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Troilus and Cressida

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Writing Style

posted Aug 3, 2013, 12:42 PM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 3, 2013, 12:42 PM]**

Verse

Most of Shakespeare's plays are written in a verse (poetry) style called iambic pentameter. Sounds kind of scary, so let's break it down.

An "iamb" is an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. "Penta" means "five," and "meter" refers to a regular rhythmic pattern. So "iambic pentameter" is a kind of *rhythmic pattern* that consist of *five iambs* per line. It's the most common rhythm in English poetry and sounds like five heartbeats:

ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM.

Let's try it out on this line from *Troilus and Cressida:*

"her BED is INDia, THERE she LIES, a PEARL."
FYI: The word "India" is pronounced here with only two syllables ("In-dya"), instead of three ("In-di-a").

So, who runs around talking like this? Princes like Troilus and other "upper-class" characters, that's who. The idea is that speaking verse fits their social rank.

Prose

But commoners and slaves (like Thersites) tend to just speak regular old prose. Here's an example:

The plague of Greece upon thee, thou mongrel beef-witted lord!

Nope. We don't catch princes like Troilus running around talking like that. This speech is reserved for the crude slave that has something nasty to say about everybody.

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symboles

posted Aug 3, 2013, 12:41 PM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 3, 2013, 12:41 PM]**

Hungry Swords

You know how you're always going around talking to your sword like it's a person who gets super hungry and a little cranky if it doesn't get its fill of blood and guts? Oh wait. You never do that? Well, Hector and Achilles do, so let's talk about it.

Check out how Hector speaks oh-so-lovingly to his sword after a long, hard day on the battlefield:

Now is my day's work done; I'll take good breath:
Rest, sword; thou hast thy fill of blood and death. (5.8.3-4)

Oh, Hector. You sweet talker! Just kidding, Shmoopers. There's nothing sweet about this— Hector has just killed a soldier because he wanted the guy's armor. Did we mention that the guy was just trying to run away from him? Here's the point we're trying to make: when Hector tells us his sword has finally had its "fill of blood and death," we're reminded that he has been acting a little *greedy* and a little *bloodthirsty* on the battlefield.

Okay. Now compare that to the way Achilles talks about *his* sword after he stabs Hector in the guts just a few moments later:

My half-supp'd sword that frankly would have fed,
Pleas'd with this dainty bait, thus goes to bed. (5.8.19-20)

Achilles has just killed Hector, but he brags that his sword's tummy isn't *quite* full from all the blood and guts it's "fed" on that day. Still, he admits that Hector was a tasty little snack, so his sword is kind of satisfied... for now. (Or, okay, maybe he's saying that it totes wasn't as much fun to kill Hector as he expected to be. Either way.)

Aside from being as cold-blooded as Samuel L. Jackson's famous "Ezekiel 25" speech from *Pulp Fiction*, what's going on here? Well, Hector and Achilles are *supposed* to be noble warriors, but, when we hear them talk and act like this, we begin to question everything we think we know about our so-called epic heroes.

Plus, all this hungry sword talk shows us how warfare and appetite are linked. Check it out:

The Prologue describes the Greek war ships as bodies that "disgorge" (throw up) their cargo and soldiers on the shores of Troy (Prologue, 12-13). And later, Nestor compares warfare to a giant, gluttonous bird that eats up everything in sight when he says that "honor, loss of time, travail, expense, / Wounds, friends, and what else dear that is consumed / In hot digestion of this cormorant war (2.2.4-6).

Of course, bloodthirstiness isn't the only kind of dangerous appetite in this play. Check out what we have to say about "Love and Food."

Food

This one's a freebie, Shmoopers. Food = sex. Every time we turn around someone is comparing sex to food. King Priam says that lusty Paris is all about enjoying Helen's "honey" (2.2.144) and Pandarus compares Troilus's desire for Cressida to baking and eating a cake (1.1.14-26).

Even Troilus uses a food metaphor when he tells us that he *can't wait* to hook up with Cressida. He says the girl's got him salivating because he's always thinking about what it will finally be like to "taste" her sweet "nectar" (3.2.21-22). Okay. We get it Shakespeare. Guys like Troilus and Paris have got big sexual appetites. So what?

