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Moreto's Polilla and the Spirit of Carnival

Polilla, the servant in Agustín Moreto's *El desdén con el desdén*, who threatens his master's throat with a dagger, is, among the *graciosos* of Spanish Golden Age comedy, one of the most memorable. He is outstanding by virtue of wit, power, unselfishness, and an integrative ability that has passed unnoticed. The festive energy of Carnival flows through him and erupts onstage, colorfully bathing all actions in new shades of meaning.¹

It will be recalled that, in this play, Princess Diana, reacting negatively to her readings about love, disdains all suitors and refuses to fulfill her political obligation to marry. One of her suitors, Carlos, feigns to reject love in the hope of conquering Diana's disdain. Piqued by his disdain, she vows to conquer it and him. Polilla, acting as intermediary, guides Carlos through the straits of Diana's disdain and deceives her by pretending to be Caniquí, an amusing and ridiculous doctor of love. He serves as a catalyst to bring Carlos and Diana together in their disdain-hate-love relationship, and as an integrative force which ironically joins other apparent contrarities, thus provoking multiple perspectives, creating antitheses and resolving differences.

The play's pervasive tension stems in part from the fact that the scene is a restrained court while the event is disruptive Carnival. The nobles try to be dignified and reserved, carefully hiding their emotions. Lurking in the wings, however, is Carnival, the period of festive sensual indulgence preceding Ash Wednesday. It is a time when the world is upside down. People are self-indulgent, and Don Carnal reigns.² Religious and social orders are deranged. This is what we expect; what we see is just the opposite.

During Carnival Diana should be indulging

herself sensually;³ instead, she is rigidly holding on to reason, defending her chastity from the danger of love's assault. Her strange behavior is in keeping with her name Diana, the chaste goddess of the hunt. Laura, a member of her court, suggests she is a hermaphrodite (750). This feature is also in keeping with her name; and it relates well to Carnival's confusion of sex roles, with men dressed as women and women as men. It contributes to the confusion and inversion in the play.

Carlos is another character whose life is turned upside down for Carnival: normally a frivolous man, he must maintain a rigid self-control. He must refrain from expressing his passion for Diana, and must cloak his thoughts in deception. If he were to express his love in the usual courtly-love manner, Diana would reject him definitively. Consequently, Carlos does not attempt to seduce through adoration, but rather through disdain, an inversion of seduction in terms of courtly love.⁴ Another inversion turns upon imagery drawn from the myth of Adam and Eve in the terrestrial paradise. Polilla-Caniquí instructs Diana: "Pues ponte como una Eva, / para que caiga este Adán" (1770-71), an ironical advice since he knows that the game actually involves making Eve fall. In the spirit of Carnival, the social and psychological inversion of the normal, Carlos seduces Diana, a reversal of Eve's tempting of Adam. To compound this irony, in this inversion of the Biblical story, the seduction does not break God's command but furthers the Christian order by leading to holy matrimony.

Serving as intermediary and committed to the spirit of Carnival, the *gracioso* begins to act as a catalyst. His master's trusted advisor, he gradually gains power as Diana's strength wanes. He breaks the illusion of reality by

directing comments to the audience, reminding them of his role as a creator, a deceiver, and a spectator. His name, Polilla, reminds us he is a spoiler, a destroyer. He plays a deceptive role, dressed in the clothes of a doctor; and, as Caniquí (the name refers to a light cotton fabric), he will get close to Diana so that his role of destroyer (Polilla, "moth") can work on his metafictional being, Caniquí. Just as the serpent used his wiles in that first garden, so does Polilla-Caniquí use his in Diana's chambers and in her garden. He appeals to Diana's pride: in Act II Caniquí, claiming to be an authority on love, advises Diana to make Carlos love her so she can burn him with her disdain. Satan likewise appealed to Eve's pride in the Garden of Eden, challenging her to seek power and leading her to Death. Similarly, Polilla's advice leads Diana to her metaphorical death, love. Diana resists longer than Eve because she has intellectual experience to aid her. The role-playing *gracioso* personifies the spirit of Carnival with its masquerading and deception. He is king of the caper. But after his reign ends, with the world once again right side up and socially and religiously responsible, the sacrament of marriage will occur, and the natural world of procreation will receive the social and religious stamp of approval. Then he will become himself, Polilla, shedding the feigned role of Caniquí.

