

Stitching the Self:

Judith Butler, Digital Identity, and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*

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❖ ABSTRACT

This article reinterprets Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl; or, a Modern Monster* through Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* to propose a shift in digital-subjectivity studies from ontological claims of fragmentation to an ethics of relation enacted by form. While posthumanist and cyberfeminist accounts have read *Patchwork Girl* as emblematic of distributed identity and multilinear interactivity, such frameworks often treat dispersion as a purely epistemological or technological property. Bringing Butler's concepts of address, dependency, opacity, and responsibility into conversation with Jackson's Storyspace architecture, the article argues that the hypertext stages a "scene of address" in which the self is produced through readerly decisions that suture lexias, expose seams, and acknowledge limits. The narrative's five pathways ("a Graveyard," "a Journal," "a Quilt," "a Story," "& broken accents") function as modes of relation—corporeal archive, citational montage, experiential bifurcation, dialogic intimacy, and linguistic seamwork—while the map overview provides a meta-mode that renders arrangement contingent and revisable. The article advances the notion of a procedural ethics of navigation: interactivity is not user sovereignty but a practice of acknowledgment in borrowed terms that never yield total knowledge.

Keywords : *Patchwork Girl*, hypertext, digital subjectivity, Judith Butler, ethics

I . Introduction

Since its release in 1995, Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl; or, a Modern Monster* has occupied a central place in discussions of electronic literature and digital identity. Few works have been so frequently invoked as evidence of the hypertextual revolution in literary form and the supposed fragmentation of the postmodern subject. The hypertext has long been read as a quintessential experiment in nonlinearity and multiplicity, a text that both literalizes and celebrates the dispersal of selfhood within the digital matrix. For scholars of early hypertext theory—Jay David Bolter, George Landow, N. Katherine Hayles, and Espen Aarseth—Jackson's Storyspace composition seemed to materialize the poststructuralist dream of textual openness, of a narrative that resists closure and embodies the decentered, networked subject of late twentieth-century thought. Landow astutely argues that electronic writing “embodies the convergence of poststructuralist theory and computer technology,” offering an interactive medium where “the author's authority dissolves into the reader's freedom” (11). Jackson's stitched woman appeared to exemplify that dissolution: a body and a text composed of fragments, inviting the reader to participate in its reconstruction.

Within this interpretive lineage, *Patchwork Girl* has often been framed as a text that enacts new modes of subjectivity made possible by digital media. Hayles argues that Jackson's hypertext “mobilizes the resources of the medium to enact subjectivities distributed in flexible and mutating ways across author, text, interface, and reader,” foregrounding “the distributed cognition characteristic of electronic environments” rather than depicting a unified, autonomous self (26). For Hayles, Jackson's use of the Storyspace platform dramatizes the flicker between code and

narrative, surface and depth, materiality and information—thereby transforming reading itself into an act of becoming-posthuman. Although Bolter and Richard Grusin do not discuss *Patchwork Girl* directly, their theory provides a productive framework for interpreting Jackson’s hypertext. They describe digital media as operating through a “double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy” (viii) where new media “refashion” (15) older forms while simultaneously exposing their own processes of mediation. From this perspective, Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* can be read as a hypertext that makes visible the very seams of mediation, staging the interface as a site where subjectivity is continually negotiated between transparency and opacity. Feminist digital theorists, such as Laura Shackelford, have extended this line of argument to claim that Jackson’s hypertext performs “technological corporeality” (87), a specifically cyberfeminist vision of embodiment that reclaims the monstrous and the mechanical as sources of creative power.

While these readings have been enormously productive, they share a common assumption that deserves reexamination: they tend to equate *Patchwork Girl*’s formal fragmentation with an epistemological model of identity. The digital subject emerging from such analyses is primarily a structural effect, a metaphor for distributed systems and network logic. Identity, in this view, is dispersed across links, nodes, and lexias; it is less an ethical condition than a design principle. The hypertext becomes a mirror for the technological age, an emblem of a consciousness multiplied by digital interconnectivity. Even where feminist interpretations celebrate fragmentation as resistance, they often retain the premise that multiplicity is, in itself, emancipatory. To be fractured is to be free; to be nonlinear is to be subversive. Yet, I argue that such readings risk substituting a formal metaphor for an experiential and ethical understanding of

subjectivity. Fragmentation becomes a sign, but not a practice; dispersion, an epistemological figure, rather than a lived condition of relationality.

This article proposes a different approach by bringing Judith Butler's philosophy of selfhood, particularly as articulated in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), into dialogue with Jackson's digital experiment. Butler's work provides a powerful corrective to the dominant posthumanist frameworks that have shaped *Patchwork Girl's* reception. Where posthuman and cyberfeminist readings often foreground multiplicity as liberation, Butler insists on dependency, exposure, and relational accountability as the ground of ethical life. The self, according to Butler, comes into being only in the context of address, through being called to give an account of itself before others (89). In other words, identity is not a property to be owned or a network to be mapped; it is an ongoing process of responsiveness within relations of interpellation. For Butler, the subject's opacity—its inability to know or narrate itself completely—is not a failure but the very condition of ethical responsibility. As she writes, “the opacity of the subject may be a consequence of its being conceived as a relational being, one whose early and primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge” (20). Because “we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us” (20), Butler holds that “we are, as it were, divided, ungrounded, or incoherent from the start” (19), and therefore we are “not self-grounding beings” but beings “whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for” (19) and “whose very opacity to itself... sustains some of its most important ethical bonds” (20).

When read through Butler's framework, *Patchwork Girl* ceases to be a mere allegory of digital dispersion and becomes instead an enacted meditation on the ethics of relational selfhood. Jackson's stitched

protagonist—a being literally composed of others’ parts—embodies Butler’s claim that the self is assembled from what is outside itself, that it is dependent on and exposed to the histories, languages, and bodies that sustain it. The hypertext’s architecture of linked lexias transforms this philosophical claim into interactive practice. Each readerly click becomes an act of suturing: a moment in which fragments are joined, paths are chosen, and meaning is temporarily stabilized. Yet every suture also reveals its seam; every traversal leaves other connections unchosen, other stories unread. In this sense, Jackson’s digital body performs Butler’s idea that our very capacity to give an account of ourselves is dependent on the norms and languages we did not make and cannot fully command (42). The hypertext’s partial, recursive design renders this condition tactile. To read *Patchwork Girl* is to inhabit the impossibility of total self-knowledge while nonetheless engaging in the ethical labor of narration.

