we are seeing is a woman who does not care enough about her woman friend, does not think Violet counts in the way the males around them do. Laura has sold herself to pay her brother's debts and is willing to sell Violet as wealthy heiress to attempt to make sure Chiltern will not run out of money.

I conclude with a few variations on how the use of language in this and other novels by Trollope reveal important truths about his characters and the norms and values promulgated in his books. There is the famous Mr. Clarkson's "Do be punctual," said by Trollope in his Autobiography to be an abbreviated memory of a money-lender who chased him over an unpaid tailor's bill which grew to large proportions when Trollope was a young man in London: "the man would come and stand behind my chair, whispering to me always the same words, "Now I wish you would be punctual" (Autobiography, Ch 3, p 36-37). Note how polite Mr. Clarkson often is, and he uses this courtesy of his to weasel his way into Phineas' private lodgings, but how at the same time when Phineas brings up any aspect of the truth of what has happened, Mr. Clarkson quickly moves to exclamations of surprise and protest intended to silence Phineas. For example, Phineas, driven by this wall of exclamations, finally says "The fact is, Mr. Clarkson, I have never had one penny of consideration for that bill, and -", to which Clarkson produces a cascading clamor: "Oh, Mr. Finn! Oh, Mr Finn!" Whatever happens to these sums of money, Mr. Clarkson has the legal right to collect what's said to be owed on the bill's face from either Laurence or Phineas. Now he knows he has no handle with which to compel the ever-elusive Laurence. The parallel here is with the secret ballot: the important question is what the law is, and custom allow or decree, not which person got what, or the specifics of each voter's behavior.

More briefly, Barrington Erle is analogously clever at turning aside accusations he is not a true liberal: "Heart should never have anything to do with politics, should it?," is the silencer he asks of all people, Mr. Kennedy (Ch 23, p 171) Blackstone, among others, argues sympathy is the basis of equity (7). With Mr. Slide we watch Phineas only beginning to grasp the nature of the bargain made to Phineas in Slide's first proposition (Ch 26, p 195). Phineas' reaction to Miss Aspasia Fitzgibbon tells us about how performative these characters are. In our chapters Phineas meets her at Lady Baldock's, where she moves directly over to him (alas too late) to tell him, not to lend money to her brother, his reaction is to tell Violet "she has taken my breath away now." Why? He is astonished at the direct way she speaks to him upon meeting him, "without any preliminaries" (Ch 2, pp 165-66).

In his *Autobiography* and elsewhere, Trollope insists he is in the business of fashioning and selling words for money. In a very interesting letter to one of his closer woman friends and a relative (after reading a draft of some sort which she has written) he tells her there is a difference between writing for yourself and writing for money. There is some kind of special manipulative inhibition involved when your purpose is to persuade people to hand over enough money to make a profit. In his

writing about his writing Trollope shows himself to be a remarkably self-aware: he thinks and acts towards his texts as words he is working with: "the language used should be as ready and as efficient a conductor of the mind of the writer to the mind of the reader as is the electric spark which passes from one battery to another" (see *An Autobiography*, Ch 12, p 147). In these chapters we find Phineas at the beginning of learning his analogous trade in the very hard give-and-take situation of parliamentary debate, and specifically what it is that most of his listeners will listen to and for. And he is surrounded by characters who are shown to use language in a less, equivalent or more self-aware manner, whose uses of language because of his need to get along with them, he must understand. And as he learns to understand them, so can we.

Ellen Moody Independent Scholar

Questions for break-out sessions:

Do you think Trollope has dramatized the true basis or experience a politician will have as central to political life?

Is Phineas's sense of himself as having at least two different identities plausible?

How about Trollope's descriptive or dialogic (writing dialogue) powers? Where did they impress you most?

Did you find the love stories well integrated with the political ones? Of all the people he meets, who was the most truly helpful to Phineas in these chapters? Does anyone help Lady Laura for real?