Polilla-Caniquí seems to have extraordinary powers, limited mainly by time. His knowledge of human psychology is astounding, his acquaintance with the natural profound, his control over the characters of the play almost demonic. He plays upon Diana's pride and curiosity. When he first enters her chambers, he provokes from her a series of inquisitive questions:

¿Vós enamorado estáis?
 Pues ¿cómo aquí entrar osáis?

 ¿Qué os escarmentó?

 ¿De dónde sois?

 ¿Y a qué entráis?

 ¿Dónde supistes de mí?

 ¿Dónde es? [Acapulco]

 Y ¿qué os parece de mí?

 ¿No sois médico?

 ¿Cómo curáis? . . . (652-700).

He delights in playing at creator, providing the solutions to Carlos' problems when the latter asks him for guidance. Polilla repeatedly gives advice or support to Carlos. He works for what spectators of comedy assume is a good end, that of bringing the destined couple together; and yet he does not believe in ideal love, but rather its base counterpart, lust. He speaks of basic nature, of animal drives, of venereal disease, and satirizes religious institutions; yet he furthers the Christian cause through his actions.⁵ He is in tune with the rhythmic flow of nature, with the process of ripening and harvest. Even as the fruit ripens within an established period, steadily and surely reaching its mature state, so also Carnestolendas is time-bound, its end signaling the termination of sensual pleasures and the beginning of the mortification of the flesh. If we consider Polilla-Caniquí as a Don Carnal, Lord Love of Carnival, we should remember that Don Carnal's days of reign end with the coming of Lent.⁶

The *gracioso's* creativity provides the resolution of the play, although critics differ on this.⁷ In Act I Polilla offers a comic solution to the problem of conquering Diana's disdain:

Polilla Señor, un necio a veces halla un medio
 que aprueba la razón. Si dais licencia,
 yo me atreveré a daros un remedio,
 con que, aunque ella aborrezca su presencia,
 se le vayan los ojos, hechos fuentes,
 tras cualquiera galán de los presentes.
 Conde Pues ¿qué medio imaginas?
 Polilla Como mío.
 Hacer justas, torneos, a una ingrata,
 es poner ollas a quien tiene hastío.
 El medio es, que rendirla no dilata,
 poner en una torre a la Princesa,
 sin comer cuatro días ni ver mesa;
 y luego han de pasar estos galanes
 delante della, convidando a escote,
 el uno con seis pollas y dos panes,
 el otro con un plato de jigote;
 y a mí me lleve el diablo, si los viere
 y tras ellos corriendo no saliere.
 Carlos ¡Calla, loco, bufón!
 Polilla ¿Esto es locura?
 Ejecútese el medio, y ¡a la prueba!
 Siten luego por hambre su hermosura,
 y verán si los ojos no la lleva
 quien sacare un vestido de camino
 guarnecido de lonjas de tocino (481-504).⁸

Using the sensual imagery of Carnival, Polilla suggests that the princess has been satiated with adoration. By withdrawing their attentions, her suitors will cause her to desire them.

All suitors later appear in a scene that fulfills

Polilla's prophecy within the Carnival spirit of the play. In Act III the suitors decide to treat Diana with disdain:

D. Gastón Que pues para estos días
 todos por suerte ya damas tenemos,
 prosigamos en las galanterías
 todos sin hacer caso de Diana,
 pues ella se excusó con sus porfías.
 Que si a ver llega su altivez tirana,
 por su desdén, su adoración perdida,
 si no de amante, se ha de herir de vana;
 y en conociendo indicios de la herida,
 nuestras finezas han de ser mayores,
 hasta tenerla en su rigor vencida
 (2014-24).

Polilla's next comment reminds us of his original food-oriented solution:

No es ése mal remedio, mas, señores,
 eso es lo mismo que a cualquier doliente
 el quitarle la cena los doctores (2025-27).

