

“Marriages ought to be secret”: Queer Marriages of Convenience and the Exile Narrative

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ABSTRACT

In histories of exile and migration, LGBTQ+ people have often entered marriages of convenience. Within these arrangements, a gay man and lesbian woman typically enter a marriage to expedite immigration processes or to placate conservative family members. Most commonly, these relationships do not produce children, and they consequently call into question the pronatalism that is often associated with heteronormative conceptions of marriage. This article explores the complex dynamics of these relationship structures through an analysis of childfree married women in the novels of two female queer exile writers: Jane Bowles and Patricia Highsmith. In Bowles’s *Two Serious Ladies* (1943), a US-American upper middle-class couple, Mr. and Mrs. Copperfield, journey to Panama, where Mrs. Copperfield begins an affair with a female sex worker called Pacifica and refuses to return to the United States with her husband. In Highsmith’s *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), the union between the US-American Tom Ripley and the French heiress Heloise Plisson provides a cover for Tom’s ambiguous sexuality, as well as his diverse criminal activities, and allows Heloise to enjoy a life of aimless pleasure. In both these novels, queer marriages of convenience permit transnational mobility within unions that are markedly non-procreative and thereby occupy non-future oriented temporalities. This article demonstrates how these writers used the alternative temporal organization of the marriage of convenience plot to undermine the conventional structures of patriarchal genres, including the modernist quest narrative and suspense or crime fiction.

KEYWORDS

Networks, queer literature, queer theory, transnational literature, modernism, crime fiction, romance fiction, temporality

Marriages of convenience between LGBTQ+ people have been a recurring feature in histories of exile and migration. In these relationships, most frequently between a gay man and lesbian woman, a marriage is entered out of neither romantic nor sexual motivations, but in order to provide a public front that may allow for immigration or the acquisition of citizenship with greater ease (Acosta 21-22) or to appease family members within repressive cultures (Acosta 22; Huang and Brouwer 140).¹ Generally speaking, these unions do not have a reproductive impetus, and they therefore challenge the pronatalist ideology that often accompanies heteronormative conceptions of marriage. Such arrangements were common in the exile communities of Europe and North Africa from the 1900s to the 1960s, which attracted queer British and North American writers escaping legal oppression in their native countries. Many gay men and lesbian women from these countries went into exile as a result of social and historical pressures, since to be homosexual in Great Britain or the US during this period was largely criminalized (Houlbrook 19-20; D'Emilio 14). Consequently, in order to pursue same-gender encounters or relationships, queer people frequently felt forced to flee their native countries in favor of more permissive foreign locations, such as Paris or Tangier.²

The exile communities that developed in these diverse locations attracted many artists and writers, who made important contributions to lively international subcultures, and marriages of convenience between queer exile writers were a frequent phenomenon. Such unions enabled these figures to cross borders and resettle more readily in foreign environments by drawing on the diffuse queer international networks of which they were a part. However, queer exile writers not only engaged in alternative relationship structures, but they would explore these ambiguous marital dynamics in their fiction. This article will particularly focus on the presentation of childfree married women in the novels of two female queer exile writers: Jane Bowles and Patricia Highsmith. Both left the United States in the mid-twentieth century for more tolerant climes in North Africa and Europe. While Highsmith never entered a marriage of convenience, she was inspired by her friend Bowles to at least contemplate acquiescing to a proposal for a platonic heterosexual marriage.

¹ These types of marriage of convenience between gay men and lesbian women have also been termed "lavender marriages," particularly with reference to unions between celebrities in the entertainment industry in the first half of the twentieth century that masked queer identities (Stephens 18).

² In these parts of the world, at different points during this period, homosexuality was either legal or tolerated. Due to the Napoleonic Code, France had no legal framework for the punishment of homosexuality, and by 1900 the city had garnered "an international reputation as the capital of same sex love among women and was designated 'Paris-Lesbos'" (Benstock 47). Tangier detached from Morocco and was governed by a coalition of European powers from 1923 until 1956 as an "International Zone" (Mullins 4). This coalition resulted in "a weak administration incapable of enforcing laws efficiently, so illegal commercial activity flourished," including the buying of queer and non-queer sex by international tourists (4).

The article will begin by discussing the benefits and challenges of marriages of convenience through a brief analysis of accounts provided in the letters and diaries of Bowles and Highsmith. It will go on to explore how such marriages were presented in fiction through a discussion of Bowles's novel *Two Serious Ladies* (1943) and Patricia Highsmith's novel *Ripley Under Ground* (1970). In *Two Serious Ladies*, a US-American upper middle-class couple, Mr. and Mrs. Copperfield, journey to Panama, where Mrs. Copperfield begins an affair with a female sex worker called Pacifica and refuses to continue travelling or return to the United States with her husband. In this text, the Copperfields' marriage primarily serves as a front that grants Mrs. Copperfield the guise of "respectability," which allows her to pursue same-gender encounters. In *Ripley Under Ground*, the union between the US-American Tom Ripley and the French heiress Heloise Plisson similarly provides a cover for Tom's ambiguous sexuality, as well as his diverse criminal activities, and it offers Heloise a life of objective-less pleasure without orientation towards the future, with her family money supporting their life of luxury in rural France. As Tom says of their pragmatic decision to wed: "Marriages ought to be secret . . . as private as the wedding night" (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 389), suggesting that marital unions should be kept mysterious in order to provide a cover for the sexual activities that are presumed to underpin them. As I will demonstrate, in both these novels, queer marriages of convenience permit transnational mobility within unions that are markedly non-procreative and thereby occupy queer, non-future oriented temporalities. These texts' use of queer time also undermines established narrative structures. Bowles's radical commitment to non-sequentiality in a queer travel novel subverts the typical arrangement of the masculinized, modernist quest narrative, while Highsmith's focus on the queer present in the lives of married couples resists the future-directed orientation of the masculinist suspense or crime fiction genres.

