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# FORUM

## What's In a Name? Everything, Apparently...

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J'ai la conviction que toute personne dont le jugement est reste libre en ce qui concern le problème...connaîtra que les ancienne positions de la doctrine traditionnelle ne sauraient être maintenues....

—Professor Abel Lefranc

Some years ago I encountered a topic in intellectual history that has since, gradually but with irresistible momentum, started to receive the concentrated attention it merits from literary professionals. My first exposure came through a 1987 *Frontline* documentary narrated by Al Austin. Intrigued, I devoured a series of often erudite and impressive books and articles, published between 1908 and 1984. These detailed the circumstances and terms of what could only be construed by any open-minded thinker—so it seemed, at least, to me—as one of the great intellectual controversies of the 20th century. I was surprised, however, to learn during my graduate school days that this subject was not discussed—except perhaps in whispered private conference, or, when required, through reflexive displays of pre-intellectual exasperation.

The reason it was not discussed was soon forthcoming, from a wholly unrelated work written not by a literary scholar, but a sociologist of knowledge. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) analyzes the dynamics of revolutions in scientific thought, the process by which one paradigm—conceptual schema—replaces another over the *long durée* of scientific thought. So successful has Kuhn's work become that his phrase “paradigm shift” has attained household name recognition, even if the book's deeper lessons often go unobserved. The advocate of an intellectual paradigm, writes Kuhn, will seldom in his practice “evoke disagreement over fundamentals” (11). On the contrary, “acquisition of a paradigm and of the more esoteric type of research it permits is a sign of maturity in the development of any given...field” (11). In more anthropological terms the conferral of a PhD—whether

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in the arts, the sciences, or some specialized technical field—is a kind of *rite de passage*. It welcomes the initiate into the privileged society of those special few on whom the wider culture confers the doubtful honor of being legitimate thinkers, much as the wizard does to the scarecrow in L. Frank Baum’s allegory of Oz.

There is, of course, a price to be paid for this knowledge: the initiate must solemnly promise not only to forgo dalliance in the field of unauthorized ideas, but to zealously defend, as a matter of honor and sanity, the jurisdiction of the paradigm into which he has been initiated. A reluctance to do so marks him, at best, as an outsider or a misfit: unqualified for employment, tenure, or professional respect.

Kuhn was writing about the sciences, but the principles of paradigm formation are equally applicable to the humanities. The ideal of frank and principled discussion seems often to be neglected in the humanities, and certainly has been so in this case. Instead of examining the role preconceptions—and egos—play in defining the scope and methods of inquiry, and therefore the nature of conclusions that can be considered, *even as possibilities*, orthodoxy has embarked on a dangerous and counterproductive campaign to quell dissent—with threats, ridicule, and bureaucratic tomfoolery. Where they might have renewed (and still could renew) a commitment to scholarly principles, English literary scholars have plugged up their own ears to evade the siren song of doubt. Indeed, the case resembled the sociological dynamic of *King Lear*: Kent, Cordelia, and the Fool—the characters who redeem the meaning of the tragedy—each is punished for speaking truth to power. Scourged and exiled, all three find solace only through a lampoon of due legal process, shivering in a howling storm on a barren heath. Their proceedings are presided over by Mad Tom, the legitimate son of a foolish father duped by his own Machiavellian seed.

“As one who found himself a contented agnostic,” wrote one insider in 1985, “I was enormously surprised at what can only be described as the viciousness [against nonconformists] expressed by so many otherwise rational and courteous scholars. In its extreme forms the hatred of unorthodoxy was like some bizarre mutant racism” (Crinkley 518). By now the reader may have guessed that the topic under discussion is the taboo question of the identity of Western literature’s most famous dramatist and poet, a subject that English literary professionals have been educated to dismiss as beneath serious notice. Alas, the intellectual historian must offer a minority opinion: the question we have been systematically trained to scorn as the ravings of Mad Tom, had already been placed on a secure and respectable footing, almost a century ago, in a series of impressive books by Sir George Greenwood (1908, 1916, 1921). To any impartial review, Greenwood’s exchange with advocates of the orthodox view—Sir Sidney Lee, J.M. Robertson, and Andrew Lang being the most influential—exposed

