

The Mechanization of Motherhood Images of Maternity in Quebec Women Writers of the Quiet Revolution

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The literature of Quebec is replete with mothers. Beginning with Marie de l'Incarnation, known as the "Mother of New France," who established the first convent in the New World to Michel Tremblay's fictional fat lady in his 1978 novel, *La Grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte*, mothers are ubiquitous.

They also appear with their progeny in the *roman de la terre*, the major literary genre in Quebec for close to 100 years. With its glorification of the farm, the Catholic Church, and the prodigious family, the *roman de la terre* would most certainly pay homage to the very rampart of Quebec society, the mother. As Lori St. Martin contends, « au pays de la survivance et de la revanche des berceaux, le mythe de la mère a atteint des sommets »(25). Not only in literature, but in everyday life, mothers were seen as the greatest allies of the Church, silent and accepting soldiers with a messianic duty to preserve the French language and Roman Catholicism. According to Sister Sainte-Marie-Éleuthère, writing in the early 1960's:

C'est un fait que les mères ont gardé ce pays catholique et français, car ce sont elles qui, en acceptant les lourdes charges de maternités renouvelées, ont accompli ce miracle canadien de la revanche des berceaux. Sans cette pacifique revanche, que sera devenu notre peuple? (3)

Yet, in spite of this elevation of the mother, what we find of her in the *roman de la terre* is little more than a type. Boynard-Frot demonstrates in her convincing statistical analysis of the corpus of novels making up the *roman de la terre* that "while women play a role in the *roman du terroir* as long as they are maidens waiting to be married; once this single goal is accomplished, they commonly fade out of sight" (Green 66).

With the social changes of the 1960's Quiet Revolution in Quebec – most notably, the secularization of the once Catholic dominated province, motherhood became a central concern as women emerged as major players in the literary field. Anne Hébert and Marie-Claire Blais – and before them, Germaine Guèvremont and Gabrielle Roy – began a "search for forgotten foremothers, a rewriting of Quebec history to include the experience of women's lives" (Green 63). Their stories document the injustices of a society which had for centuries valued women almost solely for their reproductive function, while denying them access to the social, political and cultural spheres.

A well known example of these dispossessed mothers is the nameless, silent mother in Marie-Claire Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, (1965) who haunts the pages of the novel. So caught up is she in the ceaseless rhythm of her countless pregnancies, she barely remembers giving birth to her baby the same morning. Less well known, but equally haunting is the protagonist of Madeleine Ferron's short story "Le Peuplement de la Terre" ("Be Fruitful and Multiply"), published one year after Blais's novel, in 1966. In this story, Ferron describes the reality of married life for generations

of women in Quebec caught up in a constant cycle of pregnancy, childbirth and mothering. In a tidy four pages, Ferron recounts the life story of a nameless woman who is married off before the apron strings are even severed. Robbed of her youth, she is sired by a husband she barely knows. Like clockwork, she produces one baby after another with dizzying speed until 22 children later, she is reduced to nothing more than a worn out and confused old woman.

We can read Ferron's story as condemnation of Catholicism and the pre-Quiet Revolution programs of Quebec's conservative leadership for the burden placed on women required to "be fruitful and multiply." Like Blais and Roy, Ferron turns on its head the myth of the tireless, dutiful and fulfilled mother, happy to serve God and country by producing offspring. Increasingly, the view of motherhood shared by women writers in the period prior to and in the early stages of the Quiet Revolution is a disturbing one, of childbearing automats, devoid of tenderness. What does this recurring image reveal about changes occurring in post-war Quebec society? Is it possible to trace this disturbing literary recasting of maternity to societal changes? My goal is to consider a sampling of literary texts that cast motherhood in a cold, mechanical light side by side with the "the hubbub of discourses [that] deserve to be transcribed and worked out¹," (Angenot 16) present in the medical pamphlets, self-help books and information disseminated by civic groups in Canada and Quebec during the mid 20th century. Using Ferron's short story as the primary literary example – with parenthetical references to both *Une Saison* and *Bonheur d'Occasion* – I will provide historical evidence for the increasingly mechanized nature of mothering in Quebec brought on by the ramping up of social, political, religious and economic pressures placed on women in the first part of the 20th century. The historical evidence will take the form of popular literature of health care professionals in Canada and Quebec during this period, as well as the role of the Cercle de Fermières. A civic group with connections to the Catholic Church aimed at Quebec's rural women, the Cercle possessed an ideology of super-productive women, summed up in their motto, "Travaillons sans cesse!" The call to contribute to both the economy and the demography of the province finds its ultimate prototype in the protagonist of Ferron's short story.