The focus on time and narrative is crucial to understanding how the presentation of characters in marriages of convenience enables Bowles and Highsmith to question the traditional conventions of patriarchal or masculinized literary genres, such as experimental modernism and crime fiction. Through the absence of a reproductive impetus, the unions depicted by these writers challenge normative temporalities of the family and the procreative futurity of marriage, since "[t]he wedding purports to emplot bodies into linear time, to represent an unbroken chain of causal events continuing into an unchanged future" (Freeman, *Wedding Complex* 34). The marriage of convenience offers the possibility of alternative temporal plotting within the narrative, severing the supposed casual links between love, matrimony, cohabitation, and child-rearing. In a common project, *Two Serious Ladies* and *Ripley Under Ground* both make use of the alternative structure of the marriage of convenience plot, which has

been widely deployed in the romance genre. Romance fictions typically conclude with the “happily ever after” resolution of betrothal or marriage (Ramsdell 89). As Elizabeth Freeman summarizes, “[l]iterary critics have long described the wedding in terms of aesthetic, social, and psychic closure” (*Wedding Complex* xi). However, the focus on marriages of convenience inverts the traditional temporal sequence of the romance plot, since courtship begins *after* the act of marriage. As Kristin Ramsdell summarizes, “the protagonists agree to wed for reasons of inheritance, respectability, social pressure, security, family considerations, or other motives not related to love or personal feelings. It is at this point that the actual courtship process begins” (89).³ These motivations are evident in the marriages of convenience depicted in Bowles and Highsmith’s fictions, which demonstrate how characters may wed to provide an “acceptable” social screen for queer sexualities, sometimes under social duress. Similarly, Bowles and Highsmith focus on life after marriage for couples. However, they do not dwell on practices of courtship, paying attention instead to the rituals of domesticity and international leisure that succeed conjugal unions in these cases. It is particularly the temporal disruptions of the marriage of convenience plot that appear to have appealed to these writers. They both draw on the reversed temporality of the romantic subgenre, particularly its avoidance of closure, to challenge the traditional progression of generic structures.

Queer Motivations to Marry

The correspondence and diaries of Bowles and Highsmith provide first-hand insight into their understanding of these unorthodox arrangements, as well as the mutual benefits they believed could be derived from these unions, none of which would produce children. Jane and Paul Bowles met in 1937 and married a year later. Their relationship was initially sexual, but they soon settled into a companionate marriage, both preferring to have same-gender encounters outside of their marriage. They travelled extensively together to places such as Panama and Mexico, and Paul settled in the port city of Tangier in 1947. Jane followed him to Morocco in 1948, and in the letters she wrote to Paul while she remained in the US, she is open about her numerous affairs with women. Jane also suggests that her motivation to travel was in part informed by her sexual impulses, telling her husband that he “would be bored hearing about Iris and Cory and Louisa and Sister Bankhead. . . . I am more and more crazy about the Scotch and the Irish and think seriously of paying a visit to those countries and getting it over with” (*Out in the World* 42). Within the model of erotically motivated travel, Jane finds comfort in the privacy her marriage to Paul affords her. When

³ The device most commonly appears in historical variations of the romance genre in order to convey a more socially constrictive period, circumvent the need to convey sex before marriage, or appeal to more conservative past or contemporary readerships (Ramsdell 89).

they begin to make plans for her move to Tangier, Jane expresses her fears about their new residence: “I don’t of course know about the Arab town of Tangier . . . It may be filled with European and American eccentrics in any case. That is all I would mind, being conspicuous” (62). It appears important to Jane that the domestic sphere should remain inaccessible and uninterrogated, which a heterosexual marriage allows to a degree, while she is still free to pursue affairs outside of that sphere. After she settled in Tangier in 1948, Paul engaged in a period of travel outside of Morocco. In a letter Jane wrote to him from Tangier, she provides her definition of their queer marriage of convenience as a constant interplay between restriction and freedom:

I feel both things at once. That you are completely free and someone who will help me when he can, out of affection, and yet also that you are a husband. I don’t think about the husband part very much but I am trying to be *very* honest. I am not sure either that being confined a bit by the social structure is altogether bad for either one of us. (*Out in the World* 80–81)

Of course Jane recognizes that the freedoms these kinds of relationships grant are a clear benefit, but significantly she senses that the restrictions of the institution may also be of advantage to them both, as they function as a form of protection.

Patricia Highsmith was acquainted with Jane and Paul Bowles and even had a passing romantic interest in Jane. It was, in part, the Bowleses’ arrangement that led Highsmith to contemplate the benefits of a marriage of convenience for herself. Highsmith first met Jane Bowles in late 1944 in New York, when she had returned from living in Taxco, Mexico, but the two would go on to meet frequently during the summer of 1947, when Highsmith was going through a break-up. As her biographer Andrew Wilson states, “[i]n [Highsmith’s] diaries she talks of [her] brief flirtation [with Jane Bowles] – at one point they had even planned on travelling to Africa together – but the relationship came to nothing” (135). Highsmith documents these encounters in her diaries and notebooks, but she suggests that the heavy drinking the pair engaged in proved a barrier in establishing any real connection (*Diaries and Notebooks* 394). A few years later in March 1950, Highsmith received a postcard from a lover, the socialite Natica Waterbury, informing her that she was in Paris with Jane Bowles and would be in North Africa next summer: “Why don’t I hop over, she asks” (*Diaries and Notebooks* 477). It was perhaps Bowles’s movement between global queer subcultures under the conventional guise of marriage that prompted Highsmith to consider whether a similar arrangement might be beneficial to her and whether she should marry the writer Marc Brandel, with whom she had a short relationship and who knew she was homosexual. As Highsmith noted in her diary in September 1950,

Marc came over at 8:30. He is bored with his wealthy and very ideal girl, and wants to marry me . . . again, now on flatly companionable basis. Like putting a thin, slack leash on me. He in fact no longer wants a heterosexual marriage. . . . We shall have something

like Jane and Paul B. [Bowles] For I think I may do it. It will not interfere at all with London this winter - which I dream of - or anyone or anything else. (*Diaries and Notebooks* 493)

Although Highsmith seems aware of the restrictions of this queer marriage proposal as a potential method to control her – and she would ultimately reject the suggestion – she appears to recognize that it would place no obstacles before her in terms of sex or travel. Indeed, if the models provided by the Bowleses can be taken as representative, a queer marriage of convenience may even have afforded her greater mobility