Thus, I argue that Jackson’s hypertext stages what Butler calls a “scene of address”—a space where the self is constituted not in isolation but through encounters of calling and response. The reader, confronted with Jackson’s splash screen—a painted body stitched together by visible seams—is placed immediately within such a scene. The text’s dual authorship (“by Mary/Shelley and Herself”) establishes a dialogic field that extends to the reader: a triadic relationship between nineteenth-century author, twentieth-century hypertext maker, and twenty-first-century reader whose navigation performs the act of address. To move through the text is to be hailed by others’ words, to answer by choosing, and to realize that every answer is provisional. The self that emerges here is not autonomous but answerable, not unified but sustained through ongoing acts of relational maintenance.

In making this claim, the article departs from formalist analyses of *Patchwork Girl* in three crucial respects. First, it challenges the critical tendency to treat hypertextual structure as a metaphor for postmodern subjectivity, proposing instead that Jackson's work operates as a procedural ethics. The reader's engagement with links, maps, and branching paths becomes an ethical practice of navigating partial knowledge and shared authorship. Second, it reframes interactivity not as the celebration of user agency but as a dramatization of dependency—the recognition that every click depends on an architecture built by others, just as every utterance depends on inherited language. Third, it situates Jackson's digital poetics within Butler's broader philosophical project of relational ethics, showing how *Patchwork Girl* literalizes Butler's call for an account of oneself that is always already an account to others.

By reading Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* through Butler's relational ethics, this article intervenes in three overlapping fields: digital literary studies, feminist theory, and moral philosophy. In digital studies, it challenges the dominance of posthumanist and cyberfeminist models that conflate multiplicity with emancipation. Rather than celebrating the dissolution of the subject, Jackson's work—when viewed through Butler—reveals fragmentation as the very condition of ethical engagement. In feminist theory, it extends the discourse on embodiment beyond metaphors of cyborg hybridity toward a material ethics of vulnerability and care. Jackson's visible seams and digital scars invite the reader to see connection not as smooth fusion but as the labor of holding together what might otherwise fall apart. In philosophy, the article translates Butler's abstract notion of the “scene of address” into a concrete, interactive practice: reading itself becomes the enactment of ethical relation.

This reorientation has significant implications for how we conceptualize digital subjectivity. If the posthuman subject of early hypertext theory was defined by dispersion, the Butlerian subject proposed here is defined by answerability. To exist digitally is not to dissolve into data but to become entangled in systems of recognition and response. The hypertextual interface, far from offering the reader unbounded freedom, enacts the ethical bind Butler describes: one must act within limits, using languages and architectures not of one's own making, and yet one remains responsible for those actions. Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* teaches its reader precisely this form of ethical navigation. Each click is an act of selection that opens one path while closing others, a gesture that exposes the reader's agency and its constraints.

In this light, the hypertext becomes more than a narrative experiment; it becomes an ethical instrument. It trains its reader to tolerate partial knowledge, to revisit, to repair, to live with seams. What many critics have described as *Patchwork Girl*'s disunity can thus be reconceived as its ethical pedagogy. The work does not celebrate fragmentation for its own sake but uses it to cultivate what Butler might describe as an ethics of acknowledgment—the recognition that our self-accounts are always provisional, situated, and shared. As Butler claims, “we are still under the demand to offer and receive acknowledgment: to someone else who is there to be addressed and whose address is there to be received” (22). The digital subject, like Jackson's stitched creature, exists “under the needle and under the pen”: simultaneously written, revised, and held together by others' touch.

In doing so, this essay ultimately seeks to demonstrate how *Patchwork Girl* enacts a Butlerian ethics of digital life. Its visible sutures and recursive navigation reveal that the self is not undone by multiplicity but

sustained by it. In Butler's words, "to be undone by the other is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me" (136). Jackson's hypertext literalizes this undoing—not as disintegration, but as the ongoing process of being held together through address. The reader who traverses its lexias practices what Butler may call responsiveness under constraint, discovering that identity, like the hypertext, can only persist through continuous acts of reassembly. *Patchwork Girl* teaches its audience not what a digital self is, but how it is done. The self, in Jackson's and Butler's shared vision, is neither autonomous nor transparent; it is relational, procedural, and performative. Its coherence lies not in wholeness but in the visible seams of connection—the very traces of relation that make accountability possible. This Butlerian reading thus is to reframe *Patchwork Girl* as an ethics of navigation: a text that asks us to read, click, and think as beings answerable to one another in a medium built of fragments.

II. Paths, Links, and the Digital Self

The first thing *Patchwork Girl* asks of its reader is not assent but orientation. Jackson's "splash" screen—an image of the stitched figure rendered in thick, painterly strokes—does not merely decorate an entryway; it places the reader before a body whose seams are also routes. Clicking through to the hybrid title page (*Patchwork Girl; or, a Modern Monster by Mary/Shelley and Herself*) announces the dual premise that will govern everything that follows: authorship is split, and identity is a composition. From here, five named paths—"a Graveyard,"

“a Journal,” “a Quilt,” “a Story,” and “& broken accents”—fan outward like radiating nerves. But Jackson immediately subverts the comfort of a menu: she reveals a cartographic “map overview,” a movable field of linked boxes that more closely reflects how the piece was composed and, crucially, how Jackson hopes readers will choose to move. The map is not a bonus feature; it is a thesis. It says that the architecture of this body is not hierarchical; it is discoverable. In this interface, reading is not the execution of a script but the invention of a path. The work indicates its topic—the digital self—not by abstract claim but by asking the reader to practice it.

