

Shakespeare's Conservatism

Enduring

by David P. Gontar (August 2016)



***"Now we speak upon our cue, and our voice is imperial." -
Shakespeare***

I. Introduction

Shakespeare doesn't change. We do.

Not too long ago, in a story titled "College Faculties a Most Liberal Lot" (3/29/05), *The Washington Post* reported that the vast majority of university professors, (72 – 87%), are liberals. In 2016, especially as to the humanities, this disparity has doubtless grown. It is well known that it's nearly impossible for a dedicated conservative to obtain a teaching position in American institutions of higher learning. There is no sign this gross and lamentable imbalance is being addressed. So get used to it: academic freedom in the United States is a pleasant figment of our imagination. As in so many petty tyrannies

and theocracies around the globe, a single faction determines permissible thought and discourse. It's not surprising, therefore, to learn that a few months ago students at our flagship educational institution, Stanford University, compelled its craven faculty to drop Western Civilization from the core curriculum, with no evident comprehension that every course at Stanford is in one way or another an explication of that very proscribed legacy. Despite his commercial popularity, Shakespeare remains Intellectual Enemy No. 1, a prime target for the forces of multicultural resentment. "Dead white males" are now ironically an endangered species in our schools, and one wonders if "scientists" will follow the poets to the block. After all, what about Isaac Newton? Doesn't he fit the profile? Perhaps he's next to be blacklisted. As for Shakespeare, he must either be excised altogether from departments of English or given a radical facelift. The absurd mask he has worn for four centuries is wearing thin.

In the 19th and 20th centuries writers like A.C. Bradley and E.M.W. Tillyard recognized and explored Shakespeare's fundamentally conservative philosophy, as did Harry Jaffa and Allan Bloom. As late as 1977, scholar Peter Saccio could write this:

Henry VII commissioned an Italian humanist, Polydore Vergil, to write an official history of England. Vergil's book is the foundation of a lively tradition of Tudor historiography, culminating in two works that were Shakespeare's principal sources of information: Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1548) and Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Ireland and Scotland* (1578; Shakespeare used the second edition, 1587). Basic to these Tudor accounts is a belief in Henry VII as savior of England. In part this belief sprang from the necessity to justify the Tudor acquisition of the throne In part the belief arose from the widespread sixteenth-century conviction that secular history displays patterns reflecting God's providential guidance of human affairs. (Saccio, 13-14)

Shakespeare advanced this reserved political agenda, and though he subjected its principals and agents to psychological scrutiny and moral evaluation, he had constant recourse to medieval concepts and distinctions in his art. Human beings each have within a "glassy essence" which makes them what they are. (*Measure for Measure*, II, ii, 123) Our actions are the function of innate "humours" which

dispose our attitudes at all times. (*The Taming of the Shrew*, IV, I, 158-160) And after correctly citing Aristotle's *Ethics*, "Nature" is noted to have laid down rules governing the relations of husband and wife. (*Troilus and Cressida*, II, ii, 165-174, and see section II. below)

Not content with castigating Shakespeare for giving voice to the age in which he lived, there is a tendency among critics in the 21st century to convert him from the feudal tenets he inherited from his forebears to proto-liberal ones. Yet Shakespeare has not mutated, only our perceptions and audacious expectations have. Political bowdlerization is the price "the Bard" now pays for the privilege of remaining ever so marginally in the hostile campuses of this once great land. In the section following we will examine a representative Shakespeare text to illustrate his general sensibility, selecting for this purpose not one of the tendentious history plays written in express support of the Tudor myth, but rather, to capture the flavor of Shakespeare's spontaneous feeling, one of his comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew*. We will then pass to an assessment of the arguments made by liberal educators and journalists who would have us see and embrace in Shakespeare one of their own blood and brood.

II. *The Taming of the Shrew*

The Taming of the Shrew contains the paradigmatic expression of the Shakespearean ethos. Because it kindles feminist wrath it is rarely presented in its integrity and is often omitted altogether. Let's explore it.

KATHERINE

Fie, fie, unknit that threat'ning, unkind brow,

And dart not scornful glances from those eyes

To wound thy lord, thy king, thy governor.