If you've seen the Phineas Finn episodes in the 1975 Pallisers, do you think they were particularly effective in dramatizing this phase of the novel: Phineas trying to speak; the early phase of Laura's mistaken marriage, Violet as a believable character? How is Chiltern presented? What scenes stand out in your memory?

The edition I'm reading and quoting from is Phineas Finn, ed. Simon Dentith. NY: Oxford, 2011

Notes

1 In the 1975 BBC 26 part serial, The Pallisers, Simon Raven makes explicit what Trollope leaves implicit in added scenes. I quote two which are especially telling. In one Phineas is returning from Ireland on a train with Laurence Fitzgibbon and we are shown how the Whig party's silence and inaction are central to the self-interests of Fitzgibbon. Lest we not pick up the realities here, Raven offers further explanation in a scene between Madame Max and Phineas at Matching Priory. In the most recent digital or DVD version of the series, these scenes occur towards the end of Part 10:

The two men in elegant dress at an elegant dinner table on a train; we hear the engine. Laurence Fitzgibbon: Devilish good idea these new dining coaches. It means a fellow don't have to choke it down in 20 minutes flat on some pokey railway station. [the waiter is standing there] Oh, um, soup, fish, roast, wing of jeweled chicken, apple tart (repeated), savory ..., I'll have a look at the Stilton and a full dessert ... half a bottle of Montrachet '57, a bottle of Haunt Bron '58.. a decanter of '37 with the dessert too. What about you, Phinny?

Phineas Finn. Oh, just soup and fish, thank you.

LF: Well your visit to old Ireland ain't done your appetite much good.... What have you been up to, Phinny?

PF: Oh, nothing much. What have you been up to, Laurence?

LF: Trying to screw a few hundred out of the governor, but no go. So, there's an honest answer to your question. What have you been up to in Ireland?

PF: I told you, nothing much.

LF: Only nothing much means skulking around 4 or 5 baronies in the county for Mr. Monk ... The two of you were spotted from the start, as blatant as two nuns in a bordel.

PF: And why should I not entertain Mr. Monk?

LF: Because down our way Mr. Monk means trouble. What was he doing in Ireland at all at all? Well, what?

PF: Considering the interest in the condition of small farmers and tenant holders and their relation with landlords.

LF: Meaning he wants to stir up trouble. You too, Phineas.

PF: The party will be going into all this.

LF: Oh no, not for some while yet the party won't, and the longer the better. My family and families like it, have been running their lands and their tenants for some 200 years. We don't need the party to start interfering and still less do we need you and Mr. Monk. Now, answer me plain. Are you going to help him stir up bother?

PF: I certainly think that something should be done about the condition of smallholders.

LF: Like what?

PF: Like allowing them to have the benefit of improvements they make to their holdings.

LF: Yes, what would you know about it? I don't think that your family has had much experience of tenants. I don't think that Dr Finn is in that line of country at all. So what would you know about tenants' holdings ...

PF: It's a matter of common sense If a tenant makes improvements, he should not be cheated of them by some greedy landlord.

LF: Oh, and who says we cheat them?

PF: Tenants all over Ireland.

LF: When did you ever hear an Irishman tell the truth.

PF: I certainly have known you be less than frank on certain occasions, Laurence, but that does not mean to say that all our countrymen are liars.

LF: Ow. Well now you listen here Phinny you never heard of an Irishman yet who wouldn't tell lies if he stood to profit by it. To be sure I've done my share of fibbing, but ... take yourself as well ... Your whole life is a fib, Phinny boy, you the son of a local apothecary, who is now swaggering around London as if he were descended from the Kings of Kerry .... A little Catholic boy from Killaloe ... What learned your letters from Father O'Cochrin ... and are now squiring ladies of the Abbey .... [I skipped some] as smug and as pink as any Protestant of them all ... your sweetheart to Mary Flood .. since you were in breeches are now sniffing over women in Mayfair who's got a few pounds in their purses ...and now on top of that you whose father's estate is barely big enough to accommodate an outside privy. You are now laying down he law and duties of the landlord and rights of tenants ...