Queer Transnational Journeys and *Two Serious Ladies*

Jane Bowles's only novel, *Two Serious Ladies* (1943), illustrates how queer marriages of convenience may permit transnational mobility within unions that are markedly non-procreative. The text focuses on two wealthy women in early middle age based in the New York area, Miss Christina Goering and Mrs. Frieda Copperfield,⁴ who attempt to distance themselves from their conventional lives through different forms of mobility: Miss Goering sells her house to move to a nearby island and Mrs. Copperfield travels to Panama with her husband and begins an affair with a local teenage prostitute named Pacifica. This journey was in fact inspired by Jane and Paul Bowles's honeymoon trip; the couple were married on February 21, 1938, and travelled to Panama the next day on a small freighter on Jane's twenty-first birthday (Dillon 51). In the novel, the two women meet at a party near the beginning of the novel, where Mrs. Copperfield announces her travel plans. After this point, the novel narrates the lives of the two women separately, before they are reunited in a New York restaurant at the close of the narrative, where they share what they have learned from their parallel attempts to expand the horizons of their claustrophobic lives. Strikingly, very little attention is paid to children in this novel.⁵ In the case of Mrs. Copperfield, both her marriage and lack of children allow her to move more freely around the world, the former enabling her to cross borders with greater ease as a moneyed queer traveler, the latter permitting her to make sudden spatial relocations unencumbered. When children are referenced, it is often metaphorical. Both Mrs. Copperfield and other characters in the novel repeatedly use the term "baby" to describe her identity. I would like to suggest that this character is viewed as representative of childhood in

⁴ The novel always includes titles before the women's surnames, which I therefore also adopt in this essay.

⁵ On the brief occasions that children do appear, they are presented as an imposition or an aberration in the lives of the principal characters. For example, when Mr. and Mrs. Copperfield walk through the streets of Panama, they are irritated by "the children . . . jumping up and down on the wooden porches and making the houses shake" (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 41). In a similar scene, Miss Goering embarks on a train trip along the island, and while at the station she is disturbed by children "hopping heavily first on one foot and then on the other," with the result that "the little wooden platform shook abominably" (*Serious Ladies* 125-26). In all cases, the narrative is not invested in developing the characterization of children.

adulthood due to her resistance towards the normative, future-oriented expectations of heterosexual marriage: namely that the union should be procreative. Instead, Mrs. Copperfield occupies an alternative temporality, in relation to which queer people have historically been associated with negative qualities of “backwardness” or arrested development.

An exception to the general lack of children in *Two Serious Ladies* can be found in its opening scenes, which are concerned with the early years of Miss Goering, a character who is not identified as queer in the narrative, as she will later pursue a series of unfulfilling, non-marital encounters with men as an adult. Bowles uses these framing scenes to contrast the queer childishness of Mrs. Copperfield as an adult with the unsettling precocity of Miss Goering as a child who will grow up to be straight. In childhood, Miss Goering, who is simply called Christina at that point in her life, is unpopular at school, which the narrator attributes to her interiority and lack of ability to adapt to her social environment; she is described as having “an active inner life that curtailed her observation of whatever went on around her, to such a degree that she never picked up the mannerisms then in vogue” (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 3). Her precocity manifests in an early attraction to dictatorial leadership. She exercises these desires by staging morally didactic, religious games. Christina initiates her sister’s shy friend Mary into one of them, which she calls “I forgive you for all your sins” (*Serious Ladies* 6). The rules of the game are that Mary should take off her dress, wear “an old burlap sack” with two eyeholes over her head, and repeatedly chant “[m]ay the Lord forgive me for my sins” (6). As the game escalates, Christina tells Mary she will have to stand in a stream for three minutes if she wishes to be purified of her sins. At this point, Mary complains that she is “freezing to death” (7), and she continues to shiver even after she takes a bath once Christina decides the game is over. Christina possesses a strangely accelerated and militant fanaticism, as well as a bizarre sadism. Bowles will later contrast Mrs. Copperfield, an “immature” adult queer woman, with the threatening and untimely advancement of Miss Goering, who seems to correspond to Freudian descriptions of the “dangerous” child as “remarkably, threateningly precocious: sexual and aggressive” (Stockton 27). As I will show, Bowles counterpoints Miss Goering’s advancement with Mrs. Copperfield’s queer refusal to advance or grow. Furthermore, Mrs. Copperfield’s association with lack of advancement is spatialized in the novel through her acts of delay and diversion on a transnational journey.

The trip to Panama initially appears to have been instigated by Mrs. Copperfield’s husband, but she will come to embrace the queer possibilities of international travel and transcultural encounter. At a party, where the couple describe their plans, Mrs. Copperfield’s husband flatly announces that “[w]e will go to Panama and . . . penetrate

into the interior” (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 18). Pavlina Radia historicizes such journeys to South America from the United States in the 1940s, which she frames as part of an attempted escape by cultural intellectuals from the consumerism and commercialism of mid-century America into what was perceived as a rural idyll. She observes how these associations were echoed in literature from the period, as “the often exoticized and eroticized visions of South America” pervaded “modernist narratives in which characters set out on emancipatory quests, eager to make themselves new, as it were, through an encounter with culturally different, racialized others” (Radia 754). Mrs. Copperfield is not at first open to the potential for “renewal” in their voyage to South America. After her husband’s announcement, she presses Miss Goering’s hand with fearful anticipation. As Kathy Justice Gentile has observed, dread is a recurring motif in Bowles’s work, and typical of modernist female characterization more broadly. Gentile comments that, since female characters were often presented in spatially limited, domestic environments in the nineteenth-century novel, “[a] twentieth-century character who ventures into the world may experience a dread that assumes the psychological symptoms of agoraphobia” (50). However, upon reaching Panama, Mrs. Copperfield begins to open up to this new environment, particularly through her encounters with women in the sex-work industry. We observe a character caught between her husband’s plans for the journey and the new directions in which she wishes to move, representative of a central tension in Bowles’s work between convention and deviation. As Gentile comments: “When Bowles’s characters manage to overcome habit, socialization, and fear and push themselves to the edge of the abyss, they totter agonizingly between the rule-bound world behind them and the unbounded world before them” (52).