It blots thy beauty as frosts do bite the meads,

Confounds thy fame as whirlwinds shake fair buds,

And in no sense is meet or amiable.

A woman moved is like a fountain troubled,

Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty,
And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty
Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it.
Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labor both by sea and land,
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe,
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks and true obedience,
Too little payment for so great a debt.
Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband,
And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
And not obedient to his honest will,
What is she but a foul contending rebel,
And graceless traitor to her loving lord?
I am ashamed that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace,
Or seek for rule, supremacy and sway
When they are bound to serve, love, and obey.

Why are our bodies soft, and weak, and smooth,
Unapt to toil and trouble in the world,
But that our soft conditions and our hearts
Should well agree with our external parts?
Come, come, you froward and unable worms,
My mind hath been as big as one of yours,
My heart as great, my reason haply more,
To bandy word for word and frown for frown;
But now I see our lances are but straws,
Our strength as weak, our weakness past compare,
That seeming to be most which we indeed least are.
Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,
And place your hands below your husband's foot,
In token of which duty, if he please,
My hand is ready, may it do him ease.

(V, ii, 141-184)

By its very length and concluding position in the text this passage enjoys a rebuttable presumption of representing the author's position. We recognize the voice imperial. (*King Henry V*, III, 6, 22-23) That presumption is confirmed by countless instances in Shakespeare's oeuvre in which the traditional perspective is reiterated or implied. Certainly Kate's words are subject to interpretation; what she gives us is dramatic poetry, not a manifesto or white paper. And yet, read closely, we can see her counsel is more subtle and coy than appears at first blush. It is delivered at a spirited banquet where there is much jesting and witty banter; her discourse is not spontaneous but instigated by her new husband's wish to show off the change wrought in her and win the

wager he has made. (V, ii, 116-136) As she discourses Petruchio is present, auditing every word; she therefore speaks largely to please *him*. What she might say in private to her friends can only be guessed at. Further, the now offensive political analogy likening a female spouse to a king's vassal must be set in context. The principal wifely virtues described by Kate are love (V, ii, 169) and amiability (V, ii, 146); by "obedience" is not meant military or strictly legal compliance, but rather a congenial deference expressive of reciprocity, respect and abiding affection, sentiments still found in wedding vows. Further, the image of the serene wife lying safe and warm in bed while her wretched husband does battle all night with the raw elements hardly comports with female subordination; (V, ii, 155-159) implicit in Kate's formulation is the idea that feminine power may be packaged to mimic submission when in fact it is something else more engaging and satisfying. The seemingly dominant role of the husband here reminds us of Christopher Sly in the play's "Induction," convinced he is a grand lord when in reality he is comically base. Shakespeare gives us many male-female and husband-wife relations in his works, and it is hard to think of any in which the female is a chattel slave of her spouse. (Gontar, 289-293) Finally, it should be remembered that Katherine and Bianca are both given fine educations by their father, Baptista. (II, ii, 88-101) In other words, Shakespeare is not a reactionary but one who finds in traditional values of love, spousal piety and respect a recipe for collective well-being.

These caveats acknowledged, it will still be agreed that the tenor of Katherine's speech remains fundamentally and resoundingly conservative. Physical differences distinguishing men and women are regarded as seemly, natural and entailing different modes of appropriate behavior. Willful wives are compared to "foul contending rebels," a comment not only on what is expected of married women but also on what Shakespeare thought of political rebellion, a major public ill destructive of the commonweal. Attempts by individuals to deviate from socially prescribed norms are viewed as unwholesome, conducing to permanent damage in the social fabric. Differences of rank, sex and age are acknowledged as valid and constitutive of human relations and the enriched articulation of a healthy community.

Four centuries later, in a world which prides itself on alterity, restlessness, novelty, and the transmutation of social reality in all its forms, conservatism, that is, the inculcation of tradition, stability and continuity in human

affairs, is viewed as oppression. Inasmuch as Shakespeare is a cultural icon, we find ourselves compelled to either dispense with him altogether, or re-interpret him in such a way that he is palatable to those of us for whom revolution is synonymous with virtue. Here we find the abyss of modernity opening at our feet.