Carrying out this plan, the nobles parade in front of Diana to music, courting their ladies and ignoring her. This scene occurs on Shrove Tuesday, the last day of Carnival, immediately preceding Lent. Speaking in carnal terms, the suitors have removed themselves; they are no longer available. Carnestolendas, the taking away of meat, is portrayed vividly: Diana is being starved. Diana's role offers an interesting ambivalence. She seems to be an untimely Doña Cuaresma who, rather than coming to cure the ills of carnival's over-indulgence, must be cured by a carnivalesque doctor: Polilla.⁹ Later, Polilla continues the imagery of the suggested solution, removing the suitors from Diana's reach, by referring to Carlos as flesh. In an aside, he says:

Todo esto es echar especias
 al guisado de mi amo (2131-32).

And the metaphorically starving Diana, watching the courtship of the other ladies and the gentlemen, says:

Por no ver estas contiendas
 de que a sus damas alaben,
 deseo ya que se acaben
 aquestas Carnestolendas (2133-36).

The solution to the problem, Diana's disdain of all suitors, then, originates in Polilla's food-oriented parable. The Carnestolendas scene is sensual; its food imagery suggests craving, which is a euphemistic metaphor for lust. Lust is what Polilla understands; he amusingly disparages the stiffly proper couples by calling them "priosos y abadesas."

To Polilla, life is a great game in which he

is both spectator and participant. In Act II, he refers to his dual role as advisor to both Carlos and Diana, saying: "¡Qué gran gusto es ver dos juegos!" (1212). He is totally loyal to Carlos, and, in following the new rules established by his master, embraces this play world which, by its very nature, is beyond good or evil. Carnival is the temporary abolition of the ordinary world.¹⁰ Within this new world of games, Polilla has a magical knowledge that embraces the real and the fantastic; Carlos uses this knowledge and his own power of self-control, through reason, to conquer Diana.

In *El Carnaval*, Julio Caro Baroja seeks to demonstrate that

bajo la capa de la alegría carnalesca,
 se realizaban ritos de expulsión y de
 persecución de males, por una parte, y
 ritos de fertilidad, por otra.¹¹

In his role as intermediary, Polilla is Lord Lust, conducting a fertility rite. Thus he safeguards the succession for the political kingdom to which Diana is heiress. The rite also has religious overtones. The court is allegorically a microcosm of a celestial hierarchy where everyone has his responsible place;¹² and, in terms of the doctrine of Christian plenitude, God's command that mankind multiply, Diana, by refusing to marry, is disobeying God's will.¹³

We have seen Diana's pride and frigidity dissolved and have watched her reluctant approach to the fertility rite. Reason is repeatedly discussed throughout the play, but it alone does not conquer Diana. She is overcome through the use of disdain, applied by means of reason; disdain piqued her emotions first, and reached her reason only secondarily. Polilla would describe this same metamorphosis in terms of Nature: the *breva* is conquered by time.

The *breva* is the first fruit of the fig tree. Relevant to the discussion of the significance of the *breva* is the symbolic value of the fig tree, *higuera*, whose existence is implied, especially within the repeated references to Diana as Eve in the garden.

Como la viña y el olivo, la higuera es uno de los árboles cuyo nombre aparece muy a menudo en los textos bíblicos. Según el Génesis (3,7), a veces la higuera sustituye al manzano para representar el Arbol de la Ciencia del Paraíso, por cuanto se toma como símbolo de lujuria. También se ha considerado la higuera, desde la más remota antigüedad—a causa, sin duda, de sus numerosas semillas—, como árbol antropogónico, generador y nutricio, símbolo de la fertilidad.¹⁴

In addition to the symbolic value of the tree is that of the tree's fruit, the *breva*, which will fall only when ripe. Bruce W. Wardropper's observation neatly packages the fertility image and the role of time:

. . . the one who has the *porfia* to keep trying to get the *breva* will be around when it falls. *Porfia* represents the effect of time.¹⁵

Thus man's ability to conquer through reason is seen as successful when used in conjunction with the natural processes and toward a Christian goal.

This play is a complex interweaving of the secular and religious aspects of life.¹⁶ The objectives of both the god of sensual love and the Christian God are facilitated by Polilla, who, seen as the Lord of Misrule during Carnival, works his deceitful wiles within a Christian world. For example, Polilla says Carlos would like a song "como sea / la Pasión o algún buen salmo / cantado con castañetas" (1742-44). The Carnival satirical or burlesque intent is evident. Discordant elements do not negate the seriousness nor the reality of the religious views; nor do Carnival antics deriding religious morality deny the validity and honor accorded religion.