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the brittle character of orthodox beliefs about the Bard. Greenwood was by that time joined in his skepticism by a host of prominent Victorian intellectuals and literary figures: the American populist poet Walt Whitman, the ancestor of postmodernism Fredrick Nietzsche, the Missouri satirist Mark Twain and the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, American novelists Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, and eventually the respected editor of Rabelais, Professor Abel Lefranc (1945), among many others. All had come to suspect, as James confessed it, a lingering suspicion that “the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world” (Lubbock I: 424-425).

Although Sir Francis Bacon became the most prominent 19th-century alternative to the traditional view of authorship, many, including Greenwood, refused to commit themselves to any definite conviction about the author’s identity. “I go with you fellows when you say ‘no’ to Shakspeare,” Whitman told Horace Traubel. “As for Bacon, we shall see, we shall see...” (Traubel, qtd. in Paul Nelson 4). Like Whitman, Greenwood preferred to insist on a simple contrarian conclusion: the orthodox view of the Bard was riddled with implausible contradictions that were most readily resolved by the simple but controversial premise that the presumed author had served as a living front—a ghostwriter—for a powerful insider to the Elizabethan court. For reasons of both protocol and politics, reasoned Greenwood, this person could not be publicly known as the author. Instead of endorsing Bacon, Greenwood elaborated Mark Twain’s 1909 agnostic query: “Shall I set down the rest of the Conjectures which constitute the giant Biography of William Shakespeare? It would strain the unabridged Dictionary to hold them. He is a Brontosaur: nine bones and six hundred barrels of plaster of Paris” (49).

Such agnosticism proved frustrating to orthodox scholars; it was not difficult to shoot down the Baconians, but without an alternative candidate to endorse, the sophisticated Greenwood routinely evaded his orthodox pursuers; they came off like the pretentiously foolish and self-absorbed lion in the African-American tale of the signifying monkey. One orthodox critic who *was* a match for Greenwood was the literary giant Andrew Lang. Lang focused his best shots against Greenwood’s reticence to name a contender; after mocking Greenwood for adopting an implausible and hopelessly vague alternative that would “dethrone Will Skakesper, and put a Shadow in his place” (5), Lang went on to profile Greenwood’s “shadow”:

Conceive a ‘concealed poet,’ of high social position, contemporary with Bacon and Shakespeare. Let him be so fond of Law that he cannot keep ‘shop’ out of his love Sonnets even. Make him a courtier; a statesman; a philosopher; a scholar who does not blanch even from the difficult Latin of Ovid and Plautus. Let this almost omniscient being possess supreme poetic genius, extensive classical attainments,

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and a tendency to make false quantities. Then conceive him to live through the reigns of ‘Eliza and our James,’ without leaving a trace in history, in science, in society, in law, in politics or scholarship, a single trace of his existence. He left nothing but the plays and poems attributed to Will. As to the date of his decease, we only know that it must necessarily have been later than the composition of the last genuine Shakespeare play—for this paragon wrote it. (5)

Intellectual history is full of ironic shifts that replace the self-satisfied dogma of one generation with the enlightenment of another. Appearing under the Longman imprint in 1912, Lang’s ironic profile of the “great unknown” had thrown down the gauntlet; eight years later he was answered in J.T. Looney’s *“Shakespeare” Identified in Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*. Looney’s book revealed for the first time, both to the general reading public and to English literary specialists, a man with a footprint commensurate with the brontosaurus’s bones. Far from leaving no trace, moreover, Looney’s “great unknown” had left a prolific trail of previously ignored clues. He was “unknown” only because no one had bothered to look at him, and because the memory of his life, to the extent that one remained, was shadowed by scandal and controversy.