That demand becomes evident the moment the reader enters “Birth.” The creature declares, “My birth takes place more than once ... under the needle, and under the pen,” before offering links that fracture the declaration into routes: one branch to Frankenstein’s aborted “female monster,” another to the Graveyard, and two to parallel sequences “under the needle” and “under the pen.” The sentence does not just say multiplicity; it operationalizes it. Jackson further complicates the scene with a sudden parenthetical intrusion in the monster’s voice—an editorial graffiti that revises Mary Shelley midstream and replaces obedience with unruly self-presentation. This interruption makes two decisive moves. First, it refuses the model of a subject securely locked behind a single narrator’s “locks and screens.” Second, it gives the reader evidence that identity here is dialogic and contested: the monster addresses, contradicts, and revises—producing a self across a relay of speaking positions. Digital identity in Jackson’s text is not a static “profile”; it is an event occurring in the exchange between writing hands and clicking hands, between Mary’s genteel sentences and the monster’s brazen asides, between every lexia and the paths the reader draws among them.

The paired “written” and “sewn” threads formalize the emblem that runs through the whole work: stitches are like letters, and letters like stitches. In “written,” candlelit script blurs into needlework; in “sewn,” the needle’s labor wavers into script. Jackson is not content with a metaphor. She designs the hypertext so that the reader chooses which thread to follow first and then double-backs to the other, discovering that neither alone is “the” origin story. The equivalence functions as a reading contract: readers are invited to read the text as a body—joined, scarred, made of pieces—and the body as text—segmented, cross-referenced, subject to revision. The link, in this economy, is a suture. To click is to bind; to backtrack is to reopen a seam; to hold down keys and “reveal links” is to X-ray the connective tissue of the piece. The form makes an ethics: progress is not guaranteed, wholeness is never final, and every route leaves silences elsewhere that remain to be returned to or left in peace.

The Graveyard literalizes this logic by giving each body part an archive. Head, eyeballs, lips, tongue—each part bears a local history, a voice, a provenance. The skull is “an ancient vase” reassembled from fragments; the eyeballs belong to a voracious reader whose disability rerouted her gaze into an encyclopedic knowledge of others; the lips laugh too freely for their town; the tongue comes weighted with gossip, heresy, and stolen authorship. None of these tales complete the woman; each makes her less reducible to a single account by adding yet one more thread that cannot be understood without the rest and yet does not yield to them. Readers are “burdened with body parts,” fingernails “packed with mud and chips of bone,” because Jackson wants the experience of navigation to approximate the labor of assembly. Even an untidy technical limitation (a “black bar” where a dynamic “right arm

view” was intended) plays into the theme: some intentions remain unrealized; some seams are visible as gaps. The digital self here does not arise from a perfected interface but from a practice of handling remnants—choosing, arranging, and acknowledging that the very act of reassembly leaves cuts that show.

If the Graveyard distributes the body across discrete histories, the Quilt distributes authorship across quotation. Jackson’s “Journal Quilt” literalizes Storyspace’s architecture: text boxes become patches; links become seams; an “explode” operation slices a large space into smaller ones, populating a “very well-shaped girl.” The Quilt’s lexias pull from Mary Shelley, Baum’s *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, the Storyspace manual, literary theory, and histories—scraps that are stitched until they form a legible field. Jackson’s choice to expose the software’s vocabulary (“explode,” “spaces”) alongside Mary Shelley’s prose and Baum’s fable refuses to separate the mythic from the technical. Code belongs on the same cloth as canon. The result is not a collage that dissolves sources into background noise, but a suture that leaves sources legible as sources. We read through quotation rather than despite it; authorship becomes a practice of hosting. The “Bottles” lexia, with its comically alchemical mixing of “good qualities,” makes the point bluntly: there is no essence hidden in one container, only mixtures whose properties depend on the hands that pour and the reader who follows the recipe.

The “Story” section, which many readers treat as the most linear, is only as linear as one’s commitments. Two parallel “revelations,” nearly identical at first glance, soon diverge into contrary affective consequences. In one, laughter opens desire; in the other, shame triggers retreat. The bifurcation does not ask the reader to discover which is “true”; it underscores that identity unfolds across contingencies of timing, posture,

and interpretation. The subsequent accident—the leg torn away, a funeral held for the limb—pushes this point to grotesque clarity. The body is not a single unit marching through time; it is a set of relations that can be separated, mourned, and perhaps replaced. The readers' movements through the links model the same principle: they cannot, in one pass, keep every limb in view. They will always be choosing some line of continuity at the expense of another, and the text will remain what it is: a held-together plurality that hoards what you did not click and waits for their return.

Broken Accents receives less performative attention in Jackson's demonstration, yet its title tells the reader what it does. It gathers mispronunciations, misalignments, migratory tones—verbal seams. If *Graveyard* foregrounds the body and *Quilt* foregrounds the archive, *Broken Accents* foregrounds language's inbuilt patchiness. Accents are how histories adhere to speech; broken accents are how speech advertises that its histories do not unify. The section's function within the overall design is to make audible what the other sections make visible: the digital self is not only a many-authored body and a many-sourced text; it is also a many-sounded voice. When the creature "interrupts" Mary Shelley with parenthetical bravado, when the lexias toggle between "written" and "sewn," when "revelations" repeats under slightly altered light, Jackson is scoring the prose—marking changes in accent that carry changes in claim. Digital form lets those accents branch.

The Journal extends this attention to voice by recasting Mary Shelley as a diarist who encounters, then desires, her creation. Jackson neither mythologizes nor debunks Mary; she literalizes the old double-bind of authorship: to create is both to possess and to be possessed. Mary wants to "live on in her" monster by offering a graft of herself—an explicitly

queer, maternal fantasy that renders authorship as organ donation. The result is not a stable inheritance but a recursive loop: creation produces dependency both ways. This relation is enacted, not simply described, because the reader becomes an accessory to the affair: by deciding when to follow “written” or “sewn,” when to return to Mary’s diary or move with the creature into the desert, the reader apportionates time and attention, and thus shapes which love story appears on screen.

Throughout, the map overview functions as more than a designer’s aside; it is the piece’s memory palace. Jackson remarks that she “constructed the piece” by moving these boxes by hand; the reader cannot rearrange them in the read-only version, but the trace of that manual labor remains. The map announces that this text was not born tidy. It had to be built, moved, and fitted. The digital self it theorizes is likewise something built in relation to tools that insist on certain cuts and certain joins. The requirement to hold down two keys to “reveal links” dramatizes this point: connection is not always legible at a glance; it must be summoned into view. That gesture—holding keys, revealing a skeleton of connections—makes the reader complicit in the suture. The reader is not a spectator to identity’s complexity; they are someone who must choose to see it.