Beginning with the opening line of her story – "vers huit heures du matin, ils s'éveillèrent en sursaut" (Ferron 43) – Ferron makes the first of many references to clocks, time, and mechanical movement in "Le Peuplement de la Terre." Indeed, the announcement of the hour in the first line, along with descriptions of the young bride's braid swinging like a pendulum (204), and multiple references to the seasons, all underscore the passing of time. Moreover, the narrative rhythm of the story, which starts out slowly – a description of the couple's wedding night comprises a full one-

¹ My aim in aligning less literary texts with the literary is similar to the approach espoused by Marc Angenot and outlined in his article, "The Concept of Social Discourse." He calls for literary texts to "be approached and analyzed as *intertextual apparatuses* that select, absorb, transform, and rediffuse certain images, maxims, and notions that migrate through the sociodiscursive network"(16). Texts might include, "so-called "popular" or mass paraliteratures, but also the *interdiscursive connections* between the literary and the political, scientific and journalistic,... so that the literary function can be identified in its historical relativity as a function of *the whole cultural economy*" (16).

quarter of the story – accelerates as her 22 pregnancies are compressed into two short paragraphs. To reduce her reproductive life (more than twenty years) into such a relatively tiny portion of the entire narrative contributes to the reader's sense of the fleeting nature of reproductive time. According to Sheldon Zitner, in his analysis of “Le Peuplement de la terre,” the sheer brevity of the story “is not – as so often in the contemporary short stories – the result of synecdoche or modest aims [; rather, it] sets forth a central experience of a culture through the life of one of its members who acts out so radically as to no longer be representative”(248). Is Ferron's protagonist then, the stuff of hyperbole?

“Elle,” as she is referred to “Le Peuplement de la Terre” is a descendent in a long line of women whose primary function was to populate the province. Up until the Quiet Revolution, Quebec had one of the highest birthrates in the industrialized world. Beginning in the 16th century and throughout the colonial period, cultural survival was predicated on population growth. Once the French finally got down to the business of colonizing New France – after a good century of adventuresome men trolling the continent for furs and elusive gold and mineral deposits – childbearing at last became a priority. Religious orders set up shop in part to convert native women into good Christian wives. When that tactic didn't bear enough fruit, perspective brides, euphemistically called, “les filles du roi” were imported from France in the 17th century. Eventually, efforts were so successful that during the French regime, “giving birth



Beauceron family gathering, circa 1900

approximately every two years until menopause was the common experience of married women of all classes in the colony” (Greer 65). Even after the defeat of the French by the British in 1759, those French remaining in Quebec continued the tradition of producing large

families. Indeed, given their threatened place in predominantly Anglophone North America, it was all the more crucial to shore up the French presence through a *revanche des berceaux*/revenge of the cradle. This maternal call to arms continued into the 20th century, with the average Quebecois woman producing twice as many children as her anglophone neighbor in Ontario (Gresco 268). And while the average number of live

births among Québécois women in the 1920s would hover around five, it is important to remember that this number is an average, with women on the right side of the bell curve producing babies in double digits, much like the protagonist in “Le Peuplement.” Indeed, Madeleine Ferron’s own mother, Adrienne Caron, in the space of a decade, gave birth to five children. Married in 1920 at the age of 19, she gave birth to her first child a year later, with Madeleine coming along the following year. The arrival of her third child would have to wait another two years, but the slowdown was due to her own exile to a sanatorium from 1924-1925 for tuberculosis. Given her track record, it is certainly not unreasonable to speculate that had she not died of the disease at the age of 30, Adrienne Caron might have indeed come to resemble the protagonist of her daughter’s story. Whether Ferron’s mother was to any extent inspiration for the story is open to debate. What is nonetheless unquestionable is that Ferron would have been surrounded by large Quebecois families, growing up in Beauce, Quebec.² No doubt she was accustomed to seeing women like the protagonist of her story, doomed to life on a reproductive treadmill, never without “un enfant dans les bras, un dans le ventre et l’autre sur les talons” (Ferron 45).