III. Colin S. MacDonald

For example, writing in *Salon*, someone by the name of “Colin S. MacDonald” roundly declares that “Shakespeare wasn’t a conservative” (*Salon*, April 18, 2016) employing the following logic.

The case for a conservative Shakespeare often rests on his supposed devotion to divine right [of kings], the notion that the monarch is, essentially, appointed by god [sic] and and [sic] vested with divine authority. No doubt this was a key tenet of the Elizabethan and Jacobean world, but quite frankly Shakespeare makes a mockery of the idea.

There follows a sketch by MacDonald of some of Shakespeare’s portrayals of bad English rulers: Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V and King Lear. But the content of plays in which these kings appear has been well known for ages, and Mr. MacDonald, a third-rate journalist relying on the revisionary theorizing of Kiernan Ryan, shows us nothing new. Shakespeare’s critique of such tragic monarchs not only makes no “mockery” of royalty, it implies and ratifies that status. For we measure deviation by the ideal, and every word that comes from Shakespeare’s pen is animated by that vision, from which he never wavers. When a ‘bad’ king such as the dramatic figure of Richard III is defeated by a ‘good’ replacement (Henry Tudor) Shakespeare plainly approves; it is his character, Richard of Gloucester, who makes a shambles of English monarchy, not Shakespeare. As he was always faithful to the ideal of the legitimate sovereign who uses his strength for the good of his people, Shakespeare exemplifies the social and cosmological stratifications of St. Thomas Aquinas and Dante. “Nihil obstat,” says the Bard. His disgust with the commons in *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus* and *King Henry VI* (the Jack Cade Rebellion) is fairly palpable. Rebels are indeed “foul” in his estimation. Following Mr. Ryan, MacDonald writes that “while Shakespeare’s characters inhabit a world of strict class divisions, racism or misogyny, that world is dramatized from a perspective rooted in the recognition of the fundamental equality of all human beings.” But there is zero in Shakespeare to suggest that he was a crypto-egalitarian or

condemned the hierarchical demographics of the late middle ages in which he lived, moved and had his being. Monarchy itself was never condemned. Although he penetrated the psyches of aristocrats and commoners, his predominating interest, his spiritual center of gravity, was always the gentry.

Kings fascinate Shakespeare because they are privileged and highly specialized individuals with fully developed personalities who are at the same time fallible organisms. When Richard II is deposed and imprisoned, he has a nervous breakdown in which he wavers psychotically between his royal state and his merely mortal predicament. And when Shakespeare portrays an ordinary man seeking to rise above his station or assume royal manners and prerogatives (e.g., Autolycus, Malvolio, Christopher Sly, and Stephano) he is *always* made to appear ridiculous. Thus, when Autolycus appears in the borrowed robes of a lord in *The Winter's Tale*, (IV, iv, 715 ff) the pompous accents he adopts make us cringe with laughter. Yet "Shakespeare" (who was, if truth be known, a member of the bar) also shows that Autolycus here violates England's sumptuary laws. The social transgressions of these comic figures are always somewhat muted by the acceptance of the fable of William of Stratford, according to which a country bumpkin becomes through his own efforts a "gentleman" with ersatz coat of arms, in addition to his career as the world's greatest literary genius. That kind of self-propelled transmogrification is precisely what is pilloried by "Shakespeare," who was himself, as the 17th Earl of Oxford, a noble of the highest calibre.

Mr. MacDonald apparently thinks he can adequately render Shakespeare's philosophy by briefly tossing out a few citations to *Lear* and a few history plays. The comedies, romances, long poems and sonnets are never mentioned, as though they were irrelevant to the issue of Shakespeare's political credo. He relies on a single scholar for quotes and gives no reason to believe that he has actually read widely in Shakespeare or thought beyond the dubious conjectures of Mr. Ryan. There is not a single attempt made to discuss or criticize any scholar who accepts as material Shakespeare's allegiance to a system which enshrines differences of rank, caste and family, nationality, culture, religion, age, race or gender. Let us be clear: for Shakespeare, the tensions associated with these and other variables represent the substance of life, and as such, offer the challenges which determine what we make of ourselves. They form the backdrop of the conflicts his principal characters face. Such differences are not objects of choice. They are our fate. (*Love's Labour's Lost*, V, ii, 68) There is no thought

of eliminating them any more than we can erase the heavens, earth and boundless sea. (Sonnet 65) From the Shakespearean vantage point, our task is not to dissolve differences in the acidic bath of doctrine and reductionist ideology, but to learn to navigate the contrastive field of life with sufficient circumspection, sensitivity, self-knowledge and appreciation to permit us to thrive and grow. (Gontar, 319)