Well, eventually, all this sexy food talk turns into something pretty disgusting. Check out what Troilus says when he finds out Cressida's a cheater:

The [...] orts [scraps] of her love,
The fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics
Of her o'er-eaten faith, are given to Diomed. (5.2.158-160)

Translation: Troilus thinks Cressida's love is like "bits of greasy" food that's been eaten and then puked back up. Or, to put it as crudely as Shakespeare does, Troilus is saying that Diomedes is getting his "sloppy seconds."

Um. Gross. Why is Shakespeare trying to make us sick with all this food talk gone wrong? Well, it seems like there's a point being made about the folly of Troilus' feelings for Cressida. When he talks about her as though she's a delicious slice of this, that, or the other thing, it's pretty obvious that his so-called "love" for her is nothing more than sexual desire. He doesn't actual

Disease and Illness

"Ulcer of my heart." "Plague of Greece." "Jaundies." "Botchy core." "Scab." "Colic." "Neapolitan bone-ache."

Grab your hazmat suits, Shmooperinos, because there's more puss, blood, and body fluids oozing through this play than a wounded soldier's open "gash." Gross? Yep. But don't get mad at us. Shakespeare's the one who crams this drama full of disease, decay, and death. Let's kick off our discussion with some famous examples:

• Troilus declares that his love for Cressida has left him with an "open ulcer [in his] heart" (1.1.53).
• The Greek military leaders declare that their army is "infect[ed]" with a kind of moral "sickness" and lack of respect for authority (1.3.5-8; 101-102; 140-141).
• Thersites imagines what it would be like if Agamemnon had a bunch of nasty boils and running sores all over his body (2.1.2-9).
• Thersites wishes the entire Greek army would get the "Neapolitan bone-ache!" (a.k.a. syphilis) because they're willing to fight a war over a promiscuous woman (2.3.17).
• Pandarus tells us he's dying of a sexually transmitted disease (we're guessing syphilis) and that he hopes we all get an STD and die (5.10.35; 55-56).

What the heck is going on here? According to some literary critics, *Troilus and*

Cressida is chock full of nasty disease because Shakespeare himself suffered from syphilis and was obsessed with STD symptoms (source). Okay. Even if we could prove this, which we can't, it doesn't help us with our analysis of the text. What we need to figure out is how *Troilus and Cressida's* references to disease and sickness affect our experience and understanding of the play. Here are a couple of our favorite theories:

When Shakespeare loads the play with references to disease, decay, and death, he establishes the idea that the whole world (or at least the world of the play) is a corrupt place that's full of moral decay. Come to think of it, this is a lot like what we see in plays like *Hamlet*, where Hamlet runs around saying that the world is like a "rank" (i.e. nasty and stinky) garden that's full of disease and rot. We talk about this more in "Setting."

Plus, the constant references to sexually transmitted diseases basically spit in the face of true love. It's hard to take Troilus and Cressida's love declarations seriously with all the play's talk about the "Neapolitan bone-ache," don't you think? And, in case you hadn't noticed, the whole play has a pretty pessimistic attitude toward love.

But, hey, what do you expect from a playwright who named a character in *King Lear* after a nasty sexually transmitted disease? (We're looking at you, Gonorrhea—we mean, Goneril.)

Troilus's Sleeve

Just before Troilus and Cressida are separated after their first night together, they exchange love tokens. (Aw. How sweet!) Cressida gives Troilus her glove and Troilus gives Cressida his sleeve as the two lovebirds promise not to cheat on each other (4.4.69-71). And, no, the sleeve isn't still attached to Troilus' shirt, but it's probably really fancy and has lots of embroidered embellishments.

This is a chivalry thing, kids. Knights often wore their ladies' "favors" (a.k.a. scarves, veils, handkerchiefs, etc.) when they jousted or went into battle. And, yeah, we know this play technically goes down in ancient Troy, but Shakespeare is writing Troilus like a throwback to those chivalric medieval knights we've all read about.