In a story filled with kinetic imagery, where the mechanical and human are intermingled, comes a dizzying image of the life of a woman whose tempo is out of control. The following description of the protagonist’s countless offspring brings to mind the movement of cuckoo clocks with their rotating figurines emerging from one door, then disappearing through another: “heureusement, quand il en entrait un par la porte avant, tout enrubanné et vagissant dans les bras de la porteuse, un autre sortait par la porte arrière, seul, avec son baluchon sur le dos” (46). A similar image of the perpetually pregnant mother surfaces in Marie Claire Blais’s *Une Saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel*, published in 1965, a year before Ferron’s short story. This virtually speechless mother is another victim to the cycles of reproduction that have stripped her of any maternal warmth, making her little more than a pair of breasts for another hungry infant’s mouth. Blais, like Ferron, makes repeated references to time and cycles in her portrayal of this woman who, after the birth of Emmanuel, can muster little more than the thought that “la vie se répète avec une telle précision” (14). In much the same way that Ferron reconstructs Bergson’s “mécanique plaqué sur du vivant” to emphasize, not the comic, but the tragic, Blais describes the seemingly endless progeny in her novel in this way: “les Roberta Anna Anita avancèrent comme un lent troupeau de vaches, chacune entourant de ses larges bras une espiègle petite fille aux cheveux tressés, qui, dans quelques années, leur ressemblerait”(34). The equation of cattle to little girls holding baby sisters who will soon grow the same long braids and again carry their own sisterly bundles in preparation for a life of child care, creates a chilling mirroring effect, reminding the reader of the chain that links women in their reproductive function, while

²The photo on the preceding page comes from the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s website, from a page devoted to the work of a master quilter, Monique Cliche-Spénard. Hailing from one of the region’s eighteenth-century seigneurial families, she sees her work as cultural life preserver, believing that “a people without tradition is a dying people.” Given the very low birthrate in Quebec today, a turn towards traditional arts is a way to evoke the past with its traditional values and large families.

(<http://www.civilization.ca/arts/bronfman/cliche1e.html>. Date accessed: Aug. 23, 2006)

denying them autonomy or any possibility of escaping their immanence.

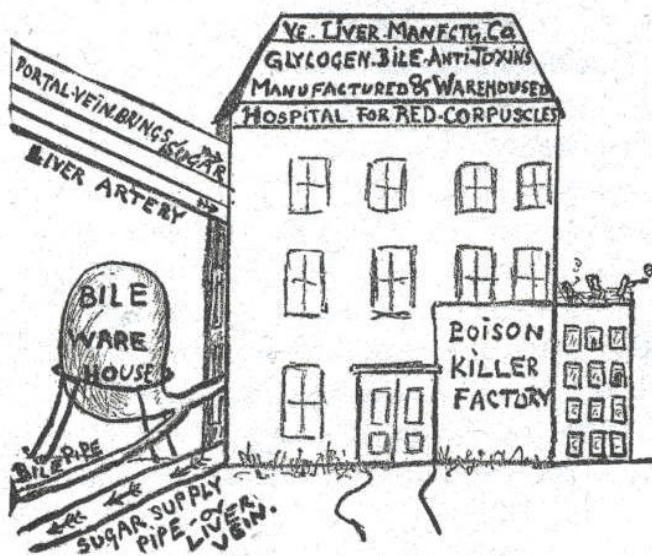
In a less Bergsonian fashion, this sense of generational vertigo seizes Rose-Anna, the mother in Gabrielle Roy's best selling novel of working class Montreal during WWII, *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945). Florentine, Rose-Anna's eldest daughter makes a hasty and desperate departure from the family's apartment on her wedding day. Moments later, it is the figure of Rose-Anna's younger daughter, Yvonne, that appears in the doorway. As Rose-Anna takes her in her arms, "sous le vêtement de nuit, Rose-Anna venait de sentir les formes naissantes, toutes gracieuses de sa fille. 'Déjà!' se dit-elle" (353). The poignancy of this moment derives from Rose-Anna's realization of the her youngest daughter's burgeoning sexuality, that will remove yet another child from her nest, only to see her set up a lifestyle much like her own.