IV. Noah Berlatsky

While Noah Berlatsky, writing in *The Atlantic* in 2014 ("Shakespeare's Conservatism: How His Politics Shaped His Art," 8/5/14) is willing to concede that Shakespeare was indeed a conservative, he counsels a judicious dissent by audiences today.

Shakespeare was a conservative, in the sense that he supported early modern England's status quo and established hierarchy, which means defending the Crown's view of divine monarchical right and opposing the radicals, often Puritan, who questioned it.

After acknowledging this general truth, Berlatsky goes further, betraying his insight by portraying Shakespeare as an inflexible authoritarian.

The vision of sickening wrongness [in *Hamlet*] is in part repulsion at his mother marrying his uncle, but it's also a political disgust at the fact that the rightful ruler is gone, replaced by a usurper. What's "rank and gross" is not just sexual impropriety, but perversion of divine order. *The Tempest* is about restoring the rightful Duke to his place in spite of his usurping brother, while *Othello* shows that **Shakespeare's sympathies are not just with kings, but with any authority figure**, as the sneaking underling Iago attempts to overthrow his noble captain. (Emphasis added)

Berlatsky recommends that we part company with Shakespeare, and chasten him, spurning his slavish devotion to sheer might. We will better our lot not by emulating him, but by rebelling against his shameful authoritarianism. But the fact is that Shakespeare did not endorse unthinking acceptance of authority. To the contrary, he reviled and defied every form of tyranny. Does Hermia obey her father's threats – or elope with Lysander? Does Shakespeare feel that since her parents preferred him that young Juliet should have married the County Paris? Nope. Yet if we are reading Shakespeare as an authoritarian we must

suppose so. When one of Titus Andronicus' young sons, Mutius, attempts to defend the right of Bassanius to wed Titus' daughter Lavinia, Titus draws his dagger and slays his own child. Is this awful deed to be rationalized on the ground that Titus is a paternal authority? Rather, it's clear that Shakespeare is demonstrating the hubris to which authority is susceptible and that ignoble power must be resisted or brought to heel. (I, i, 276-287) In Act III of *The Tragedy of King Lear*, when Cornwall attempts to destroy Gloucester's remaining eye, a nameless servant of his rises to defend the victim with his sword. That brave man is stabbed in the back and slain by Regan. (III, vii, 70-86) Do Shakespeare-the-authoritarian's sympathies lie with Cornwall and Regan, the superiors of this nameless but courageous domestic? Absolutely not. Let us avoid knocking our poet's pate with his own cudgel. We learn our morals and manners from him, and it is bad form to turn about and chastise him employing the very principles he gave us. To free Shakespeare from the charge of non-conservative only to label him as a hidebound reactionary is surely an ironic blunder.

V. Peter J. Leithart

Theologian Peter J. Leithart attempts a compromise – and fails. Not a Shakespeare specialist, he is ill-equipped to tackle the problem, and lands in vagueness and confusion. Writing for *First Things* (April 22, 2016), in "Shakespeare the Conservative?" [the question mark tells the story], Leithart skips lightly over the depths. "Republic and monarchy each have their pluses and minuses, but with rare exceptions political actors in every regime act out of cold, calculating self-interest. And the exceptions are far from promising. Brutus is an honorable man, but he doesn't survive his plot against Caesar." What's all this to the purpose? It couldn't be more obvious that Shakespeare sees the faction as venal and misguided, and the play is rock-solidly conservative, in keeping with most everything Shakespeare penned. There is no support whatsoever for the canard that Brutus is "honorable," though he fondly calls himself such, a foible ridiculed by Mark Antony. Brutus' actions fall in line with all the rest of Shakespeare's rebels who commit their grim deeds "out of cold, calculating self-interest," as Leithart says. Brutus is no "exception." The bastard son of Julius Caesar, he was exonerated for vile over-reachings by his father and promoted multiple times, until, as the curtain rises, he is Praetor Urbanus (Chief Judge) of Rome. In that exalted capacity he murders his own loving father in the Capitol to allay his groundless fears that