I suggest an analogy between this play and baroque painting, specifically Velázquez' *Los borrachos*. There, within a very naturalistic vision of the world, the god of wine mingles with common mankind. Similarly, baroque painters desired an equilibrium of the secular and the religious. The highly popular allegorical style also appears in emblem books and, more familiar to most of us, in Velázquez' *Las hilanderas*, which in its enigmatic allegory interfuses myth and reality. Velázquez is a master of the ambivalent. We must also recognize and esteem complexities and ambivalent intricacies of a seventeenth-century author's work. Moreto's work allegorically mixes the classical world of Diana, the political realm of the court, and the natural world of ripening fruit and carnal pleasures with overtones of the Bible and the spirit of Carnival. As Polilla moves from one plane to another, his actions appear ambivalent, but his principal frame of reference is Carnival.

Polilla is a burlesque ruler of a courtly Carnestolendas, the egotistic self-dubbed doctor, and the deceiver. His burlesque quality is precisely an overflow of Carnival spirit into the restrained court scene. The *gracioso* communicates to the audience the ebullience

which is experienced psychologically by the characters, even though they cannot express it exuberantly in the streets as the lower classes do. The chorus of the laughing people, of the folk-culture, of the marketplace, provides the unofficial, ambivalent, yet true historic picture. This is society and history becoming, not static. It appears ambivalent because it is not determined, not set. The moment depicted by the laughing people shows an interplay of attitudes and language. Polilla's use of antiquated Latin and Macaronics indicates the death of that classical language. Yet Diana relates to it; it conveys to her a sense of the official, the historic, the static, the safe. She is balky, refusing to move forward toward her destiny. Polilla must entertain her with Macaronics and tales of far voyages. He is "the physician who amuses his patient."¹⁷

In this play deception is a moral necessity for the continuation of the natural, political, and religious worlds. Motives are masked. The Carnival background affirms its reverse, Lent, which follows it in the ecclesiastical calendar. The last scene, which presents the measured rhythm and outwardly grave reserve of the palace, contrasts sharply to the beat of Carnival's magic outside the walls. Although Carlos may be inwardly captivated by Carnival's rhythm, he must progress so as not to reveal his hand; he declares his will has been bent to Diana's desire. She responds that she will grant her hand to him because he knew how to conquer disdain with disdain. All of which shows us a very proper world of intellectual games and sober reason. In actuality, passions smolder beneath those cool words. The most powerful character in our midst addresses us for the last time, claiming he is only a Polilla, but we know what a creatively integrative force he is.

Critics have described this *gracioso* as unique. His wit is directly aimed at furthering the plot. He speaks of lust and constantly refers to foods, but never to his own appetites. He is never cowardly, and shows such determination as to threaten his master, however ambiguously, with a dagger in order to advance the latter's interests. A fool dissolves events and prevents focus; Polilla does the opposite. So, contrary to what he is called on stage, he is no fool.¹⁸ He is the wise fool. He provides a perspective upon the Christian ethic while weaving playfully through realms

of classical and contemporary references.

Polilla's play transcends fantasy to confide in the audience, thus establishing a coexistence of Moreto's created art world and the natural spectator world, in both of which worlds Polilla is a participant. Velázquez presented this same vision in his painting *Las Meninas*, which includes a self-portrait of the painter, who is in the act of painting the picture. The painter's self-portrait looks out at us as from a mirror, and as though he were painting us. We are drawn into the world of the artistic creation. The illusion is one of spatial continuation. Moreto uses the figure of the *gracioso* similarly to the way that Velázquez uses his self-portrait. Polilla does for our perspectives what he does for Carlos and Diana: he takes their contrarities, and paradoxically makes them form a wholeness. They coexist together and with us.¹⁹ The realms of religion, literary art, politics, creative art and naturalism all coexist. The *gracioso* is the catalyst, remaining unchanged and true to his "natural" beliefs and commitments. Don Carnal also remains unchanged, simply disappearing each Lent, yet he too serves, during his stay, as a type of psychological and spiritual catalyst.