Jackson’s late movement west—to the mobile home near Death Valley, to a laptop strapped on for wandering—completes a transformation in time and scale. The creature exits the nineteenth-century laboratory and enters the late-twentieth-century network. Yet the desert sequence is anything but an escape into blankness. The creature fantasizes about dissipation—becoming “hard shreds of jerky”—only to recall that her life is “doubt and movement.” In a digital register, this is the difference between erasing a file and accepting version history. The past cannot be

unmade; it can be “snipped,” “revised into seamliness,” but even the attempt produces evidence of its own cuts. The desert’s “stubborn blank thingness,” like a blank screen, tempts one to believe that identity can be restarted. Jackson denies the fantasy by installing in the reader’s body the experience of memory as linkage: every click is a return, every route a remainder of alternatives.

The reader’s role, then, is not to master a labyrinth but to practice a repertoire. Jackson’s insistence on disorientation—“a reader could find herself somewhere ... disorienting”—is pedagogical. It trains a tolerance for partial knowledge and an appetite for revisitation. The work thereby models a digital self that is playable: not game-like in the sense of goals and rewards, but instrument-like in the sense of a body you must learn to sound. The musician never exhausts an instrument; the reader never exhausts *Patchwork Girl*. Each traversal is a new performance under constraints—the lexias exist, the links link where they link—but the articulation among them shifts. That performative quality answers a core anxiety about digital identity: if it is always assembled, is it therefore arbitrary? Jackson’s answer is no. The seam is not arbitrary; it is consequential. A different stitch makes a different contour. And because stitches pass through material, the body bears the history of its making. Links are scars that hold.

Placed within a discourse that often equates digital identity with dispersion alone, *Patchwork Girl*’s structure advances a different claim: dispersion is the condition of relation. To be stitched is to be held to others—sources, readers, prior texts, lovers, software—and to be visible as so held. The splash screen’s painted body is an invitation to regard seams as features: they are marks of attachment, not merely of damage. The closing movement to the map overview seals this idea. Jackson

would have been “happy enough” to let readers move the boxes around themselves—an admission that the ideal interface would expose the full contingency of order. Even without that feature, the trace remains: the reader senses the possibility of a different arrangement, and that sense becomes the final lesson. The digital self is an arrangement that could have been otherwise and will be, the next time you read.

The work’s narrative threads demonstrate how this structural thesis operates at the level of plot. “Birth” fragments the act that most persistently anchors identity; “revelations” stages the discovery of another’s body as an occasion for both desire and fear; the leg’s funeral insists that parts can be mourned without undoing the whole; the desert asks whether “erasing” one’s history can ever amount to more than editing. Each scene rehearses a core operation of the interface. Birth is linking, revelations are branching, the funeral is deletion with remainder, the desert is the temptation of the empty document. In each, the reader’s hand performs an equivalent action on the text: clicking forward is choosing a story, backing up is refusing closure, opening the map is remembering that other lives run in parallel.

Because the earlier introduction reads Jackson through an ethical lens of relation, it is worth underscoring how the interface practices that ethic rather than merely analogizing it. To navigate *Patchwork Girl* is to accept that one’s account of it (and of oneself through it) will be partial, exposed to contradiction, and produced in response to others’ words. That earlier introduction frames this as a condition of responsibility rather than failure: we become selves by giving accounts to one another within constraints we did not choose. Jackson’s text operationalizes the same idea. It solicits accounts—the reader’s sequence of clicks, their chosen quotations, their preferred metaphors—and it makes those

accounts visible as accounts by refusing the illusion that a single route could comprehend the whole. In that respect, the hypertext is not just a metaphor for the digital self; it is an instrument for practicing it.

One could object that the work's reliance on Storyspace's visual schema and link conventions dates it, or that its occasional technical limits (the "black bar" in place of a movable limb) compromise its ambitions. But even these features serve the thesis. A digital self is not the triumph of frictionless control; it is the negotiation of affordances and limits. The "read-only" version can't rearrange the map, yet it allows the reader to conjure a link-skeleton with a key press. The glitch in the Graveyard confirms that authorial intentions are mediated by software's stubbornness, just as identities are mediated by institutions, bodies, and other people. The seams are part of the story. Thus, I argue that *Patchwork Girl's* architecture can be read as an enacted theory of digital selfhood. The five paths are not thematic bins; they are modes of relation—corporeal archives in the Graveyard, dialogic intimacy in the Journal, citational montage in the Quilt, experiential bifurcation in the Story, and linguistic seamwork in Broken Accents. The map overview supplies a meta-mode, reminding the reader that every current arrangement can be redrawn. Their actions—revealing links, choosing branches, backtracking, lingering—are not enhancements; they are the grammar of the piece. Jackson's strongest claim is therefore not descriptive ("identity is many") but procedural ("identity is done many ways").

The work closes as it began: by asking the reader to own the consequences of a route. When the creature asserts that she was "thrown into movement and doubt," she names the condition of every reader who has tried to hold the whole in mind. The payoff is not mastery but

a practiced ease with incompleteness. That ease is not resignation; it is a skill—knowing how to suture without pretending one has restored an original purity. If digital culture has made identity feel like an endless editing session, *Patchwork Girl* offers an account of why that condition can be livable: because the seams are shared, visible, and revisitable. The work's body does not hide its repairs. Neither should ours.

Jackson's hypertext demonstrates that the digital self is not a thesis to be asserted but a practice to be learned. It teaches the reader to treat choice as suture, quotation as hospitality, maps as memories, interruptions as claims, and glitches as history. It makes visible how every birth in a life is only one among several, and how every revelation recasts what came before. In its design and in its story, *Patchwork Girl* proposes that identity—digital or otherwise—consists not in being one thing, but in returning, with others, to make and remake the path through which that thing holds together for now.