Mrs. Copperfield most directly challenges convention and the “rule-bound world” through her connections with female prostitutes in the Panamanian port town of Colón. The exploration of these types of cross-cultural encounter were central to the shaping of North American modernism. Michael Trask argues that the literary movement should be “defined with reference to the social transformations that brought genteel and upper-class [US-]Americans into encounters, either forced or chosen, with their social ‘inferiors’” (*Cruising Modernism* 1), which included those at the sexual margins, such as prostitutes. Modernist writers in the US recirculated an elitist discourse that “chose to couch class difference in the language of sexual illicitness, viewing innovative and unsettling social arrangements as an extension of the irregular or perverse desires that sexology deliberated” (*Cruising Modernism* 1). Similarly, sexual deviance in *Two Serious Ladies* is conflated with Mrs. Copperfield’s engagement in class “slumming.” Her marriage to a wealthy man is crucial to these activities, since it lends an “acceptable” public face to her transgressions. Mr. Copperfield chooses a

hotel for them “right in the heart of the red-light district” (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 38) in order to save money, and they begin to explore the area together, “walking through the streets arm in arm” (41). Mrs. Copperfield is quickly approached by women, and she engages with their advances, going into the room of a woman who she guesses is from the West Indies (42). Her husband actively facilitates this exchange, offering to explore the area further and return to pick her up, as well as giving her some money for the encounter. As Mrs. Copperfield enters the room with the woman, she exclaims “I love to be free” (43), but her ability to engage in queer sex tourism is very much dependent on the protection, financial support, and respectability granted by her marriage.

There are clear overlaps here between the Copperfields’ marriage of convenience and that of the Bowleses themselves. In the same letter to her husband where she talked of her concerns about being “conspicuous” in Tangier, Jane Bowles went on to compare herself to her character from *Two Serious Ladies*: “As for worrying about comforts – as you know or should by now, that is not the kind of thing that concerns me. Have you forgotten Mrs. Copperfield?” (*Out in the World* 62). Similarly, it is not the discomfort of living in a cheap hotel in a seedy district that inspires fear in Mrs. Copperfield. In the novel, female anxieties are instead directed at the world that lies outside the conventional bounds of marriage. When the Copperfields first meet the Panamanian prostitute Pacifica in Colón, the young woman complements Mrs. Copperfield’s appearance, and when she replies that she looks “terrible tonight,” Pacifica insists “it does not matter because you are married. You have nothing to worry about” (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 47). Women in this novel believe marriage promotes financial security and easeful transnational mobility, but nowhere does the text suggest that it should necessarily produce children nor preclude the pursuit of queer desires. Mrs. Copperfield expresses the twin desires to be both anchored by conventions and to test their limits, which is explored through her ambivalent relationship to place in the text. In a trip to Panama City with her husband, Mr. Copperfield insists, in typical fashion, on “a walk towards the outskirts of the city” (59), but Mrs. Copperfield reflects that she “hated to know what was around her, because it always turned out to be even stranger than she had feared” (59). The conventional and the strange can co-exist in a state of irresolution in the queer marriage of convenience.

Mrs. Copperfield most actively pushes against the spatial boundaries of convention when she moves into Pacifica’s room at the Hotel de las Palmas, a gritty pension in Colón. Mrs. Copperfield begins to contemplate moving to Colón, bringing an end to her travel plans with her husband. It is here that the Copperfields’ itineraries diverge substantially from one other. When Mrs. Copperfield insists that she wants to stay indefinitely in the city with Pacifica, Mr. Copperfield challenges her wishes by

asserting that “you can’t plan a trip that way” (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 108). The journey is essentially analogous to plot here, since Mrs. Copperfield’s adamantness that she will not continue the trip as planned disrupts the sequential progression of the narrative. Gentile observes that Bowles’s “characters’ urgent and idiosyncratic quests for liberation and fulfilment break the sequence and restructure the trajectory of events in the female plot” (50). As part of this causal disruption, female figures from Bowles’s fiction depart from normative, gendered trajectories that move towards the raising of children.

It is in this sense that the marriage of convenience enables Bowles to disrupt the patriarchal structures of modernist narrative. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs place Bowles within a second generation of female anglophone experimental writers who both challenged literary traditions and subverted patriarchy, since their writings, “reflecting a radical disengagement from patriarchal modes, satirize or attack traditional structures and in some cases presuppose their dissolution” (17). Bowles’s writing primarily achieves this through its radical commitment to non-sequentiality, which is enacted spatially by Mrs. Copperfield’s refusal to follow the itinerary she had initially agreed upon with her husband. Taken more broadly, Mrs. Copperfield’s actions serve to disrupt the outcomes and trajectories of the quest narratives fundamental to patriarchal modernism. As Friedman and Fuchs comment, Bowles’s presentation of characters who do not move towards a specific goal “parodies traditional novelistic structure,” since “[i]n patriarchal fiction salvation and happiness are commonly depicted quests that Bowles has here [in *Two Serious Ladies*] decentered and thus sabotaged” (22). The quest narrative was central to masculinized modernism, and it allowed male writers to identify with the image of the alienated hero, perceiving themselves to be social outsiders and participating in what Jennie Skerl calls “the legend of the artist . . . with women playing supporting roles as muses, mistresses, or wives” (263). In contrast to her male contemporaries, Skerl argues that Bowles “presents the artist’s spiritual quest from a female point of view and laughs at the grotesque ‘lack of fit’ between female experience and the male visionary quest” (264). In *Two Serious Ladies*, journeys veer off their plotted course and away from marital commitments as a result of same-gender desire, disrupting the established conventions of modernist narrative in the process.