Looney’s book ushered in a new age of Shakespearean studies. For six decades after it appeared orthodoxy preferred to contain the authorship question with chilly silence rather than risk direct confrontation in the style of Robertson or Lang. Academicians addressed the subject in public only when forced to do so, and rarely devoted any serious attention to either the questions or the solutions proposed by Looney and other critics of the orthodox paradigm. But Looney’s book refused to die. In his introduction to the second (1948) edition, William McFee spoke for many readers when he declared that it was “destined to occupy, in modern Shakespearean controversy, the place Darwin’s great work occupies in Evolutionary theory. It may be superseded, but all modern discussion of the authorship of the plays and poems stems from it, and owes the author an inestimable debt” (xix).

When we step back from the particulars of the many skirmishes in the long battle between orthodox Shakespeareans and their contrarian counterparts, it becomes clear that the traditional scholars have made two strategic mistakes in their assessment of intellectual history. First, they have been poorly prepared to grasp the persuasiveness of the anti-Stratfordian case as articulated by Greenwood and, since him, many others. As Richmond Crinkley, writing in a 1985 *Shakespeare Quarterly* review of Charlton Ogburn’s *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (1984, 1992) acknowledges, “doubts about Shakespeare came early and grew rapidly. They have a simple and direct plausibility” (518). Instead of admitting this reasoned basis for doubt, and engaging in the reasoned debate that would require both sides to test

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assumptions and revisit first principles, all too often orthodox scholars have attacked the sanity of the contrarians or misrepresented the factual and theoretical basis of their skepticism. Ogburn's book, writes Crinkley, "chronicles a sorry record of abuse from the orthodox, much of it directed at assertions never made, positions never held, opinions never expressed" (518).

Second, traditional scholars have failed to comprehend the seminal originality and philosophical élan of Looney's case for Oxford, or to notice the cumulative corroboration of his work by the three generations of mostly amateur scholarship—including impressive works by Ogburn (1984), Fowler (1986), Whalen (1994), Hope and Holston (1993), Sobran (1997), and Anderson (2005)—that have since pursued his theory. This is in part merely the result of a lack of accurate and extensive information. Few have seen Looney's book, let alone read it; most would fear to be seen by their colleagues with a copy; and those who have noticed the book often seem content to rely on prejudicial third-party accounts rather than examining it for themselves. Warren Hope (PhD, English) and Kim Holston in their 1992 history of the authorship question succinctly summarize the character of the discipline's response: "The best trained and most highly respected professional students of Shakespeare in the colleges and universities of England and the United States contemplated the seemingly seamless argument represented in *"Shakespeare" Identified*, and quickly discovered a flaw in it. The book was written by a man with a funny name. They found their argument against Looney where they had found their arguments in favor of William Shakespeare: on a title page" (116).

Of course Looney's work is not flawless, especially from the perspective of eighty-five years of progress in literary and historical methodology. Some of his premises about circulation of motifs in early modern lyric poetry were wrong (May). His Comtean positivism seems passé in a postmodern world in which even Freud has been Lacanized. Few contemporary followers of his work would agree with him that *The Tempest* is not written by the Bard. But the intellectual historian need not be distracted by the incidental failures to which even pioneering works are sometimes susceptible, nor confused by a prevailing academic culture in which the traditional virtue of plausibility has been declared irrelevant; instead she will ponder the sobering implications of McFee's comparison of Looney's book to Darwin's. Why have so many independent intellectuals—writers, psychologists, lawyers, and doctors—succumbed to the dreaded heresy that de Vere is the real author of the works? What is the evidence supporting the "Oxfordian" theory? In brief the supporters of the case might put it thus:

- De Vere was known to be a talented dramatist, yet no dramas of his survive under his own name. Both the anonymous *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) and

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Francis Meres (1598), the latter evidently recalling more than two decades of literary history, refer to him as one of the “best for comedy.”