III. Butler's Scene of Address in *Patchwork Girl*

What Jackson builds as a navigable body of seams and routes meets Judith Butler's demand that any "account of oneself" is staged before another, in a scene that precedes and conditions the very possibility of self-narration. Butler's claim in *Giving an Account of Oneself* is stark: "I begin my story of myself only in the face of a 'you' who asks me to give an account" (the one who asks, "Was it you?") (11). The account is not a soliloquy; it is provoked, situated, and oriented by an address that arrives from elsewhere. *Patchwork Girl* enacts that scene at every level of form. The reader's first situation is the splash screen and the

title that names “Mary/Shelley and herself,” immediately establishing a dialogic field of address: a nineteenth-century author; a twentieth-century hypertext maker; a stitched figure who will interrupt, mock, and answer; and a reader whose clicks count as replies. In Butler’s terms, the reader’s route is not merely a technical choice through links; it is the performative uptake of a demand to order a life that is not fully one’s own to order. Each traversal answers a tacit “you,” and each revisit concedes that any prior account was provisional.

Butler is explicit that “telling a story about oneself is not the same as giving an account of oneself” (12), since an account answers an allegation, accepts that one may be the cause of another’s suffering, and aims at persuasion in the presence of an audience. Jackson’s “Birth” lexia places the creature under just such an interrogative atmosphere. The parenthetical eruption that laughs at Mary Shelley’s tidy narrative—“I told her to abort me ... I did not want what he wanted”—is not only an assertion of autonomy; it is a counter-account delivered inside and against a prior scene of address. That is to say, the monster does not withdraw into privacy; she answers Mary’s literary and moral frame with another story that refuses the presuppositions of the first. Butler notes that even refusal—silence, or the decision not to narrate—is still a “relation to narrative and to the scene of address” (12), because it responds to the question by contesting its authority. In *Patchwork Girl*, refusal takes the shape of detours (“under the needle,” “under the pen”), parenthetical sabotage, and a map that lets one skip the “proper” path. Those structural options dramatize Butler’s reminder that the ethical moment is not exhausted by whether a given account is complete; it includes how one is addressed and how one answers (30–31).

A central thread of Butler’s argument is that the very media of

self-explanation do not originate with the self. “The very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character,” she argues, and the scene of address is “a more primary ethical relation than a reflexive effort to give an account of oneself” (21). Jackson’s *Quilt* literalizes that claim. The writing spaces that become patches, the Storyspace menu command “explode” that slices text into lexias, the manual’s idiom embedded alongside Shelley and Baum—all of these are the socially available “terms” that prefigure and delimit what can count as an account here. When the reader pieces together a route across quotations and programmatic scaffolding, the reader’s “I” is not inventing out of nothing; it is composing with borrowed cloth. In Butler’s idiom, the self does not transcend its dependence on shared norms and shared language; it is constituted in and through them, sometimes uneasily. That dependence need not be lamented. It is the condition under which the self can appear at all, because intelligibility is a public currency before it is a private resource. The *Quilt*’s citational density thus does not merely decorate Jackson’s theme—it supplies the very normative terms that make any account within this milieu receivable.

If the *Quilt* demonstrates that our words come to us already worn, the *Graveyard* shows that our bodies arrive with histories we cannot fully recount. Butler describes a limit that every narrative of the self will strike: “Although we are compelled to give an account of our various selves, the structural conditions of that account will turn out to make a full such giving impossible” (20). There is “a formative history that remains irrecoverable by reflection,” such that primary relations “produce a necessary opacity in our understanding of ourselves” (20–

21). Jackson's skull-as-vase and the body assembled from partial lives enact that opacity not as a failure of craft but as the grain of the medium. Even where the text affords micro-histories for "eyeballs," "lips," or "tongue," the collected dossier never closes into total knowledge. Readers are made to feel this as labor—"burdened with body parts"—and as a remainder they cannot finesse away. Butler sharpens the point by distinguishing what narrative can and cannot touch: certain bodily exposures are "a condition of my narration, one I cannot fully thematize within any narrative I might provide," so that "the stories do not capture the body to which they refer" (38). *Patchwork Girl's* intractable seam—e.g. the missing "right arm view" that remains a black bar—reads, from this angle, as more than an obsolete interface glitch; it is a formal reminder that a part of one's genesis and composition will not be brought into intelligible sequence, even when one can point to it.

This opacity does not release us from responsibility. Butler goes out of her way to refuse the inference that limits to self-knowledge license ethical negligence. "If the subject is opaque to itself, it is not therefore licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its relations to others" as she holds (19-20). The task is to imagine an ethics that works in the service of "responsibility" without fantasizing full transparency (91-93). Jackson's split "revelations" are useful here. In one thread desire opens; in the other shame closes down; both end in injury and a leg's funeral. The monster's account of these events—especially the uneasy thought that she could "erase" a past by editing it—faces the problem Butler names: how to own one's doings and their effects when the self that owns them is not fully available to itself, nor authored by itself alone. The hypertext's design suggests one answer. Responsibility is not a final

ledger; it is an ongoing practice of returning, revising, acknowledging what was not seen on the first pass, and accepting that a different path does not cancel the prior one but remains alongside it as part of what one has done. In Butler's phrasing, narrative capacity is "a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility" (12), but the narrative does not come after the deed as a neutral report; it is how moral agency takes shape at all. The ethics, then, live in the recursive performance, not in the fantasy of a single definitive version.

Butler also wants us to see how norms mediate recognition. Drawing on Foucault, she writes that a "regime of truth offers the terms that make self-recognition possible" (22), setting a frame for who can count as a subject at all. These norms "provide the framework and the point of reference" for decisions about who the "I" will be, even while they remain open to challenge and change (22). Jackson dramatizes recognition's frame with the title page that calls the figure "a Modern Monster." The label both constrains and invites: it loads the creature with a genealogy (Frankenstein, modernity, monstrosity), but the interface refuses to let that label settle into a single arc. The "Story" section's bifurcations show recognizability as an alternating current. To Chancy, the stitched body is first a threat and then a lover; to the passerby, it is injured matter; to the reader, it is a cursor-dependent protagonist or a dossier of scraps. Butler urges us to read these shifts not as mere relativism but as encounters inside a moving field of norms. The "desire for recognition" (22), she claims, sets limits on recognition's operation and can, paradoxically, "run the risk of arresting desire" (44) if norms try to fix us too tightly. *Patchwork Girl's* refusal to settle both protects desire's motion and shows how recognition remains contested terrain.