Daddy will bequeath the Empire to nephew Octavius. "Et tu Brute," indeed. (Gontar, 139-160) Leithart's uncertain squib misses the mark, and is instructive in nothing but its vacillations and errors.

VI. Noah Millman

Noah Millman falls victim to the same syndrome, glorifying Brutus. So long as we misread the plays in this mindless manner we can hardly shed light on Shakespeare's ethics and politics.

. . . sometimes Shakespeare's rebels are heroes. Brutus is the hero of *Julius Caesar*, "the noblest Roman of them all – certainly a more admirable figure than the rabble-rousing cynic Mark Antony."

Are we made noble by empty rhetoric? – or by acts? If Mr. Millman believes Brutus is honorable, yea, even "noble," why does he not refer to those glorious deeds performed by this "hero"? Read Plutarch. There are none. Brutus is a man who believes his own press. He feeds his "honor" to the echoing crowds so that it circulates round the city like an air freshener in a latrine. "Believe me for mine honour, and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe." (III, ii, 15-17) What? Didn't Falstaff tell us that "honor" is but a word? (*King Henry IV*, Part One, V, I, 125-141) Apparently Mr. Millman is a true believer. But no congratulations are in order. That is precisely the sort of vacant ballyhoo Antony holds up in scorn in his funeral oration. "For Brutus is an honourable man, so are they all, all honourable men." (III, ii, 83-84) The irony is palpable. Let's get this straight: Brutus is not "the hero" in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. He is its tragic protagonist, and not a particularly alluring one. "Heroes" are the stuff of melodrama, brawny, square-jawed youths who save the lady-in-distress on the railroad tracks where the mustachioed villain has fastened her. ("Curses, foiled again!") And a complex character such as Mark Antony is shabbily conveyed by cheap and facile epithets like "rabble-rousing cynic." To gauge Shakespeare's true attitude one needs to look first at Antony's masterful soliloquy "O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth" (III, I, 256-278) in which his honest, searing grief pours forth. Here is the truth of Shakespeare, unnoticed by partisan squabblers, ideologues and academic mountebanks. It sails over Millman's head like the jet stream. As the murderers of Caesar wander the city, their hands still reeking with Caesar's blood, Antony (the "rabble rouser") addresses the people. What does the "cynic" tell them? "He

was my friend, faithful and just to me." (III, ii, 86) Does that in Antony seem "cynical"? Classically, by the way, the Cynics abjured friendship. In the most straightforward of terms Antony cries, "here I am to speak what I do know." (III, ii, 102) He is grateful for Julius Caesar's love and assistance; not so Brutus, who never mentions the debt he owes his natural father.

In Millman's view, *Julius Caesar* is evidence that Shakespeare was not in his heart a conservative. But his argument is flawed since his reading of the text is faulty. To try to tease Shakespeare's philosophy from the script requires *über alles* the most adequate and searching comprehension of that script and its author's mind, a merit not exhibited by Mr. Millman, who says, "I think it's safe to say that Shakespeare accepted the social order as simply part of his world. He didn't want to change it. Did he endorse it, though? That's harder to discern. Among other things because essentially all the words Shakespeare wrote, he wrote not in his own voice, but for characters to say." It follows that we never hear Shakespeare's voice. But to adopt that position would be to lack any reason to think about and discuss the issue, to try to sift the lines to find the man in his writings. Were that impossible Shakespeare would be a lesser author, not a greater one, one habitually given to using language without the slightest regard for authenticity, integrity and recognizability. It would reflect a dramatist and poet indifferent to the edification and education of the audience. That is not Shakespeare. He certainly allows us to peer through the fog of characters and their words to find his own authorial position, just what we would expect in a conservative poet writing for his time and for posterity. (See, e.g., A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904, Meridian Books, 1955, 126)