- De Vere was known to have concealed his work: *The Arte of English Poesie* explicitly refers to him as one of those “who have written commendably well as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest” (Arber 75), and also includes him by implication as one of “many notable gentlemen in the Court who have written commendably, And suppressed it again, or else suffered it to be published without their own names to it” (37).
- De Vere was a child prodigy in languages and history. Tutored by the greatest Elizabethan Anglo-Saxon scholar, Laurence Nowell, by the lawyer and statesman Sir Thomas Smith (arguably the greatest legal mind of his generation), and probably by his uncle Arthur Golding, the translator of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a work which “so frequently reappears in Shakespeare’s page, especially by way of subsidiary illustration, as almost to compel the conviction that *Shakespeare knew much of Golding’s book by heart*” (Lee, “Ovid” 458; emphasis supplied).
- His life resembles the experience of Hamlet in so many curious and unprecedented ways that it has been called a rough draft of the play. It is as if the author had two texts, the Belleforest Saxo Grammaticus tradition of the 11th-century Danish Prince, *and* the story of de Vere’s life, in mind as he wrote. To mention just one significant parallel, de Vere was, like the Danish Prince, a prominent patron and aficionado of the theater.
- De Vere was an accomplished lyric poet. William Webbe in 1589 refers to him as “the best” of the court poets, and Henry Peacham in 1622 places him first in his list of outstanding literary figures from the Elizabethan era. His extant poetry betrays many affinities to Shakespearean lyric forms (Looney, Sobran, etc.; for a biased but useful critique, see May).
- De Vere was a prolific correspondent whose extant letters betray numerous verbal, figurative, and philosophical parallels to the plays and poems (Fowler).
- Trained in law at Grey’s Inn, de Vere had the legal training so evident in the works (Alexander). His extant correspondence, reprinted in modern spelling by Fowler and Chiljan, contains hundreds of legal terms, many found in the Shakespearean canon.
- The most notorious “Italianate Englishman” of his generation, he traveled extensively through the Italian city-states (Anderson) that provide the locale and ambience of so many of the Shakespearean plays (Grillo) and built a house for himself in Venice.

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- The Earl of Southampton, thought by most to be the “fair youth” of the Sonnets, was engaged to de Vere’s daughter from 1591 to 1593, during the time the “marriage sonnets” were written.
  - William Cecil Lord Burghley, thought by many to be the historical prototype of the prolix Polonius, was de Vere’s foster father and, after 1571, father-in-law.
  - The “two most noble brethren” to whom the 1623 folio is dedicated were de Vere’s son-in-law, Phillip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery, and his brother (who almost married another de Vere daughter) William, Earl of Pembroke.
  - De Vere was wealthy and powerful, something many modern Shakespearean scholars find intolerable in a bard, but he was also the quintessence of the downwardly mobile aristocrat, one who spent a lifetime losing real property to lawyers and “new men” like his father-in-law William Cecil. Like Hamlet, he had ample cause to rue the “buyer and seller of land” with his “statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries” (*Hamlet* V.i.)
  - Like Jaques in *As You Like It*, de Vere may have given up his land to see the lands of other men, but he was rich in his artistic associations. He patronized thirty-seven major works of literature—including works of Watson, Green, Byrd, Munday, and others—of philosophy, music, and history. Many of these works have documented connections to the Shakespearean oeuvre. The playwright John Lyly was his secretary and close theatrical associate. Edmund Spenser in a dedicatory sonnet to *The Fairie Queene* calls him one “most dear” to the muses.
  - De Vere’s tottering finances were eventually underwritten by a mysterious thousand-pound crown annuity (1586-1604), to which Shakespeare apparently makes frequent if oblique reference: in the *Sonnets* (111.5), *Venus and Adonis* (Stritmatter, “A Law Case” 193-195, 200-203), *Comedy of Errors*, *Hamlet*, and *Henry IV.2* (Stritmatter, *Marginalia* 35-39, 202). Alas, even this state subsidy does not seem to have saved him, in the long run, from the fate of Timon of Athens.