So, the love tokens are *supposed* to symbolize the couple's love and commitment to one another, right? But, of course, Cressida betrays Troilus about a nanosecond later when she promises to become Diomedes' lover. Just in case we don't get what a traitor she is, Shakespeare has her give Troilus' sleeve to her new man… while Troilus watches from a hiding spot (5.2.66). Ouch.

Not only that, but Diomedes brags that he's going to wear the sleeve on his helmet the next day in battle just to taunt the guy who gave it to Cressida in the first place (5.2.92-93). Double ouch.

In the end, the sleeve becomes a big, glaring symbol of Cressida's sexual infidelity. Does this sound kind of familiar? Shakespeare does something similar with the infamous handkerchief in *Othello*. Othello gives Desdemona his handkerchief as a symbol of his love, which then gets stolen and winds up in the possession of another man. Well, Othello sees the handkerchief as evidence that his wife's a cheater, even though she is most definitely not.

Here, though? The girl's totally cheating. There's a perfect match between the thing (the sleeve) and the thing it symbolizes (the infidelity).

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summary

posted Aug 3, 2013, 12:40 PM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 3, 2013, 12:40 PM]**

The play begins seven years into the Trojan War. You know, that epic series of battles fought because a "wanton" (a.k.a. horny) Trojan prince named Paris stole Helen, the luscious wife of a Greek King named Menelaus.

While most of the Greeks and Trojans have been busy getting their epic battle on, a young Trojan prince named Troilus has been trying to get his epic *love affair* on... with a hot local girl named Cressida. The problem is, Cressida's been playing hard to get for quite some time, so Troilus is depending on Cressida's dirty-joke-loving uncle Pandarus to help facilitate a steamy hook-up. (Got that? Good, because Troilus's hot and heavy desire for Cressida is the center of the play's first

major storyline, a.k.a. the "Love Plot.")

Over at the Greek camp, the mighty Achilles refuses to come out of his tent. Instead of fighting against the Trojans, he spends all his time "lolling" around his bed with his BFF/ not-so-secret lover, Patroclus, playing a little game called "Hide the…" Wait. No, not that game. A game called "Let's Bag on Our Greek Military Leaders."

As you can guess, the Greek military leaders are not happy about their best warrior being on strike. Ulysses hatches a plan to jump-start the stagnant war by getting the mighty Achilles out of his tent and back on the battlefield. (Get your highlighters out, kids, because getting Achilles to fight in the war is the center of the play's second major storyline, a.k.a. the "War Plot.")

So, what is this evil-genius plot to get Achilles involved in the war? Well, it involves Hector, the biggest and baddest Trojan warrior around. Hector has just issued a throw-down challenge to the Greeks and says he wants to square off in man-to-man combat with *their* biggest and baddest warrior. (Psst. That would be Achilles.)

But, instead of sending Achilles to face Hector, the Greek military leaders try to use some fancy reverse psychology. They have a fake lottery and choose a meathead named Ajax to fight. The idea is that Achilles will be so furious that he wasn't picked that he'll get his butt back out on the battlefield ASAP to prove he's a mighty warrior.

Meanwhile, the Trojans bicker about whether or not they should just send Helen back to the Greeks to put an end to the war. In the end, they decide to keep her as a matter of "honor." Finally, Troilus goes to Cressida's house for the long awaited hook-up. Uncle Pandarus is there to literally walk these two kids to the bedroom (eww!).

But first, he cracks a bunch of filthy jokes, makes everyone feel uncomfortable, and to tries to kill any and all romance as he rushes them into the bedroom and says they should hurry up and do it already. Despite this, our nervous lovebirds are kind of sweet (almost as sweet as Romeo and Juliet) and swear they won't cheat on each other. They promise that if they're not faithful they hope that from here on out, "all constant men [should be called] Troiluses, all false women Cressids, and

all brokers-between Pandars!" (Yep. That's called irony, Shmoopers. We'll tell you more about this in "Symbols.")

While Troilus and Cressida spend the night together, Cressida's dad (a traitor named Calchas who has gone over to the Greek side) convinces the Greeks that they should trade his daughter for a Trojan prisoner. The deal goes through. The very next morning, a guy named Diomedes takes Cressida away to the Greek camp, promising Troilus that he'll take real good care of Cressida. (Uh, oh.)