While Roy leaves us to guess what will become of Rose-Anna and her daughters, Ferron documents the entire life of her protagonist in her brief tale. Emphasizing the swift physical and mental demise of this character who – a bride at 13 ½ still running home to mother for "une grande tartine de crème recouverte de sucre" (45) in the space of two pages, Ferron transforms her into a haggard old woman. By the end of the story, the protagonist has fallen victim to a kind of pre-mature Alzheimer's, brought on by the dizzying effects of producing too many children in so short a time. With the death of her husband, the relentless swinging of the pendulum is replaced by the more calming image of the rocking chair. Still, there is no rest because "le mécanisme ne sut pas s'ajuster à un rythme nouveau" (46). Like a clock whose hands have spun out of control, she stands in her now empty house, [et elle] tournait en rond, les bras tendus, de plus en plus troublée" (46).

It is tempting to read Ferron's story, with its many overt mechanical references, as a parable, and the protagonist, as an extreme case. However, as Ferron maintained in an interview after the publication of *Coeur de Sucre*, the collection from which the story comes, "[mes contes] sont réels; ils développent une image de la vie [et ils ne sont pas] allégoriques" (12 Basile). References to buggies in the first part of the story, and busses in the second, allow us to situate the story in the first part of the last century. This era, marked by Two World Wars and a Depression, saw an increase in infant mortality and a drop in birthrates across the US, Canada and Europe. Governmental agencies, not only in Quebec, but throughout Canada and the US, sought to address the problem with public health campaigns. What is striking in the language of much of the literature distributed by agencies and doctors during this period was a move away from affective child-rearing methods to, according to one leader in the infant welfare movement in Canada, "a scientifically controlled and managed experiment"(Dr. Helen MacMurchy, 196 in "Educating Mothers.") Mothers were told to avoid excessive physical contact with children, kissing – because of its potential for spreading germs was strictly forbidden. Adherence to schedules regarding feeding, bathing and sleeping would have the positive effect of making the baby into a "little machine"(Alan Brown, 1932 publication, *The Normal Child*, 196 in Arnup).

Another book from the same era, *Yourself and Your Body*, by Canadian Dr. Wilfred Grenfell, from Labrador is at once folksy and Orwellian in its tone. His book, designed as an anatomy primer to help parents explain to children the workings of the human body, contains chapters with titles like “The Pump and the Pipes” (about the circulatory system), “The Furnace House” (on the respiratory system), “The Special Sentinels or Controls that Help Us Guide Our Machine” (on the senses). Although there is nothing new about this Cartesian and Da Vincian concept of the body as machine, Grenfell’s book is noteworthy as a product of its time with its fascination with a world increasingly marked by new technologies, like the automobile and airplane. Furthermore, this tendency to see the body as a kind of machine may well be related to generational anxieties related to the huge loss of life during World War One and a shrinking of the Canadian population, as well. In the following passage, from another publication, *How to Take Care of Children* (1922), the author employs a nationalist and indeed, militaristic tone to characterize motherhood for this post-World War I generation of women. “The mother reports for special duty about 250 days before the baby is born and she is never de-mobilized until she meets the Bearer of the Great Invitation. Mother, at ninety years, is still Mother” (200 in Arnup).

Undoubtedly the most influential piece of medical writing in Quebec during the first half of the 20th century was Dr. Ernest Couture’s *La Mère canadienne et son enfant*, with “plus de deux millions d’exemplaires ... distribués aux nouvelles mères ou aux femmes enceintes avant sa première révision en 1949” (Société canadienne). Insisting that “la santé d’une nation repose principalement sur la mère” (Couture 5), Couture put together a kind of how-to manual on pregnancy and early child care. His battle cry throughout the book is for regularity, made evident in the following passage in a chapter on early childhood development: « Le grand principe à se rappeler, en formant les premières habitudes de l’enfant, c’est la nécessité de le dresser à la *régularité* [emphasis mine]: régularité du sommeil, des repas, du bain et puis des selles quotidiennes » (179).