In short, if Shakespeare is, as the postmodernists would say, a nexus of “social energies,” then those energies evidently converge on the suspect that the “old historicist” Looney had identified eighty-six years ago as the true mind and soul behind the works. Not surprisingly, Looney’s work (although ignored in academic circles) swiftly impressed a new generation of independent intellectuals; John Galsworthy called it “the best detective story” he had ever read. Professor Gilbert Slater, Leslie Howard, Marjorie Bowen, and Orson Welles became prominent early advocates of the new theory. Sigmund Freud, the creator of the modern science of depth psychology, also

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endorsed the work. Freud evidently followed the debate closely and understood the *ex post facto* irony of Lang's phrase: "I am almost convinced that behind the figure of Shakespeare lies a *great unknown*: Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford" (96; "*ein grosser unbekannter*" in the original). In private correspondence with Looney, Freud was even more candid about his belief: "I have known you as the author of a remarkable book, to which I owe my conviction about Shakespeare's identity as far as my judgment in this matter goes" (qtd. in Miller II: 273).

More recently, the de Vere theory has made impressive inroads among Shakespearean actors, Sir John Gielgud, Sir Derek Jacobi, Jeremy Irons, and Michael York among them. The U.S. Supreme Court, exposed to the issue at a 1987 American University Moot Court (Lardner), originally voted to uphold the orthodox view. But the inquiring mind of Justice John Paul Stevens took a sustained interest in the subject, and Stevens' 1992 *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* opinion is surprisingly sympathetic to the heretical view. Academia is not that far behind. For ten years now, Portland's Concordia University has promoted research and scholarship supporting the Oxford theory through its annual Shakespeare Authorship Studies Conference. This spring, both Concordia, and with it London's Brunel University, announced plans to start major programs in authorship studies granting MA degrees for study and scholarship on the authorship question as a topic in intellectual history.

What, then, are the orthodox objections to the de Vere theory, and how might the Oxfordians answer them? In practice they are far less formidable than is commonly believed, as these six examples illustrate:

- 1) The authorship question is a precipitate of romanticism (Bate) that has nothing to do with Elizabethan realities. Early modern readers did not understand the concept of authorship or care about the lives of literary figures. This popular academic myth, which misuses the truth that concepts of authorship are indeed historically variable by transforming it into an anti-intellectual hyperbole, is called into serious doubt by Mark Anderson's book, as well as by Diana Price, Greenwood, and many others, each of whom documents the pervasive circulation of the idea of concealed authorship in Elizabethan literature. Sir Francis Bacon's well-known 1602 letter to John Davies urging him to be "good to concealed poets" is only the tip of this iceberg. According to Taylor and Mosher, the 16th and the 17th centuries were the "golden age" of pseudonyms and "almost every writer [of that age] used a pseudonym at some time during his career" (85).
- 2) There are so many authorship candidates that it invalidates the entire question. A favorite of Terry Ross, the prolific internet controversialist who specializes in debunking the anti-Stratfordian position, this argument comes in the shape