As Cressida arrives at the camp, the Greek leaders line up to greet her. And by "greet" we mean kiss her, paw at her, and flirt / talk dirty to her. Cressida flirts back and kisses each of them, except for Ulysses, who snidely refuses to lock lips with such a "sluttish" girl.

That same day, the Greeks and Trojans gather at the Greek camp to watch Hector and Ajax throw down... but it's a major letdown because they only go at it for about 5 lines before agreeing to stop the fight. The Greeks and Trojans call a temporary truce so they can party with each other that night.

After a big feast and some serious partying, Ulysses takes Troilus to Cressida's tent so he can prove to Troilus that Cressida is a big cheater. Troilus watches from a hiding spot as... Cressida flirts with Diomedes and agrees to hook up with him. Troilus is completely crushed so, naturally, he vows to kill Diomedes the next day in battle.

Back in Troy the following morning, Hector's wife, sister, and dad all beg him not to go to the battlefield that day because they've all had premonitions of his death. Hector goes anyway and proceeds to slaughter a boatload of Greeks, including Patroclus (a.k.a. Achilles' BFF / not-so-secret lover). This enrages Achilles so much that he finally leaves his tent and roars back onto the battlefield looking for Hector.

Meanwhile, Troilus and Diomedes have faced off on the battlefield but it's been a big fat letdown because neither one of them kills the other. (What? That's sort of what's *supposed* to happen in a play like this.)

Soon after, Hector and Achilles go toe-to-toe, but, you guessed, it's a draw. (Hmm. This play is one anti-climax followed by another. What's up with that?) But later, Achilles and his gang of Myrmidons find Hector unarmed and taking a break from

the battle. (Uh, oh. Now would be a good time to put your rain slickers on, because things are about to get bloody.)

Hector points out that it's totally dishonorable to kill an unarmed soldier but Achilles tells his goons to do it anyway. They surround Hector and immediately hack into him with their swords and weapons. (Finally! A climax, albeit a devastating one that makes us wonder whether or not Achilles is so "great" after all.) It gets worse, Shmoopers. Achilles then has Hector's body tied to his horse's tail so it can be dragged around the battlefield for everybody to see. So much for heroic deeds.

Troilus and the other Trojan warriors are heartbroken that their leader is dead so they decide to go back to Troy and break the bad news to Hector's family and countrymen. Good ending, right? But Shakespeare's not finished with us, because he has Pandarus go up to Troilus, who is still heartbroken about Cressida. Troilus calls Pandarus a "broker" (a.k.a. pimp), smacks the you-know-what out of him, and tells him to scram. Pandarus is all "Man, this is the thanks I get for trying to help Troilus hook up with my niece?"

The play ends with Pandarus on stage telling the audience that he's dying and that he hopes we all get a sexually transmitted disease or two (or three). In fact, he's going to "bequeath" us all his diseases in his will. Note to self: be sure to send Pandarus a "Thank You" note for this generous gift.

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characters

posted Aug 3, 2013, 12:39 PM by alaa hagag **[updated Aug 3, 2013, 12:39 PM]**

Troilus

Troilus is a young Trojan prince who falls for the wrong girl (that would be Cressida). If he were a real person living in the 21st century, he'd be starring in an episode of Cheaters or telling Jerry Springer all about the time he hid in the bushes outside his girlfriend's house and watched her agree to a steamy hook-up

with another guy (5.2). Gut-wrenching? You bet. Anyone who's ever been betrayed can totally relate to this guy, even if he is kind of a chump. (More on this in a second.)

By the time Shakespeare whipped up this play around 1601-1602, Troilus was already famous for being the most faithful lover on the planet. Thanks to Chaucer, who made the love story famous in his c.1380's poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, Troilus was as well-known to Shakespeare's original audience as, say, Romeo is to us today.

Cressida

We have absolutely no idea why Toyota named one of its cars after Cressida, since she's one of the most unreliable characters in literary history.

She's Troilus' girlfriend and the daughter of Calchas, a.k.a. the slime-ball who betrays Troy and joins the Greeks. (Hmm. Looks like the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.) She's also one of the most famous she-cheaters of all time. In the play, she falls in love with Troilus and promises to be faithful to him forever.