NOTES

¹Francisco Rico, in the introduction to his edition of the play (Agustín Moreto, *El desdén con el desdén*, ed. Francisco Rico [Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1971], p. 29), stresses that the use of Carnival is not simply a concession to the spectacular, but is related to the role of deceit in the play. He does not indicate, however, how Polilla, the *gracioso*, manifests the spirit of Carnival. All references are to this edition by line numbers.

Frank P. Casa mentions Carnival as a revelry that contributes to the cyclical structure of the play and to the mellowing of the serious conflict. ("Diana's Challenge in *El desdén con el desdén*," *RJ*, 23 (1972), 307-18.

"... el Carnaval es un hijo del cristianismo. Lo personifica Don Carnal, que simboliza la libertad para comer carne, y se termina con las *Carnestolendas* (*carnes toledas*, es decir, prohibidas). Su principal significación es que autoriza, de hecho, la satisfacción de todos los apetitos que la moral cristiana, por medio de la Cuaresma, refrena acto seguido. Pero, al dejarlos expansionarse durante un período más o menos largo, la moral cristiana reconoce también los derechos de la carne, la *carnalidad*. El Carnaval encuentra así, además de su significación religiosa, una significación social y psicológica, y su función equilibradora en todos estos aspectos resulta evidente." (Bartolomé Bannasar, *Los españoles: actitudes y mentalidad* [Barcelona: Argos, 1976], p. 35.)

²"La carnalidad implica, pues, no sólo realizar actos opuestos al espíritu cristiano, sino también actos irracio-

nales o, mejor, si se quiere, locos." (Julio Caro Baroja, *El Carnaval: análisis histórico-cultural* [Madrid: Taurus, 1965], p. 48.)

³Antony Van Beysterveldt, "La inversión del amor cortés en Moreto," *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, No. 283 (1974), pp. 88-114.

⁴The Christian cause has long exploited the figure of the devil, who often has been portrayed as a humorous character. Cf. "In the diableries of the medieval mysteries, in the parodical legends and the *fabliaux* the devil is the gay ambivalent figure expressing the unofficial point of view, the material bodily stratum." (Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky [Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968], 40-1.)

⁵"El triunfo del Carnaval era también la víspera de su muerte: una última cuchipanda en la que la carne de cerdo, los tocinos y jamones, eran la base. ¿Un desafío al Islam? Tal vez." Bannasar, p. 36.

⁶Anna Marie Lottman ("The Comic Elements in Moreto's *Comedias*," Diss. Colorado 1958, p. 200) states that Polilla provides the solution for Carlos and she quotes the anecdote of the grapes and the parable of the fig. She thus provides a psychological explanation of attraction in the anecdote of the grapes, and a prophecy in that of the fig, but does not show how they offer a solution. Frances Exum ("Another Look at Polilla's Parable of the Fig in *El desdén con el desdén*," *Romance Notes*, 21 [1980], 83-88) analyzes the parable of the fig in detail and rejects the opinion of critics who accept the *brevia* described by Polilla as the governing image of the comedy, and his anecdote as a microcosm of Moreto's play. Exum chooses the grapes anecdote to unlock the meaning of the play. It has been asserted by Antony Van Beysterveldt (Van Beysterveldt, pp. 104-5.) that Polilla does not provide the initial solution, but that Moreto allows Carlos to invent his own solution in order to preserve his dignity. Francisco Rico (see note 1, above) denies that Polilla originates the idea of fighting disdain through disdain, but acknowledges that Caniquí helps define the error of Diana's strange illness in which reason runs contrary to nature, thus accentuating the pervasive paradoxes of the work.

⁷In the seventeenth century pork products signaled the "cristiano viejo," not to be confused with a converted Jew who might still be clinging to old ways. (See also note 6, above.)