Additionally, Mrs. Copperfield’s deviation from an itinerary unsettles the masculine community of the text. When he leaves Panama to continue his tour of Central America alone, Mr. Copperfield sends his wife a letter in which he makes a series of accusations against her character and perceived lack of development:

You . . . spend your life fleeing from your first fear towards your first hope. Be careful that you do not, through your own wiliness, end up always in the same position in which

you began. . . . I believe sincerely that only those men who reach the stage where it is possible for them to combat a second tragedy within themselves, and not the first over again, are worthy of being called mature. When you think someone is going ahead, make sure that he is not really standing still. (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 110–11)

Mr. Copperfield accuses his wife of stasis, immaturity, and a lack of development due to her refusal to move on to the next stage of their planned journey. These features have frequently been attributed to queer people within modernity. As Heather Love observes,

[w]hether understood as throwbacks to an earlier stage of human development or as children who refuse to grow up, queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow recall the past. (6)

Mr. Copperfield identifies his wife's refusal to move on to the subsequent port of call in their trip with a kind of queer backwardness, a spatialization of her perceived resistance to development and maturity. Mrs. Copperfield's failure to "grow up" is observed through what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls "a short-sighted, limited rendering of human growth, one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved" (11). We should instead pay attention to queer forms of development from childhood to adulthood to interrogate "the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up" and emphasize "the many kinds of sideways growth" (11) that queer people engage in.

Conceptions of personal growth are clearly framed spatially in terms of moving forward through space. But what happens when a character refuses to grow or move in this way? Echoing her husband's accusations, Mrs. Copperfield is pejoratively associated with childishness many times in the novel, which appears to be bound up with her refusal to move around the world as is expected or planned. In this sense, her "childish" stasis, trying to stay on in Colón, can also be allied to her childlessness. Freeman describes how,

[i]n a chronobiological society, the state and other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are teleological schemas of events or strategies of living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals. (*Time Binds* 4)

By refusing imperatives towards "movement and change," which includes reproduction and child-rearing, Mrs. Copperfield cannot shed the tag of immaturity. In a gin-fueled night of revelry at the Hotel de las Palmas, Mrs. Copperfield exclaims: "At a certain point gin takes everything off your hands and you flop around like a little baby. Tonight I want to be a little baby" (Bowles, *Serious Ladies* 71). In the final scene, when Mrs. Copperfield introduces Pacifica to Miss Goering, Pacifica asks: "What can

I do with [Mrs. Copperfield]? She is like a little baby” (200). By ignoring the normative pressures placed on women within heterosexual marriages, Mrs. Copperfield is perceived by those around her as a figure of arrested development, a derogatory association that she herself appears to have internalized. As a narrative type, Mrs. Copperfield aligns with Stockton’s definition of the “grown ‘homosexual,’” a negative label used “to describe the supposed sexual immaturity of homosexuals: their presumed status as dangerous children, who remain children in part by failing to have their own” (22). This characterization may be cemented within marriages of convenience, since Freeman elsewhere argues that within “[a] state that promotes marriage” those who cannot function within a traditional couple form may be stigmatized and stereotyped as “immature and/or sexually indiscriminating” (*Wedding Complex* 2). On the one hand, Mrs. Copperfield offers a queer counterpoint to the propulsive, procreative expectations of marriage, resisting demands that she should progress to the next stage of her life’s journey until its queer possibilities have been fully explored. However, by doing so, she cannot escape the stigmatization and stereotyping of her “childish” behavior by those around her.

International Crime, Queer Performativity, and the Ripley Novels

Similar to the ways in which Bowles uses the marriage of convenience to undermine the masculine modernist quest narrative, Patricia Highsmith’s foregrounding of a queer couple in an equivalent arrangement in *Ripley Under Ground* subverts the patriarchal structures of crime or suspension fiction. Highsmith was a female author working within a genre that has often been charged with presenting “an effective façade of gender conformity” (Plain 25), particularly through its adoption of masculine, hard-boiled registers. Highsmith overcomes such gender norms in *Ripley Under Ground* through her focus on the transnational lives of the married couple Tom Ripley and Heloise Plisson. The movement of these characters reflects Highsmith’s own experiences of exile. From the early 1950s, Highsmith lived a highly transatlantic life, travelling back and forth between the United States and Europe; she would settle permanently from 1963 in France and Switzerland, distancing herself strongly from her Southern Texas roots. Highsmith’s letters and diaries from the 1940s to the 1990s show how the author traversed many international queer exile communities; Highsmith can be found spending time with Paul Bowles in Tangier or on a night out at the gay club Chez Romy Haag in West Berlin in the late 1970s. Highsmith’s five novels about the main character Tom Ripley and his circle, published between 1955 and 1991 and known unofficially as the “Ripliad,” also connect these transnational queer networks through the mobility of their criminal protagonist and his wife, the wealthy French heiress Heloise. In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (1980), which was dedicated

to Highsmith's French lover Monique Buffet, Tom has a criminal rendezvous in a Berlin gay bar dressed in drag, and in *Ripley Under Water* (1991), Tom and Heloise are pursued on a trip to Tangier by a man who wishes to expose Tom's history of murder. Throughout these novels, Heloise is often the motor behind their mobility, insisting that they engage in international travel to escape scandal or place distance between themselves and Tom's criminal activities.

In the second Ripley novel, *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), Tom and Heloise's marriage of convenience serves both to mask Tom's career as an international criminal and to allow Heloise to pursue a life of aimless pleasure. Underneath the camouflage of the Plisson dynasty, Tom engages in a career of forgery, fraud, and murder, activities that take him to Austria, Greece, England, Germany, and Morocco. His marriage to Heloise grants him membership of the wealthy classes of French society, and the couple enjoys a life of leisure in their home Belle Ombre, a rural idyll, the upkeep of which is supported largely by the allowance Heloise receives from her parents. Despite its European setting, Tom is a quintessentially US-American literary figure, who rapidly climbs the social ladder through techniques of impersonation. He resembles Jay Gatsby, a rich US-American whose background remains mysterious to those around him and whose conspicuous wealth conceals criminal activities. In the first novel in the Ripley series, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), the working-class protagonist is sent on an errand from New York to Italy by the shipping magnate Herbert Greenleaf to return his son Dickie to the US to work for the family. Instead, Tom resolves to stay in Europe using Dickie's money after he murders him, and then temporarily takes on his identity.