From *Yourself and Your Body*. Author’s drawing (213)

A baby’s life is clearly marked by developmental milestones, so it is not surprising to find a book about pediatrics putting so great an emphasis on these defining moments: a baby’s first tooth, the age when it first lifts its head, can roll over, etc. However, for a book meant to cater to all childbearing women of Quebec – not just the well educated – the sheer number of charts, schedules and feeding guides is at times overwhelming. For instance, the book contains exacting explanations of incremental increases in amounts

of food to be given to the baby, mathematical charts showing how much baby formula to administer to a child who can not be breast-fed, wake-up schedules to help cure bed-wetting. Here is an excerpt from those instructions:



From the Cercles des Fermières' website.

Ne donnez plus à boire à votre bébé après cinq heures du soir. Pour trois ou quatre nuits consécutives, levez-vous à *une heure* [emphasis mine] après minuit, prenez l'enfant et installez-le sur le pot ou le siège des cabinets. Faites de même, encore trois ou quatre nuits, à *deux* heures puis à *trois*, à *quatre* et, enfin à *cinq* heures du matin. Ce moyen ne réussit bien qui si on le pratique avec *régularité et précision* [emphasis mine]. Réglez donc vos levers sur le réveil-matin. (180).

The insistence on regularity, clockwork and schedules reveals a growing attitude in the medical establishment in Canada during the first part of the 20th century, intent on seeing “the body as a machine” (Mitchinson 304). According to Mitchinson, author of *Giving Birth in Canada, 1900-1950*, “the effectiveness of machines could be measured, and the history of childbirth reveals the increasing importance of measuring the body’s functions”(304).

Still, Couture’s book is not simply a scientific treatise, and it does in fact recognize the need for attachment between parent and child. In fact, later editions in particular, which are shorter and whose photos have been replaced with cartoon characters in an attempt to simplify the message, are decidedly less scientific in tone. At times, the advice sounds as if it came more from the mouth of concerned aunt, mother or older sister, than a physician. For example, he cautions against too many hours listening to the radio “[qui] peut vous ébranler le système nerveux”(21). Long car rides are also on the list of health compromising activities as they can cause “des contractions musculaires for épuisantes et pourrait vous être nuisible” as in using a pedal operated sewing machine. On the other hand, he does recommend time out of doors and encourages women to “brode[r]. Confectionnez des vêtements pour le bébé. Faites des petits travaux de jardinage”(20).

Couture’s call for domestic tasks sounds very much like the language employed by the civic women’s group, the Cercles de Fermières. Founded in 1915, the group was formed to create a sense of solidarity amongst rural women of Quebec by offering incentives for the creation of “les petites industries féminines à la campagne, c’est-à-dire, le filage, le tissage, la couture et le tricot”(Desjardins 220) and small scale agriculture production. By giving women a sense of economic agency – however small, the Cercles sought to stem the swelling tide of emigration to the cities and encouraged women to participate in the *revanche des berceaux* in a variety of creative ways. For example, The Cercles were responsible for popularizing Mother’s Day and even held “des concours de bébés,” in which doctors serving as judges awarding prizes for the most beautiful and the most healthy baby. ³

³ The Cercles continue today with 735 groups scattered across the province of Quebec, representing 40,000 members. Each on-line issue of their magazine contains arts and crafts