⁸Augustín Redondo's discussion ("Tradición carnavalesca y creación literaria: Del personaje de Sancho Panza al episodio de la insula Barataria en el *Quijote*," *Bulletin Hispanique*, 80 [Jan.-June 1978], 64-65.) of this doctor-patient relationship is very relevant to our thoughts here. "Y si Sancho es personificación del Carnaval, la figura antitética, Pedro Recio, tiene que ser la de la Cuaresma. ¿No dice Rabelais que ésta engendra y cría a los médicos? Después de las sustanciosas comidas de Carnestolendas, ¿no vienen los doctores a sanar a los numerosos enfermos de indigestión, aplicándoles una *recia dieta*? ¿No es además la época de Cuaresma la de los *recios ayunos*, la de las *recias mortificaciones*? Y ¿no es cuaresmal la larga loba negra de los médicos? . . . Los dos personajes, representaciones de dos principios opuestos, de dos formas de cultura, están pues frente a frente: Sancho Panza tiene que intentar saciar su voracidad esencial y al doctor le corresponde prohibirle tal satisfacción. El combate simbólico . . . termina, como era de suponer, por la derrota de Sancho. Este, en efecto, al no poder probar ningún plato, acaba por pedir cómicamente que

se le deje comer."

¹⁰⁰"Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. This temporary abolition of the ordinary world is fully acknowledged in child-life, but it is no less evident in the great ceremonial games of savage societies. . . . Everything that pertains to saturnalia and carnival customs belongs to it." (Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens; a study of the play-element in culture* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1960], p. 12.)

¹⁰¹Caro Baroja, p. 63.

¹⁰²See Angus Fletcher's chapter "The Cosmic Image," in *Allegory, The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965), esp. p. 129.

¹⁰³"What Boscán (*Octava Rima*) expresses is the doctrine of Plenitude, which has Biblical sanction and a respectable theological tradition, though those who profess it are ever on the verge of heresy because of the Church's teaching that virginity is the highest state. Jean de Meun, Boccaccio, Juan Ruiz . . . and many others argued that the act of generation, in mankind, was a sort of continuation of the divine act of creation, and that God had indeed commanded his creatures to populate the earth. It is natural that Boscán should have been attracted to the theme: by temperament he was unsympathetic to the rigors of courtly love. . . . Any woman recalcitrant to love is like a branch torn from a tree, leafless and withered. The act of generation is universal and not unholy." (Otis H. Green, *Spain and the Western Tradition* [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1968] I, 135).

¹⁰⁴J. A. Pérez-Rioja, *Diccionario de símbolos y mitos, las ciencias y las artes en su expresión figurada*, Segunda edición (Madrid: Editorial Tecnos, 1971), p. 241.

¹⁰⁵Bruce W. Wardropper, "Moreto's *El desdén con el desdén*: the *comedia* secularized," *BHS*, 34 (1957), 1-9.

¹⁰⁶See Julio Caro Baroja, *Las formas complejas de la vida religiosa (Religión, sociedad y carácter en la España de los siglos XVI y XVII)* (Madrid: Akal, 1978). That

seventeenth-century Spain was not of one mind and one-hundred-percent orthodox is well illustrated in Caro Baroja's work. In it and in Moreto's work we can see how society and individual beliefs at times conflicted with stated doctrine. We also see people attempting to integrate life's experiences and to resolve paradoxes through individual interpretations (Diana's), rebellious eruptions (such as Carnival), and rejections of those traditions which could not be integrated (e.g., courtly love).

¹⁰⁷"The physician is essentially connected with the struggle of life and death in the human body and has a special relation to childbirth and the throes of death. He participates in death and procreation. He is not concerned with a completed and closed body but with the one that is born, which is in the stage of becoming." Bakhtin, p. 179.

¹⁰⁸"Las palabras del «loco» tienen otro sentido que las de la cultura oficial y culta. Su discurso nace en otro centro, en la tradición popular. Sus rupturas lingüísticas, sus creaciones verbales, sus juegos de palabras, su glosolalia no son sino expresión de otra verdad, de otro universo." Redondo, p. 49.

¹⁰⁹This suspension of spatial, social and temporal barriers is characteristic of Carnival. M. Bakhtin's summary of the basic categories of Carnival is also a list of the outstanding aspects of Polilla's influence: 1) "free, familiar contact among people"; 2) "eccentricity"; 3) "carnivalistic mésalliances"; 4) "profanation." See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, trans. R. W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1973), p. 101.

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