Until she's traded to the Greek army for a Trojan soldier and agrees to become Diomedes' lover. Oops!

Hector

Hector is definitely the most crush-worthy of the Trojans, at least by reputation. Most stories show him as the biggest, baddest, most honorable Trojan soldier around. In classic literature like *The Iliad*, Hector is the poster boy of "virtue" because he's the ultimate family man and honorable warrior.

In this play? Not so much. Let's look at all his flaws.

Achilles

Achilles has a rep for being the Greek army's toughest and most important warrior. There's just one problem: he doesn't quite live up to his reputation in this play. How can he when he refuses to come out of his tent and fight? Instead of getting his fight on, Achilles spends all his time doing the following:

(1) Lying around in bed with his lover, Patroclus

(2) Bagging on the Greek military leaders
(3) Kicking back and listening to everyone tell him how awesome he is

Hmm. This character is nothing like the "great Achilles" we've been hearing about. Check out what Ulysses has to say about all this:

The great Achilles, whom opinion crowns
The sinew and the forehand of our host,
Having his ear full of his airy fame,
Grows dainty of his worth, and in his tent
Lies mocking our designs: with him Patroclus
Upon a lazy bed the livelong day. (1.3.142-147)

According to Ulysses, Achilles is arrogant, lazy, and disrespectful. Not only that, but his inactivity has made him effeminate or "dainty." (In case you hadn't noticed, the play's military culture associates masculinity with warfare. If a guy doesn't fight, he's considered a girly wimp. More on this in "Themes.")

So, this presents quite a problem for the Greek commanders, because Achilles has set a terrible example for the rest of the army—the soldiers have zero respect for authority and are totally out of control. And, according to Ulysses, Achilles' bad example is the reason why the Greeks aren't winning the war.

Helen

If *People* magazine had been around in ancient Troy, Helen would have been the tabloid mag's "Sexiest Woman Alive" 10 years in a row. (You know, because that's how long the Trojan War lasted.)

Her beauty is so legendary it "hath launch'd above a thousand ships" (2.2.82), and she's always being described as "the mortal Venus, the heart-blood of beauty, / love's invisible soul" (3.1.32-33). But don't hate her because she's beautiful—it's a hard life. Her relationship with Paris is the whole cause of the Trojan War.

Pandarus

Pandarus is Western literature's original creepy uncle. He acts as a go-between for Troilus and Cressida and is always reducing their relationship to nothing more than a steamy hook-up.

Did you notice how he kills all the romance between our lovebirds when he rushes them off to the bedroom? When Troilus and Cressida try to get all Romeo and Juliet on us (read: gush about how much they love each other), Pandarus asks "What? Blushing still? Have you not done talking yet?" (3.2.100-101). In other words, Pandarus thinks there should be less talk and more action, which is why he shoos them into a room that's furnished, quite simply, with a "bed" (3.2.211). (We talk more about this in "Themes: Love.")

At one point, Cressida even calls her uncle a "bawd" (a.k.a. a pimp), and by the end of the play, even Pandarus acknowledges that he's been acting like a "trader in the flesh" (5.10.45). FYI—Pandarus' character is responsible for the fact that, today, the word "panderer" is another name for a person who arranges sexual hook-ups. (He's also the reason politicians who play to our lowest instincts are said to "pander," so thanks, Pandarus.)

Of course, things don't exactly work out for Troilus and Cressida, so naturally, Pandarus is blamed for everything. In the final act, Troilus slaps him and says that he should scram because he's nothing better than a pimp or a servant: "Hence, broker, lackey!" (5.10.33).

But here's our question: why is Pandarus doing all this? Is he just trying to get his vicarious jollies, or does he have some deeper political scheme that just doesn't quite work out?

Ajax

Ajax, a commander in the Greek army, is the play's official meathead. Literally. Thersites calls him "beef witted" (2.1.12). (We don't advise going up to your school's star linebacker and taunting him that, BTW.)