PF: I merely want to see justice done.

LF: Oh, yes, why don't you start in your own backyard by keeping your hot hands-off little Mary Flood unless you mean to marry her? and our hot eyes off Madame Goesler unless you intend to

give proper value in return for it. PF: [Gets up slowly, enraged] Goodbye, Laurence. LF: Dark silent look, chugging train, Bye-bye Phinny.

Now Phineas and Madame Max are seated together, both in evening dress, and apart from the others. It's evening again:

Madame Max: What else is wrong? Has Miss Effingham been unkind?

Phineas Finn: I'm still talking politics [he has been worried over where he will find another borough] Madame Max. Ireland. Ireland. Irish tenant right.

MM: Yes I have heard you mention it before. If I am correct, the problem is very much the same as in Hungary, of which I heard a great deal when I was in Vienna last. The tenant, often a poor peasant with only a tiny holding, has to pay as much rent in a bad year as in the best.

PF Far too much in any year, but ruinous in a bad year. The problem does not end there in Ireland. If an Irish tenant, despite all his difficulties, manages to make improvements to his farm, the landlord then increases the rent to correspond with the improvements.

MM: Even though these have been done at the tenant's own labor and expense?

PF: Exactly. And it is this abuse that Mr. Monk and I have singled out as a starting point for reform. I mean, it's robbery, Madame Max, often of semi-starving people by absentee landlords who then spend the proceeds on balls and banquets, banquets, if you please ...

MM: Of which you and I, Mr. Finn, have been only too happy to eat our share ....

PF: Yes, I hope now under Mr. Monk's leadership to make amends

[we are hearing Mr. Monk's voice raised ever so slightly as he talks in the distance with others] MM: So, you two alone are going to challenge the whole new government. Mr. Monk holds high office.

PF: He will resign if necessary. They are trying to get him to soften the line, trying this moment, I dare say, but I know the man, Madame Max, he's determined to march on this issue. He's not even Irish. The least I can do is to march with him.

MM: I fear he will march you right out of Downing Street, Mr. Finn.

PF: Very likely, Madame Max. Very likely.

Script by Simon Raven.

2 A wholly invented ironic comic scene by Raven in Part 9 of the Pallisers makes visible how class does and does not count as power: Mrs. Bunce wakes Phineas up in the middle of the night of the demonstration, to express her distress at Mr Bunce's "being took." We see Donal McCann at the local police station learn that his various legal axioms or his say-so will not free Bunce, —but rather a big enough bribe. It's a drama of incipient male cronyism. In Trollope's *PF* we are instead quickly told that it took Phineas weeks to try to help free Bunce, and then it was not Phineas who did anything, but time and the process of the era's law. Then Bunce wanted some revenge; his pride and self-esteem had been hurt, and he tries to sue; Mr. Low, Phineas' previous mentor, the lawyer, triec to discourage Bunce from wasting his time and money, but Bunce wouldn't listen.

3 See Carol Pateman, The Sexual Contract. Stanford, Ca: Stanford UP, 1988.

4 From among many essays, see Romona Denton. "That Cage of Femininity: Trollope's Lady Laura, *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 45:1 (1980):1-10; and Abigail Mann, "Love in the Time of Liberalism: Phineas Finn, Divided Affections, and Liberal Citizenship," *Victorians Journal*, 90-104

5 I liken the treatment to that of Ralph the Heir in the novel named after him.

6 Frances Power Cobbe, "Wife Torture in England," (1878), from *Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors*, ed. Susan Hamilton. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Broadview, 2004. This anthology with its columns and essays by woman across the 19<sup>th</sup> century shows how much of feminist thought and action was written about and readily available to common readers across the era.

7 Kathryn Temple, Loving Justice, Legal Emotions in Blackstone's England. NYU Press, 2019

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