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- of a boomerang. In fact, the proliferation of authorship candidates testifies to the popular discontent over the ivory tower myth that all is well in Stratford. The success of books by Ogburn, Sobran, Whalen, and Anderson—to name only the most influential—have sparked a new wave of derivative “copycat” works endorsing one or another implausible alternative to the Oxford case.
- 3) De Vere (1550-1604) died before *The Tempest* and other plays were written. This objection has obtained wide currency, especially since the 1984 publication of Ogburn’s work, for a very intriguing reason. According to Mark Anderson, the chronology of the plays functions as a Kuhnian rule: “rules restrict the number of solutions to puzzles encountered in one’s day-to-day research. Devise a solution that defies the chronology (i.e., the author stopped writing in 1604) and face hostility, censure or excommunication” (“A Little More Than Kuhn” 12). Dispute over rules mounts, says Kuhn, as a dying paradigm fights to hang onto its plausibility: “Rules...become important and the characteristic unconcern about them...vanish[es] whenever paradigms or models are felt to be insecure” (Kuhn 47). Few orthodox scholars have been prepared to ask themselves a critical question: how *certain* are we that these plays were actually written in 1609-1611? The answer? Not very. Certainly not enough to perpetuate the Panglossian illusion that the positive case for de Vere’s authorship is unworthy of notice or sober consideration.
  - 4) De Vere was a wicked man and a “monstrous adversary” (Nelson). The premise of this argument seems to be that great literature is created by uncontroversial conformists, a view contradicted by an overwhelming mass of comparative evidence and known by all specialists in the field of creativity to be false. On the contrary, creative personalities in all fields, particularly writers, are prone to an exaggerated frequency of psychological disorders such as bipolar affective disorder, and are often perceived by the wider society as dangerously eccentric misfits. That de Vere was a misfit and an eccentric few have ever denied. Regaled by defense attorneys with de Vere’s litany of misbehavior, Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens famously quipped, “sounds like the conduct of a playwright” (Lardner 102).
  - 5) The Oxfordians are saying that Ben Jonson was a liar. Ironically, this objection was answered as long ago as 1930 when George Greenwood replied: “we of the ‘heretical’ persuasion can afford to smile” at the indignant defense of “honest Ben,” for “we see no reason to suppose that Jonson might not have taken the course we attribute to him”—that is, lending his name to a literary hoax—“and considered himself quite justified in so doing” (27).

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A primary, defining function of literary criticism is to meet interpretative challenges. Any premise in literary scholarship is—or should be—subject to spirited and preferably collegial testing and debate. By these criteria, there is no room to doubt the efficacy and intellectual seriousness of the Oxford challenge. What orthodoxy scorns as a heretical theory in fact validates a whole range of new interpretive visions, challenging the dogma of a disembodied, impersonal bard, motivated primarily by pecuniary interest and lacking any tangible human connection to his own literary production. In place of the world-weary and cynical dogma that the Bard was a sort of literary idiot savant, the Oxford story reveals a literary oeuvre connected in many intimate particulars to the actual lived experience of a real, flesh-and-blood author, whose life's work was to transcend his own suffering through the therapeutic power of art. Such a shift in perspective amounts to the kind of transformation required of 20th-century physics as quantum mechanics began to supplement Newtonian principles, revealing a strange but fascinating new universe of subatomic interaction which contradicted the old laws that were formerly believed to be inviolable constants.

Humanists might learn from our colleagues in the sciences, which deal on a regular basis with such fundamental disagreements about the structure of knowledge. While the recurrence of epistemic conflict does not protect scientists from the inevitable inhibition of contrarian views when advocates of an orthodox paradigm secure unwarranted powers of suppression, there is, at least among sociologists of science (and those enlightened scientists who are responsible for more than their fair share of authentic innovation), a healthy understanding of the dynamic nature of scholarly investigation. Respect for traditional premises and methods of inquiry need not conflict with recognizing the generative potential of “thinking outside the box.” Nor can it eliminate the need to return to a review of first principles when unexpected evidence appears.

The Oxford theory of authorship does not deny the fundamental value of much orthodox Shakespearean criticism, any more than advocates of the new science of quantum physics contested the legitimacy of Newtonian mechanics. Indeed, authorship skeptics have predictably made their strongest arguments when proceeding from factual bases established by orthodox critics and showing how, and why, these facts support an unorthodox conclusion. On the other hand, authorship skeptics *can understand* the reason for an outstanding paradox—a glaring anomaly, actually, from a comparative perspective—of Shakespearean studies: the more a critical work remains tied to the *biographical* mode, *the less* of any significance it tells us about the nature of the Shakespearean *literary* experience.

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Ultimately orthodox Shakespearians must retreat into the subjectivist belief of John Updike that “biographies are really just novels with indexes” (France and St. Clair 8). But if this is so, the novels orthodox Shakespearians write are bad literature. They lack real motivations, plausible characters, or compelling human logic.

Meanwhile Oxfordians take consolation in the Bard’s own prophetic voice, delivered in the persona of Mad Tom, visored for battle:

Know, my name is lost;  
By treason’s tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit  
Yet am I noble as the adversary  
I come to cope. ✱

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