In other words, Ajax is ferocious on the battlefield, but he's also not very bright. Of course you'll be wanting an example, so here it is: he has no absolutely no idea he's being used by the Greek leaders when he's chosen to face Hector in man-to-man combat. (Remember, Ajax is picked because the commanders want to make Achilles jealous, not because Ajax is the best warrior.) That's why people are always ragging on him. Check out what Alexander has to say:

This man, lady, hath robbed many beasts of their
particular additions; he is as valiant as the lion,

churlish as the bear, slow as the elephant: a man
into whom nature hath so crowded humours that his
valour is crushed into folly, [...]
he is melancholy without cause, and merry against the hair: (1.2.19-27)

In other words, Ajax is "valiant" (bold and courageous) all right, but the guy is also a moody hot-head, which tends to turn all that "valor" and bravery into "folly." By the way, Ajax is always being compared to some kind of animal. Notice how Alexander says he's "valiant as the lion" but "slow as the elephant"? This suggests that Ajax is no better than, well, a brutish animal. This idea speaks to a larger issue in the play: warfare is just a bunch of wild animals going at it (5.7.9-12).

Another thing about Ajax is that he's got both Greek and Trojan blood. In fact, he's related to the Greek warrior Hector. That doesn't stop him from facing Hector in combat, but it does stop them from killing each other. Whenever Ajax's mixed heritage comes up in the play, it seems like Shakespeare is reminding us that the Greeks and Trojans have a lot more in common than they think.

Paris

Paris is the "wanton" (i.e. horny) Trojan prince who started the Trojan War when he stole Helen from the Greek King Menelaus (Prologue, 8-10). What? You say the cause of the Trojan War is more complicated than that? Well, not according to *Troilus and Cressida*. In the play, Shakespeare doesn't have a lot of patience for this guy—he portrays him as a selfish brat who cares more about getting laid than the people who are killed fighting in the Trojan War. As his dad points out, Paris acts "Like one besotted on [his] own sweet delights" (2.2.142).

Case in point. Paris doesn't mind sending soldiers to fight for his right to keep Helen but he doesn't spend nearly as much time on the battlefield as he should. At the beginning of the play, we hear that he's sustained a minor injury in battle (1.1.11-112), but, for the most part, Paris spends all his time making googly eyes at Helen (3.1.30-33) and getting jealous when she flirts with other men (1.2.166-167). With a guy like that for Prince, no wonder the Trojans lose

Menelaus

Menelaus is Helen's ex-husband and a commander in the Greek army. He's

probably the most famous "cuckold" in literary history. ("Cuckold" is just an old-school term for a guy whose wife cheats on him. This word shows up a lot in this play.)

Because he's a "cuckold," he's the butt of several jokes about his status as the biggest chump of all time. Here's the most famous one:

Let Paris bleed, 'tis but a scar to scorn;
Paris gor'd with Menelaus' horn. (1.1.111-112)

Translation: When Troilus finds out that Menelaus has wounded Paris in battle, he says that Paris was probably "gor'd" with Menelaus' "horn." As we know, horns are a common symbol for cuckolded husbands (and, uh, penises). So, it's almost like Paris was sexually assaulting Menelaus by having sex with Helen—and then, by stabbing Paris, Menelaus assaults him right back. Because you know that a sword is just a pointy substitute for a penis, right?

Ulysses

One of the Greek commanders. A highly intelligent, even philosophical man, he is renowned for his cunning.

Thersites

A deformed slave serving Ajax who has a vicious, abusive tongue.

Agamemnon

The Greek general, and the elder brother of Menelaus.

Diomedes

A Greek commander who seduces Cressida.

Menelaus

A Greek commander, Agamemnon's brother, and the abandoned husband of Helen.

Helen

Menelaus's wife. Her elopement with Paris led to the Trojan War.

Calchas

A Trojan priest, and Cressida's father. He defected to the Greeks in the early days of the war.

Aeneas

A Trojan commander.

Nestor

The oldest of the Greek commanders.

Cassandra

A Trojan princess and prophetess; she is considered mad.

Patroclus

A Greek warrior. Achilles's best friend—and, it is suggested, his lover.

Priam

The king of Troy, and the father of Hector, Paris, and Troilus, among others.

Antenor

A Trojan commander, he is exchanged for Cressida after his capture by the Greeks.

Helenus

A prince of Troy.

Andromache

Hector's wife.

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