VII. Conclusion

The critics need to make up their minds. If we are not able to reach the poet because his characters stand in the way, we must be skeptics on the question of his philosophy. In that case there is no sense calling the writer "conservative" or its opposite. On the other hand, if we can proclaim in print that Shakespeare is or is not a "conservative," by what magic did we penetrate the poetic veil to reach the artist's heart? And how is it that we then disagree about what we find there? What is obvious from all this is that the "conservative" aspect of the plays and poems makes for a hard sell on the multicultural campus. Students feel, "Well, he may not be a conservative, but he's too close for comfort. We'll

have none of him." That's the result of impromptu scribbling by liberal professors of English and their journalistic epigoni. Either Shakespeare is in fact a conservative, and his dramatic blandishments should be resisted by us, or he is best understood as a liberal in disguise who undermines and subverts the nexus of differences. Him shall we allow. What is inimical to the spirit of our sad age is the possibility that we have taken leave of our senses, and in our rush to free ourselves from the scourge of nature and its differences we have jettisoned the voice which has uplifted people of all walks of life for 400 years. As we slide down the slippery slope that leads to our brave new world of indistinguishable slugs the man who stood against the tide of formlessness may be safely interred. As Corporal Nym would say, "That's the humour of it."

Shakespeare's world of medieval values, fidelity, rank, chivalry, sovereignty and many more, predominates throughout the corpus to form a context so overwhelmingly universal and obvious that it may aptly be termed the foundation of all his labors. The first glimmers of modernity (such as Prince Hamlet's "infinite space") were just beginning to be noticed in Elizabethan England. But "witches" would continue to be persecuted and burned by James and his successors for generations to come. As his feudal conservatism forms everywhere the background of the action, Shakespeare brings to the front conflicted individuals whose consciousness is incommensurate with the prescribed roles they enact, and who find themselves declaring, "I am not what I am." Yet each of these characters at the same time most emphatically is what he is, and Shakespeare does not propose to reduce dramatic tension by dissolving the self as social construct. Lear, Richard II and Henry VI, though they discover their common humanity, never become refugees therein. They remain what they have been and what they are: "every inch a king." (*King Lear*, IV, v, 7)

Thus the tragic tension is preserved. No new texts have been exhumed which would warrant our revision of Shakespeare as a progressive and proto-liberal poet. Professors of English, charged with the responsibility of teaching Shakespeare to surly and resentful students, may be expected to tamper with his image so as let him slip unnoticed into the multicultural m lange. But the gambit is a lie. Anyone wishing to take stock of Shakespeare's politics need only read the three parts of *King Henry VI* (the longest play in the canon, dwarfing all others), paying particular attention to the Jack Cade rebellion in *King Henry VI*, Part Two, Act IV. The beastly mindlessness and hatred of learning evinced by

Cade's legions shows us in no uncertain terms exactly what Shakespeare would think of the current crop of demented narcissists at Stanford University with their diminutive minds and fierce slogans.

Afterword

A Challenge to Conservatives

If it is correct that the humanities faculty across our nation is 90% liberal, it may be that the staunch support of William of Stratford as the author of the corpus is not a reflection of expertise and objectivity but political bias. Shakespeare must on the side of Labor, not with the Lords. These are scholars who have a morbid fear of social rank and nobility and find it impossible to interest their strident multicultural students in "dead white males" or – much worse – English peers. The idea that the secret identity of "Shakespeare" is the 17th Earl of Oxford is anathema on campus and its acceptance by faculty would signal the implosion of Renaissance studies in Anglophone universities and colleges. American conservatives might wish to consider this. If you are satisfied with William of Stratford as the god of your idolatry, you are adopting precisely the view of the multiculturalists you decry, those who debase our educational institutions. The spectacle of U.S. conservatives maintaining this hapless alliance with the liberal establishment is a paradox worth pondering.

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David P. Gontar's latest book is [*Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*](#), New English Review Press, 2013.

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