His relationship with Heloise seems to be a further stage in Tom's impersonation of transnational elites, since it provides him with an appearance of what he calls "French respectability" (Highsmith, *Ripley's Game* 599). This is a performance in which Heloise is also complicit, as Tom observes in *Ripley Under Ground*: "Her propriety was a veneer only, Tom knew, or surely she'd never have married him" (576). Tom considers how he has managed to keep

his name and his reputation clean, amazingly clean, considering all he did. It would be most embarrassing if it were in the French papers that Thomas Ripley of Villeperce-sur-Seine, husband of Heloise Plisson, daughter of Jacques Plisson, millionaire owner of Plisson Pharmaceutiques, had dreamed up the money-making fraud of Derwatt Ltd . . .
(*Ripley Under Ground* 300)

This distinction between public and private is part of the queer performativity of Heloise and Tom's marriage, which, in part, offers a cover for Tom's ambiguous sexuality. In her earliest note from her diaries on *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, written on March 28, 1954, Highsmith describes Tom as

[a] young American, half homosexual, an indifferent painter, with some money from home through an income, but not too much. He is the ideal, harmless looking, unimportant looking . . . kind of individual a smuggling gang would make use of to handle their contacts . . . He gets into deeper water, this careless, carefree young man (who is able to have affairs with both men & women) . . . Like Bruno [from her first novel *Strangers on a Train*], he must never be quite queer – merely capable of playing the part if need be to get information or to help himself out in an emergency. (*Diaries and Notebooks* 622–23)

Tom's queerness confounds as it appears, at times, to be performed for criminal ends.

As Tom observes in the final novel in the Ripliad, *Ripley Under Water*, in “the realm of sexual relations” matters can be “so different in privacy from what the pair might show the public” (Highsmith 68). This discrepancy appears to have produced severe discomfort in Tom during the act of marriage itself. As Highsmith describes

Tom had turned green at the wedding, even though it had been a civil wedding with no audience in a courtroom of some kind. . . . Marriages ought to be secret, Tom thought, as private as the wedding night – which wasn't saying much. Since everybody's mind was frankly on the wedding night anyway at weddings, why was the affair itself so blatantly public? There was something rather vulgar about it. (*Ripley Under Ground* 389)

Tom believes that audiences at weddings are fixated on the sexual activity that is presumed to follow the ceremony, despite the fact that carnal intimacy between Tom and Heloise is in fact limited. Feeling exposed, even by the presence of the limited audience for a civil wedding, Tom wishes for the ceremony to be made private in order to screen the “vulgar” sexual theater of marriage, which attracts the prurient interest of onlookers. Highsmith's exploration of the unsettling linkage between public and private through the wedding is arguably part of the novel's queer political project, which engages in “exposing links between the ‘private’ sphere and various ‘public’ techniques of control” (Freeman, *Wedding Complex* xiv). Tom articulates a desire to restrict the public sphere around marriage, appearing to resent the sporadic performativity that is essential to marriages of convenience, as well as the discomfiting erotic voyeurism of the ritual itself. As Shuzhen Huang and Daniel C. Brouwer analyze within a contemporary Chinese context, heterosexual marriages where one or both parties are queer require “episodic but felicitous performances of heteronormativity from queer subjects” (141), which may, in the case of Tom on his wedding day, place excessive stress upon members of these couples.

In *Ripley Under Ground*, Tom gives a number of reasons as to why his relationship with Heloise functions as a successful mask for his criminality and ambiguous sexuality. First, Heloise subscribes to a form of moral relativism that allows her to overlook his activities. Tom considers her morals to be “next to non-existent” (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 300) and believes that they are “disrespectful of the same

things” (*Ripley Under Ground* 459). He even goes so far as to say that “Heloise was that curious bit of a crook herself” (*Ripley Under Ground* 538), meaning that she is willing to look the other way and not ask questions when confronted with criminal behavior, and perhaps also his sexual transgressions. When Tom confesses to her that he has murdered someone, she is not fazed, rationalizing that there can be plural accounts of the same event: “What is true, what is not true?”, she ponders cynically (*Ripley Under Ground* 574). Throughout the novel, she displays a curious detachment from the complex situations in which they find themselves. As Tom reflects, “Heloise had a marvellous air of not being much interested in the situation, but of being polite enough to be present” (*Ripley Under Ground* 536). This position relates to her attitude to their collective finances, since Heloise “was interested in money, but not particularly in where it came from” (*Ripley Under Ground* 456). For Heloise, indifference to crime and indulgence in decadence go hand in hand, and it is precisely this relationship that also marks her as a queer character whose investment in immediate pleasures, rather than long-term goals, resists the normative futurity of the couple arrangement.

Heloise’s queerness is partly established by her unconventional gender identity and acceptance of Tom’s relative lack of sexual interest in women. Although Tom is attractive to women, he is passive to their advances: “the girls had liked him well enough, and in fact Tom had felt a bit pursued. Heloise Plisson had been one of the ones who had liked him. And from Tom’s point of view, she wasn’t a piece of cement, orthodox, or far out, or another bore” (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 389). Part of Heloise’s unorthodoxy is her embrace of sexual unconventionality. There are suggestions in the novel that she would be open to non-monogamy, and she tolerates and is amused by Tom’s young male protégés. There are also hints of youthful experimentation with sexual norms on Heloise’s part: “The stories she’d told Tom about her adolescent intrigues with girl schoolmates, and boys, too, to evade her parents’ surveillance, matched the inventions of Cocteau” (*Ripley Under Ground* 499). In a later Ripley novel, *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, Heloise even demonstrates her knowledge of queer subculture and literature, dancing to Lou Reed’s music and reading a “well-worn copy” of W. H. Auden’s *Selected Poems*, whose work she likes because it is “clear” (287). It is important to note here that Highsmith’s association of criminality and female sexual transgression may have been informed by the author’s attitudes towards women. Her friend Barbara Roett stated that “[i]f [Highsmith] were a man I would have no doubt in saying that she was a misogynist” (qtd. in Wilson 300). As Nathan Tipton also points out, Highsmith “had little truck with feminism, gay liberation, or, for that matter, any organized sociopolitical movement” (135). Highsmith’s

depiction of the amoral selfishness of Heloise and Tom can, in part, be read as an expression of her lack of solidarity with women and queer people.