The relation between speech and life is another hinge where Butler's

ethics clarifies Jackson's practice. Following Foucault's reading of Socratic address, Butler notes that giving an account is a practice in which one "is being led" by another's question and must "show that there is a relation between the rational discourse ... and the way that you live" (126). Speaking is already "a kind of doing, a form of action" (126), and the account answers a request in order to "establish or re-establish a certain bond" (131). In *Patchwork Girl*, the monster's interjections into Mary Shelley's prose are not purely expository; they are interventions in a relationship. Mary's diary entries that move from fear to intimacy are not background; they are the life of an address between author and creature, each altered by the other's words. When the reader chooses "written" before "sewn," the reader is not only selecting content; the reader is taking up one relation between speaking and living over another for that pass. The hypertext makes this uptake palpable, and in doing so aligns with Butler's claim that the ethical matter at stake is the manner of address, the risk of speech, and the attempt to honor that one has been called upon.

At several junctures Butler returns to the fact that the address that inaugurates the account is not only proximate and dyadic; it is social and historical: "The norms by which I recognize another or, indeed, myself are not mine alone. They function to the extent that they are social" (24). Jackson keeps that social thickness in view by braiding Mary Shelley, Baum, theory, manuals, and lore into the same fabric. To give an account inside this text is to speak in a polyglot public idiom. Moreover, Jackson lets the reader "reveal links" with a key command—the skeleton of the work's sociality, so to speak—so one can see how any present lexia is held up by structures not currently in view. Butler's insistence that one's terms are inherited rather than invented becomes

not an abstract linguistic point but a sensation: the reader literally calls up the mesh that will have made any claim intelligible.

Because inherited terms can wound as well as enable, Butler also worries about ethical violence—those moments when the demand for a transparent, self-identical account punishes what cannot be said or known. She insists that the limits of narration are not just cognitive inconveniences; they are conditions that any humane ethics must respect. To insist on full clarity is to deny the formative, opaque relations by which the self comes to be. Jackson’s design resists that punitive drift. The work welcomes disorientation, and the map’s invitation to rearrange (even if the read-only build cannot fully realize it) signals a gentle refusal of the one true order. The “black bar” in the Graveyard—so tempting to fix—remains as a structural apology for control. Rather than framing the gap as fault, Jackson lets it stand as a record: some seams will show; some parts will not articulate on command. The reader learns, with Butler, that an ethic lives in how we meet such limits—do we berate, or do we adjust and continue the conversation?

Butler’s name for the field in which all of this is staged is “the scene of address” (50, 54), a place where we are asked to account, where we may nod, speak, or refuse, and where “acknowledgment” (42) occurs as a practice rather than a final state. As Sara Ahmed clarifies, this scene is defined not only by giving an account but by whether—and how—an account is received. Reception, Ahmed argues, can be simulated without taking place, structured as a position rather than an act (27). *Patchwork Girl* transposes this scene into interface. The reader meets a demand (to choose), answers it by movement (a click that binds two lexias), and then finds that this answer commits one to consequences (what remains unseen, what must be returned to, what is now irretrievable without a

new route). Butler emphasizes that the address precedes the reflexive subject: “I come into being as a reflexive subject ... when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me” (15). The hypertext makes this temporality legible. The stitched woman speaks because Mary speaks to her, because the reader routes her, because Storyspace offers certain joins rather than others. Self-reflection follows address; it does not originate it.

The Death Valley coda clarifies another Butlerian pressure: the lure of erasure versus the patience of revision. The creature dreams of peeling off her past “like linoleum,” of a blankness that would relieve the burden of prior links. Butler warns that such dreams are at odds with the very sociality that gives the “I” its speech. The terms that make self-knowledge possible cannot be willed away; to deny them is to deny the relation by which one is addressable, and thus accountable. In Butler’s words, morality is “essential to the determination of agency,” and the ethical question reappears “at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility,” where dialogue persists despite no guaranteed common ground(20). Jackson’s desert is exactly such a limit—a place where the code of prior lives thins, yet a laptop hums, and a path must still be cut. The scene is not nihilistic; it is an austere lesson in continuing to speak with others in mind when nothing secures the fit between lexia and life.

Butler’s distinction between story and account helps us read Jackson’s several “revelations” more precisely. A story may stage a discovery (Chancy’s body), but an account inserts that scene into an address that raises the question of injury, causation, and responsibility. As Megan Cole Paustian emphasizes, an account is never simply a report of events; it is shaped by the frame of mediation and recognition through which

an other is encountered, and it takes on ethical force only insofar as it persuades a listener positioned within that frame (192). In one thread, laughter leads to sex; in another, suspicion drives a parting. The subsequent accident and leg funeral shift the register from plot to accountability: What is one to another? What is owed? What can be claimed? Butler notes that an account “must establish that the self either was or was not the cause” and must do so under the pressure of persuading a listener (12). Jackson’s duplication of the episode presses us to feel how fragile that persuasion is. The same setting yields non-equivalent accounts; the listener changes; the outcome changes; responsibility becomes something worked out in relation, not deduced from essence.

Where Butler turns to Foucault to insist that norms “constrain but do not determine” (Stuart Murray 435), Jackson’s monster crafts a life in a field of constraints—genre, legend, software, gendered expectation—while opening alternatives. The instructional verb “explode” in the Quilt is exemplary: the system offers the tool; the writer applies it; the reader inherits its consequences. No actor “decides” alone; each is caught inside an arrangement that can be bent but not ignored. Butler’s insistence that critique must “call into question the truth of myself” (23) wherever regimes of truth govern who can be recognized recognizes the risk the monster runs whenever she asserts a path that the frame did not foresee. Jackson therefore pairs each branch with the possibility of repair—backtracking, re-reading, looking at the map—so that critique does not arrest motion but channels it.

That channeling returns us to Butler’s signature claim about narrative failure. The account of oneself cannot be completed—not because we have not worked hard enough, but because the conditions that make

giving an account possible also keep part of the self outside the frame. By the similar token, Jules Gill-Peterson argues that ethical and political errors arise when this structural incompleteness is mistaken for a deficit to be overcome and when subjects are imagined as capable of grounding themselves through identity, ontology, or interior truth (217). The body's history outruns recollection; primary relations write themselves into us before we can speak of them; the terms of intelligibility are borrowed and contested. *Patchwork Girl* trains a readerly habit that fits this condition: do the work; learn the instrument; revisit; accept remainder. The ethic is not heroic confession but sustained responsiveness to address under acknowledged limits. The stitched body is not a metaphor for brokenness alone; it is a method for living with unmastered origins and non-coincident parts without abandoning the task of making something hold together "for now."