With the Second World War, the ranks of the Cercles swelled to 49,000 women with its members involved not only in more traditional modes of feminine production, but, in the absence of husbands and sons, more agricultural work. The Cercle's newsletter, *La Revue des Fermières* featured ads proclaiming: "La ferme est notre champ d'action!" and "Des vivres pour la Victoire!" The various publications of the group, instruments of propaganda, proposed a system built on the family and parish and used a combined rhetoric of patriotism and religion. One article from 1930 declared: "La famille nombreuse nous a sauvé de l'absorption et de l'assimilation. La chaîne des berceaux qui animent le sourire des petites mères canadiennes, et autour desquels s'élève le concert perpétuel des vieilles chansons françaises, est notre rempart le plus solide (Desjardins 232). What becomes clear in Ferron's tale, however, is the price paid by the women required to keep this chain of cradles going. Moreover, the parting image is not one of a society with a "rempart...solide." True, 'elle', responds to the Cercle's call to be fruitful and multiply, efficient not only in the mass production of babies, but in other ways: "elle tissait des draps, plus que n'en pouvaient contenir ses coffres, cultivait des légumes plus qu'ils n'en pouvaient manger et élevait des veaux plus qu'ils n'en savaient vendre" (Ferron 45). For a group who wrote off the Depression as a fantasy, telling its members that poverty was the result of laziness; wouldn't the Cercles find in "elle" their poster child? Sadly, no, because it is her doing too much that is her undoing. Ultimately, her over-production means not prosperity, but chaos – in the form of chests bulging with sheets she had sewn and pregnancies that "déborda inconsidérément sur celle de ses petits enfants" (Ferron 46). In addition, over-productions means waste – in the form of cattle she cannot sell and vegetables too copious to consume. What we are left with is not the perfect vision of the neat and tidy home with food put by in rows of colorful mason jars, orderly photos of children and grandchildren or a bucolic scene of animals grazing. Instead, Ferron shows the spoils of a life too frenetically live. Indeed, the greatest sense of waste comes in a final, heartbreaking scene in which we witness a moment of generational confusion as the matriarch mistakes her grandson for her deceased husband. When taken by her son to a nursing home and presented to the residents, she asks confusedly: "Dis, est-ce qu'ils sont tous tes frères?" (Ferron 47). Perhaps most tragic is her realization that her grandson's wife to whom she pays a visit in the States does not speak French. In spite of

projects, such as Easter egg decorating or instructions on how to make a tablecloth. In addition, readers can find articles or interviews with Québécois women (from best selling suspense writers to actresses to doctors), articles on managing family life, on health and exercise. Their website (<http://www.cfq.qc.ca/> Date accessed: Aug. 23, 2006) features recipes that mix tradition and a kind of Martha Stewart eye for innovation in decorating and cooking– such as the Soupe au chou de chez nous or the more daring, Velouté de rutabaga, façon érablière. The founding principle of the organization – "attacher la femme à son foyer en lui rendant agréable et facile l'accomplissement de ses devoirs d'épouse" (Desjardins 225) sounds harmless enough until we learn of the group's opposition to women's suffrage and their "équation automatique entre féminisme et abolition de la famille" (Desjardins 241). Vestiges of this attitude can still be found on today's website, with its ubiquitous images of wooden nesting dolls. Their nearly identical faces and peasant dress, at once homespun and quaint, are but a stark reminder of a past of a people known for its rampant progeny.

her many contributions meant to ensure the survival of her culture and language, her descendants, like so many French Canadians in the 19th and 20th century, headed south to the States in search of wealth and a better life, forsaking their heritage and calling into question her life's work.

Ferron's depiction of motherhood, far from a ringing endorsement for it, is nonetheless part of an evolution in the representation of motherhood by Quebec women writers. In the intervening years since the publication of "Be Fruitful and Multiply," we see a shift away from the robotic mother to an even more sinister one, as seen in novels with horrifying scenes of infanticide and matricide, such as Aline Chamberland's *La Fissure* (1985) and Suzanne Jacob's *L'Obéissance* (1991). These crimes may be interpreted as the ultimate expression of women's frustrations with the limits traditionally imposed upon them, a lashing out, not only a refusal to churn out babies, but to take the lives of those she has already created or the one who created her. While one might argue that the crime of infanticide is the most dehumanizing of all, for Lori Saint-Martin, in her study of matricides and infanticides, these scenes, no matter how shocking, may harbor a silver lining, with « la haine et la pulsion meutrière [n'étant] que le versant sombre d'un amour sans nom » (Saint-Martin 118). She explains,

Tant les textes du matricide que ceux de l'infanticide nous entretiennent d'une histoire d'amour qui a mal tourné, d'une immense soif de tendresse qui s'est muée, faute de pouvoir se dire, en désir de meutre. Aussi terrible qu'ils soient, ils sont donc porteurs d'un espoir : espoir de réconciliation, espoir de retrouvailles, espoir d'une rencontre enfin à venir" (118).

Likewise, the image of a daughter knowingly torching the family home with her mother inside in Blais's *La Belle Bête* provides us with the narrative ashes from which a more positive depiction of motherhood may emerge. With motherhood now a choice rather than a requirement, we see more and more in the works of contemporary women novelists of Quebec, a celebration of motherhood, "une source de joie et de vitalité" (Saint-Martin 15), the polar opposite of Ferron's glassy eyed, spent protagonist.

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