Although their relationship still has a sexual component, it is not a priority for either of them. Their attempts to have sex while on honeymoon in Spain are repeatedly interrupted by a parrot in their hotel singing *Carmen* badly (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 335), which sets an early precedent for the irregularity of sex in their marriage. In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, Tom reveals that “[t]hey didn’t often make love,” but “[t]he infrequency of their making love didn’t seem to bother her at all. Curious . . . But convenient too, for him” (144). A detailed description of their sex life appears in *Ripley Under Ground*:

Tom lay with Heloise on the yellow sofa, drowsily, his head against her breast. They had made love that morning. Amazing. It was supposed to be a dramatic fact. It was not so important to Tom as having fallen asleep with Heloise the night before, with Heloise in his arms. . . . Tom felt odd sometimes making love with her, because he felt detached half the time, as if he derived pleasure from something inanimate, unreal, from a body without an identity. (458)

Tom derives pleasure from sex with Heloise, but the physical closeness to his wife appears more important than the act itself. Additionally, there is a curious sense of detachment, as he objectifies and depersonalizes his wife. Trask observes that Tom’s feelings in this passage confirm “not only our intuition of Tom’s queerness but also Highsmith’s commitment to eroticizing impersonality even in the midst of a relation as ostensibly intimate as the conjugal tie” (“Highsmith’s Method” 609). The freedom Heloise gives to Tom appears to be reciprocal, as his impersonal detachment from her gives her space in which she can escape a conventional female role within an ostensibly heterosexual marriage, as Tom recalls “Heloise had once said to him that she liked him, or had she said she loved him, because he let her be herself, and gave her room to breathe” (Highsmith, *Boy Who Followed* 255). The benefits Tom and Heloise derive from their relationship are consistent with Huang and Brouwer’s finding that queer marriages of convenience can paradoxically further heteronormativity and challenge gender and sexual norms simultaneously, thereby troubling “the perception that cultivation of same-sex desire and participation in a male-female marital relationship must be discontinuous and sequestered from each other” (141).

The benefits of this arrangement for Heloise may be less pronounced, since her sexuality is not consistently coded as queer, and she does not marry Tom for material advantages, as he is not himself from a wealthy background, deriving his income from the Greenleaf estate and his involvement in the Derwatt art forgery operation run out of London. However, her attachments to instantaneous enjoyment associate her with a queer form of stasis. The Ripley novels suggest that Heloise enjoys a “queer” relationship with Tom, which resists what Love calls the “future-oriented

temporality of the family” (67). Both characters strongly resist future-directed imperatives, including the raising of children, existing instead in a pleasure-based present, similar to the failure of Mrs. Copperfield to stick to the advance planning of her husband’s travel itinerary, part of Bowles’s representation of “quests . . . that contradict their declared objectives” (Friedman 246). It is Heloise and Tom’s lack of objectives that stretch into the future that partly marks this marriage as queer.⁶

In the case of Heloise, this manifests particularly in her pursuit of short-term consumerist pleasures. Her materialism seems to be bound up with her resistance to long-term planning. As part of this trend, she has a particular attraction to disposable items and superficial cultural symbols. The narrator tells us that “Heloise loved London – English sweaters and Carnaby Street, and the shops that sold Union Jack wastebaskets and signs that said things like ‘Piss off’” (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 309). Her interests remain primarily within the material realm, which manifests through a superficial engagement with other cultures through the purchases she makes, as the novel summarizes, “[i]f she had any passions, they were for travelling, sampling exotic food, and buying clothes. The contents of her two closets in her room looked like an international costume museum without the dummies” (*Ripley Under Ground* 352). Such pleasures have often been negatively associated with the absence of children in the lives of queer people, as Lee Edelman argues, capturing this stigmatizing logic: “If . . . there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning” (13).

Apparently lacking orientation towards the future, Heloise is ascribed a temperamental childishness, similar to that of Mrs. Copperfield, as well as an uncanny agelessness. Highsmith’s novel describes Heloise’s uncontrolled outbursts of anger with little cause behind them: “She had tempers and tempers. . . . The more serious tempers were caused by boredom or a minor assault upon her ego, and could occur if a guest had bested or contradicted her in a discussion at the table” (*Ripley Under Ground* 459). Heloise is judged by others to lack advancement through her apparent ability to regulate her “uncontrollable, unreasonable” (*Ripley Under Ground* 535) emotions. As a reflection of this queer form of arrested development, Heloise appears to age very little across the four Ripley novels in which she appears, which are set between 1968 and 1988 (Sutherland xvii). In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, Tom struggles to remember Heloise’s age: “she was only twenty-seven, or was it twenty-eight?” (144). However, in *Ripley Under Water* – the subsequent novel in the series set around ten years later – the text states that she expresses herself “sounding and looking like

⁶ Mrs. Copperfield also has few objectives apart from generalized pleasure. *Two Serious Ladies* describes how “Mrs. Copperfield’s sole object in life was to be happy” (Bowles 40).

a teenager instead of someone in her late 20s” (26). Heloise’s unnatural youthfulness may simply be a product of an authorial oversight to iron out inconsistencies between novels in the same series, but her surreal preservation against aging also speaks to a queer form of stasis and the stigma of developmental delay.⁷

As discussed in the previous section, queer theorists have shown how LGBTQ+ people may stand in opposition to normative temporal systems of organization. Jack Halberstam explains that

[q]ueer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. . . . “Queer time” is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. (1, 6)

Queer time stands in counterpoint to what Edelman calls “reproductive futurism” (2). He elaborates that

[e]ven proponents of abortion rights, while promoting the freedom of women to control their own bodies through reproductive choice, recurrently frame their political struggle, mirroring their anti-abortion foes, as a “fight for our children – for our daughters and our sons,” and thus as a fight for the future. (Edelman 3)

Edelman offers a queer challenge to discourses of pronatalism, arguing against “the singular imperative . . . to embrace our own futurity in the privileged form of the Child” (15).