Two last Butlerian motifs clinch the alignment. First, the distinction between proximate address and broader social normativity: *Patchwork Girl* stages both—the intimate call ("Was it you?") in Mary's diary and the social regimes (monster, woman, author, immigrant, software user) that prefigure how any answer will be heard. Butler's caution is that the dyad never fully contains the scene; normativity "precedes and conditions any dyadic exchange" (24). Jackson's work honors that, not only by stuffing the Quilt with public sources but by letting the map overview hover as a reminder that one's route is never the whole terrain. Second, the thought that giving an account is already a mode of living with others. Butler's use of Socrates—"the listener is led... into 'giving an account'" and thus exhibits "the logos by which one lives"—frames speech as practice, not supplement (126). Jackson makes that practice tactile; to click is to suture; to suture is to live in public with the mark

of that choice.

Across these correspondences, a sharpened claim emerges. *Patchwork Girl* does not simply illustrate Butler's theory; it exercises it. The hypertext situates the reader at a scene of address, equips the reader with social terms and tools not of their making, requires an account that can never be finally complete, and asks the reader to go on anyway—responsibly, revisably, in relation. Butler's pages caution against the moralism that punishes opacity and against the romanticism that dreams of self-sovereign clarity. Jackson's pages give the hands something to do instead: touch the seams, follow a path, double back, let the gap stand, answer again. If, as Butler argues, "I come into being as a reflexive subject ... when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me" (15), then *Patchwork Girl* is a device for producing that being—speaking to the reader so that the reader must speak back, and in that exchange, learn the limits and possibilities of a digital "I."

The result is an ethics of navigation. Not the ethics of arriving at the one right story, but of moving in such a way that others—sources, prior texts, alternate routes, technical constraints—remain legible as the conditions of one's own intelligibility. Butler calls this an ethic that persists "at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility," where we must still "offer and receive acknowledgment" despite the absence of guaranteed common ground (21). Jackson's stitched cartography is just such a limit-space. It gathers readers into a practice of account-giving fit for digital life: situated, constrained, iterative, exposed to others, and alive to the seams that hold.

IV. Conclusion

Patchwork Girl does not simply represent the digital self as a fragmented figure of postmodernity; it teaches its readers how to inhabit that condition ethically. Jackson's opening gestures—the stitched figure on the splash screen, the dual authorship inscribed in “by Mary/Shelley and Herself,” and the unfixed architecture of the map overview—train readers to treat identity as an ongoing traversal rather than a stable possession. The Graveyard, Quilt, Story, Journal, and Broken Accents all instantiate that principle in different registers: corporeal, archival, experiential, dialogic, and linguistic. Each segment requires the reader not merely to interpret, but to perform an act of assemblage that mirrors the text's own labor of composition. Read through Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Jackson's hypertext becomes an experiment in practicing selfhood as relational address—an enactment rather than an allegory of digital subjectivity.

This reading situates *Patchwork Girl* within a critical conversation that has often described digital identity in terms of dispersion, interactivity, and the loss of stable selfhood. Early hypertext theorists such as George Landow, Jay David Bolter, and N. Katherine Hayles framed electronic writing as a departure from print-bound linearity and as an emblem of poststructuralist subjectivity. Yet, much of that scholarship either celebrated this fragmentation as liberation or lamented it as dissolution. Jackson's work, especially when read through Butler's ethical philosophy, exposes the limitations of that binary. What emerges instead is a vision of digital identity as neither emancipation from the self nor its fragmentation, but its ethical reconstitution in and through relation. Jackson transforms what many critics have called the “loss of

coherence” in digital forms into the very condition of accountability. In this sense, *Patchwork Girl* extends and complicates existing scholarship on digital subjectivity by showing that selfhood in networked environments is not undone by multiplicity but sustained by responsiveness.

Butler’s framework allows this argument to push current hypertext criticism beyond formalist accounts of reader agency. Rather than treating the reader’s navigation as a playful freedom, this analysis interprets it as a performative responsibility. Each click becomes an answer to a prior address—Mary Shelley’s prose, Jackson’s programming, the monster’s interjections, the software’s architecture—and thus a gesture of acknowledgment. This reconceptualization contributes to digital literary studies by proposing an ethical model of interactivity, one that resists the instrumental language of “user control” in favor of mutual implication. It invites a reconsideration of what reading digitally entails: not mastery of information, but a practiced openness to interruption, opacity, and co-authorship. Jackson’s reader does not command the text but converses with it, learning to navigate incompleteness as an ethical condition rather than a technical flaw.

The argument also intervenes in the field of trauma and posthuman studies, where *Patchwork Girl* has often been read as a feminist reworking of Frankensteinian monstrosity or as a cyborg allegory of embodiment. While such readings rightly emphasize the body’s fragmentation and reconstruction, the Butlerian lens emphasizes the act of narration that accompanies that reassembly. Jackson’s *Graveyard* and *Quilt* do not only anatomize bodies and texts; they demonstrate how every act of stitching is also an act of accounting. The monster’s fragmented body does not signify a loss of identity but the necessity of giving an account that can never be total. By aligning this structure with

Butler's concept of "necessary opacity," this essay may contribute to the current debate on posthuman ethics by arguing that digital form can articulate a model of subjectivity grounded in partiality and relationality rather than in coherence or control. This approach reframes hypertext not as a metaphor for posthuman fragmentation but as an ethical medium that performs what Butler calls "the scene of address."

The contribution here also extends to narratological and methodological questions within digital humanities. The analysis repositions *Patchwork Girl* as a site where interface design, narrative form, and ethical philosophy converge. It challenges the disciplinary habit of reading digital literature either as aesthetic experiment or as technological artifact by demonstrating that its architecture performs a philosophical argument. Jackson's link structure operates as what this article terms a "procedural ethics," a mode of storytelling that makes the reader responsible for the very connections they traverse. This concept adds to the lexicon of digital narratology by proposing that structure is not a neutral vessel but an ethical agent that conditions reading as an act of response. In doing so, the argument broadens the conversation about form: from questions of usability and navigation to questions of accountability and relation. It suggests that future analyses of electronic literature attend not only to what digital works say about identity but to what they ask readers to *do* with identity.