In addition to Heloise’s tastes, character traits, and apparent lack of aging, we can observe this resistance to futurity in her relationship with Tom, when her husband contemplates that

[h]e could not make out [Heloise’s] objectives in life. She was like a picture on the wall. She might want children, some time, she said. Meanwhile, she existed. Not that Tom could boast of having any objectives himself, now that he had attained the life he had now, but Tom had a certain zest in seizing the pleasures he was now able to seize, and this zest seemed lacking in Heloise, maybe because she had had everything she wished since birth. (Highsmith, *Ripley Under Ground* 458)⁸

Highsmith contrasts the aggressive, posturing upward mobility of the US-American Tom with the staid, entrenched class privilege of the European Heloise. In reference to the “pleasures” of Tom’s life of leisure, Victoria Hesford comments that he is “an

⁷ The childishness of stigmatized characters was also explored by Alfred Hitchcock in his 1951 film adaptation of Highsmith’s novel *Strangers on a Train* (1950). Hitchcock referred to the queer character Bruno from Highsmith’s text as “rather a child” (qtd. in Greven 146), and David Greven argues that in the film both queer male and sexualized, heterosexual female characters are associated with “childlike and therefore regressive behavior,” which manifests through their “sensual childlike appetites” (150). Such presentations are reflected in the luxurious and shallow materialism of Heloise in the Ripley novels.

⁸ Mrs. Copperfield also seems to be aligned with a lack of futurity, when she comments that “[t]he longer I live, the less I can foresee anything” (Bowles, *Two Serious Ladies* 71).

accumulator of things . . . acquired for the pleasure they give now rather than the promise they offer for the future” (111).

Tom and Heloise’s investment in the immediate additionally unsettles the temporalities of crime or suspense fiction. Suspense fiction is driven by “the uncertainty of an expected outcome” and, within the context of narrative, it is the technique of “delaying or postponing (and, to a certain extent, concealing) the outcome of a certain action or situation” (Prieto-Pablos 100). Its orientation, therefore, is squarely towards the future, with suspense propelling the plot forward and helping to regulate its pace; as Juan A. Prieto-Pablos asserts, quoting Meir Sternberg, “suspense (and curiosity) constitute ‘perhaps the most propulsive forces a storyteller can rely on’” (109). The crime writer’s handling of time serves to either rapidly accelerate or slow down the pace of the narrative. Tony Hilfer argues that time within this genre is “decentered” and “[t]he narrative pace is either headlong (fast forward) or excruciatingly protracted (frame advance) as the protagonists struggle to stay a step ahead of the big clock for fear that they are about to be caught in its machinery” (39). Highsmith’s focus on the resistance to futurity of a queer married couple grounds the text in the present moment, and thereby subverts the temporal organization of crime fiction itself, specifically its predilection for speed or painstaking delay.

Although Highsmith does suggest that Heloise has an abstract desire to have children, this never materializes across the four Ripley novels in which she appears. Instead of subscribing to a normative ideology of reproductive futurity, Heloise and Tom are invested in the present moment.⁹ In a scene of non-sexual intimacy from *Ripley Under Ground* where the couple decadently drink champagne in bed, Tom considers that

[i]t was not an evening for making love, but Tom felt very happy, and not at all worried about tomorrow . . . Then his cheek was against her breast. Heloise, you’re the only woman in the world who has ever made me think of *now*, Tom wanted to say . . . (Highsmith 498)

Their queer investment in the present is highly disruptive of the conventions of suspense fiction; when with Heloise, Tom’s lack of anxiety for the future undermines the uncertain anticipation that is supposed to propel this genre forward. Heloise, as a relatively minor character in the Ripley series when compared to Tom, introduces stasis into the plot, to an extent that it comes to violate the governing principles of

⁹ In an interview from 1984, Highsmith expressed the misogynistic view that women who married, had children, and then complained about the “drudgery” of their lives should themselves bear responsibility: “‘And she didn’t foresee that [if] she got married and had the two kids, she’d be stuck in this particular trap [?]’” (qtd. in Wilson 300). In contrast to what seems to be a conscious decision not to have children on Heloise and Tom’s part, Highsmith would elsewhere condemn her female characters’ “passive” acceptance of normative expectations for womanhood. In relation to this passivity, Fiona Peters argues that “what is striking about [Highsmith’s] approach to women, both protagonists and objects, is the lack of will or, in some cases, the annihilation of choice” (130).

suspense fiction itself. Highsmith herself commented on the potential impact of smaller characters on narrative pace: “The trouble with [minor characters] may be that they do not advance the plot, and suspense novels can scarcely afford such characters in spite of the writer’s feeling that they vary the pace of the story” (*Suspense Fiction* 106). Heloise’s presence therefore works against the propulsive movement of suspense fiction, and, additionally, through her relationship with Tom, Highsmith presents a queer vision of coupledness and physical intimacy without orientation towards the future. This desexualized married couple continue to live in a queer temporality that evades future-directed objectives, including the raising of children, in both life and narrative.

Conclusion

In *Two Serious Ladies* and the Ripley novels, Bowles and Highsmith drew on their own experiences to explore how queer marriages of convenience may facilitate the movement of exiles. While they produced highly mobile narratives, neither of these texts moves towards a clear destination, typical of the marriage of convenience plot and its resistance towards closure. The plots of this romantic subgenre are temporally disruptive since they focus on courtship *after* marriage. Similarly, Bowles and Highsmith are not concerned with conventional progression from courtship to marriage to parenthood, but rather the unorthodox sexual arrangements that may lie behind the public face of conformist, heterosexual coupledness. Their shared focus on alternative temporalities of marriage allowed them to deconstruct the organization of the patriarchal genres of experimental modernist fiction and crime or suspense fiction. In *Two Serious Ladies*, Mrs. Copperfield’s refusal to continue on the planned and plotted path her husband has chosen for her, choosing instead to pursue a queer affair in Panama, undercuts the deliberate, premeditated steps of the masculinist, modernist quest narrative. Similarly, in *Ripley Under Ground*, Heloise and Tom’s investment in a pleasure-based present disrupts the propulsive structures that generally accompany suspenseful crime narratives. In both cases, a lack of orientation towards the future in narrative is linked to Mrs. Copperfield’s and Heloise’s lack of children within their chosen relationship structures. While these narratives offer queer alternatives to pronatalist ideology within heterosexual marriage, both characters are stigmatized by those around them as “childish” or “undeveloped” through their disengagement from procreative, future-directed imperatives. Nevertheless, these texts demonstrate that journeys may deviate from their expected paths through the experience of exile or that normative goals can be discarded in the lives of transnational women like Mrs. Copperfield and Heloise, since their queer motivations to marry produce unions whose outcomes can neither be conventionally plotted nor predicted.

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