Moreover, this reading engages with the growing discourse on feminist materiality in digital environments. Scholars such as Hayles and Jessica Pressman have examined the tactile and embodied dimensions of digital reading, yet Jackson's work, through Butler, introduces an ethics of exposure and care. The stitches and seams that hold the text together are not metaphors for technological connectivity but invitations to

practice a feminist ethics of relation that refuses invisibility. Jackson's insistence on showing the cuts, gaps, and technical limitations of her medium aligns with Butler's rejection of the fantasy of transparency. This analysis thus contributes to feminist digital theory by articulating how material constraints—whether linguistic, corporeal, or algorithmic—can become grounds for ethical encounter rather than obstacles to agency. The work teaches that vulnerability, when made visible, is not a sign of weakness but the condition of relational accountability.

By pairing Jackson with Butler, this article also challenges prevailing tendencies in digital selfhood studies to focus on data, representation, or algorithmic profiling as the primary metaphors for identity. Instead, it foregrounds the experiential and ethical dimensions of navigation—the embodied process of giving and receiving address through digital form. Jackson's hypertext stages a scene in which reading becomes analogous to Butler's account-giving: an act shaped by inherited structures, responsive to others, and necessarily incomplete. The contribution here lies in identifying *Patchwork Girl* as an early instance of what might now be called “performative ethics” in digital literature, where form is not illustrative but constitutive of the moral and philosophical questions it raises. In this sense, Jackson's work anticipates later discussions of interactivity, agency, and responsibility in networked culture by transforming the technical act of linking into a philosophical problem.

The argument's broader significance, then, is to reposition *Patchwork Girl* as a pivotal work for theorizing the digital subject as an ethical subject. It shifts the conversation from what digital identity *is* to how it is *done*, from representation to procedure, from ontology to practice. Where earlier critics often read Jackson's fragmented architecture as a symptom of postmodern disunity, this reading demonstrates that

fragmentation functions as the very grammar of ethical relation. The seams of the digital body become the visible traces of relational labor, the proof that selfhood is held together not by wholeness but by acts of ongoing repair. This insight extends Butler's project into the digital sphere, suggesting that the ethics of self-accounting she locates in the interpersonal domain can also describe the aesthetic and procedural conditions of networked media. The result is a bridge between ethical philosophy and digital poetics—a framework for understanding how reading itself can become a practice of ethical navigation.

The argument also offers a methodological contribution to literary scholarship. It models an approach that does not treat theory and form as separate domains but as co-constitutive. Reading *Patchwork Girl* through Butler is not the application of an external philosophy to an existing text; it is an encounter that transforms both. Butler's language of address, opacity, and acknowledgment acquires a tactile dimension when performed through Jackson's hyperlinks and lexias, while Jackson's hypertext gains conceptual precision when read as an exercise in Butlerian ethics. This reciprocal illumination suggests a model for future interdisciplinary work in digital humanities—one that recognizes theoretical concepts as procedural, and literary forms as philosophical instruments.

In its synthesis of digital form and ethical thought, *Patchwork Girl* stands as an argument for the humanities' capacity to theorize new conditions of subjectivity through design. Jackson's hypertext demonstrates that the question of how to live amid multiplicity can be staged, not only articulated, in digital literature. The reader's movements—hesitant, recursive, contingent—become acts of ethical orientation within a system that never stabilizes but still holds. The self that emerges through this practice is neither dissolved nor autonomous, but, in Butler's sense,

answerable. What this study contributes to current scholarship is an account of that answerability as both aesthetic and ethical form: a mode of being and reading in which the visible seam becomes not the site of failure, but the mark of relation—the place where meaning, responsibility, and digital life itself are stitched together anew.

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❖ 국문초록

자아를 짜깁기하다: 주디스 버틀러의 이론으로 읽는 디지털 정체성과 셸리 잭슨의 『패치워크 걸』

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본 논문은 셸리 잭슨의 디지털 텍스트 『패치워크 걸: 혹은 현대적 괴물』을 주디스 버틀러가 『자기 자신을 설명하기』에서 제안한 이론 비평적 프레임을 통해 다시 읽기 하고자 하는 기획이다. 이를 통해 디지털 주체성 연구의 방향을 파편화된 주체에 대한 존재론적 논의에서 형식에 의해 추동되어 구축되는 관계의 윤리로 전환할 것을 제안한다. 기존의 포스트휴머니즘 및 사이버페미니즘 비평은 이 작품을 분산된 정체성과 비선형적 상호작용의 전형으로 해석해 왔으나, 이러한 접근은 분산적 특성을 주로 인식론적이거나 기술적 속성으로 환원하는 경향을 보인다. 본 논문은 버틀러가 제시한 호명, 의존성, 불투명성, 책임의 개념을 잭슨의 ‘스토리 스페이스’라는 플랫폼 공간 기반 하이퍼텍스트 구조와 접목하여, 『패치워크 걸』이 독자의 선택을 통해 ‘렉시아’들을 통합하고 그 이음새를 드러내면서 동시에 인식의 한계를 인정하는 ‘호명의 장면’을 구성한다고 논증한다. 텍스트 안에 구축된 다섯 개의 경로인 ‘묘지,’ ‘퀵트,’ ‘이야기,’ ‘일기,’ ‘깨진 역양’은 각각 신체적 아카이브, 인용구로 이루어진 몽타주, 체험의 분기, 대화적 친밀성, 언어적 통합이라는 관계 양식으로 작동한다. 동시에, 텍스트 전체의 지도는 배열, 배치의 우연성과 수정 가능성을 드러내는 메타적 양식으로 작동한다. 이를 통해 본 논문은 ‘향해의 질차적 윤리’라는 개념을 제시한다. 이때 상호작용성은 독자 혹은 사용자의 주권을 전제하는 통제 행위가 아니라, 차용된 조건 속에서 절대 완결된 지식을 산출할 수 없다는 인식을 인정하며 응답하

는 윤리적 실천으로 이해된다.

주제어: 『패치워크 걸』, 하이퍼텍스트, 디지털 주체성, 주디스 버틀러,
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