Homoerotic and Homosexual Perspectives in Medieval Poetry and Verse Narratives: Indirect Evidence of a Hidden Discourse. With an Emphasis on Dietrich von der Gletze and Ulrich von Liechtenstein

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Abstract

Although it proves to be a difficult task, we still can identify more literary texts from the Middle Ages addressing homoerotic love than we might have expected. Even when poets voiced severe criticism and radically condemned homosexuality, their comments serve us well to identify more specifically the actual discourse behind the official scene. Although legal and Church authorities consistently characterized ‘sodomy’ as one of the worst sins a Christian could commit, since late antiquity, and certainly throughout the Middle Ages, the phenomenon existed, of course, and was also addressed in veiled or open language. This paper examines a selection of relevant literary and didactic works that shed more light on this issue.

Keywords: Medieval homoerotic poetry; Thomas de Cantimpré; Dietrich von der Gletze; Ulrich von Liechtenstein; Late antique love poetry; Courtly love discourse.

Introduction

Following the increasing popularity of the study of the history of gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages latest since the 1950s or 1960s (for the most recent study on this topic, see Harvey 2021), recent interest has also turned to the issue of homosexuality, or same-sex love, which is now generally called “queer love” and which implies the general questioning of normative heterosexuality, or the traditional binary system in all gender relationships. Research faces, however, a considerable dilemma in its efforts to detect and trace concrete examples confirming the existence of this type of shifting sexual identities because both the Church and the worldly authorities pursued all cases of “sodomy,” or of the “unmentionable sin,” with utmost cruelty, in clear contrast to Roman law in antiquity or the condition in ancient Greece. A major change can be identified, for instance, in the law of Justinian (538/539 and again 559), which formulated a strict ban on homosexual acts (“abominable lust with men”). In the subsequent centuries, the legal authors repeatedly formulated

the same harsh warnings against the “sins against nature,” obviously because they were afraid that they could not eradicate it and needed to build the legal wall higher and higher against a tide they could not stem.

Since Peter Damianus (1007–1072), the worst sexual sins were identified in the following hierarchy of condemnable acts: sodomy, incest, adultery, bigamy, bestiality, and masturbation. The legal and theological discourse on sodomy, generally identified as a *peccatum contra naturam*, raged throughout the entire Middle Ages and well into the nineteenth century, when the term ‘homosexuality’ was finally coined in 1868 by Karl-Maria Kertbeny and then Richard von Krafft-Ebing in the same year (Boswell 1980; Boswell 1994; for an excellent survey, with a strong emphasis on philosophical aspects, see Pickett 2021). However, gay rights continue to be under threat until today. Although the US Supreme Court decided in 2015 to accept gay marriage as part of the law of the land, currently there are grave dangers that all that legislation could be withdrawn again (2023). Hence, we really need to understand the discourse on homosexuality as it had emerged in the Middle Ages and then dominated the world ever since.

By the late twelfth century, Peter the Chanter, for instance, voiced great concerns about the moral decline of his society, denouncing especially sodomy, and he was followed by scholars such as Stephen of Tournai and Joannes Faventinus. In fact, it would be impossible to identify any significant medieval author of legal, philosophical, and theoretical writings who would not have argued strictly against the so-called unmentionable sin, namely, homosexuality, if there was an occasion to address the fundamental norms of sexual identity in the first place. In the late Middle Ages, urban legalizations intensified the treatment of sodomy as a severe sin, probably because the authors were afraid of God’s punishment afflicting the entire community if homosexuality were tolerated within their walls.

Queer studies, however, do not argue simply that medieval society was aware of, or condemned homosexuality. Instead, since the 1990s, research has increasingly observed that medieval society at large was involved in various discourses on sexual identity and explored the meaning of traditional concepts of heterosexuality. Close readings of many different types of medieval texts, such as Old French *dits* and romances such as Heldris’s *Roman de Silence* reveal a considerable degree of reflexivity regarding sexual identity (Samuelson 2022; see also the article by Rostakovic 2021). Visual documents have demonstrated the considerable degree of sexual nonconformity in existence, although often expressed in veiled language. The realization that the social dimension of sexuality is the result of discourses, and that normative heterosexuality has always been the outcome of constructions (Michel Foucault, 1980; id. 1985; id. 1986), has led to much innovative research of the Middle Ages.

We discover queerness both in the fields of philosophy and theology and in those of literature and the arts. At the same time, queer theory is still in the process of establishing itself more solidly, trying to avoid common pitfalls in the analysis of texts where there seem to be contained references to homosexual or lesbian love, when those have to be explained much more specifically as performative elements of a highly political nature.

Most queer studies draw from a wide variety of sources and can thus not be cleanly categorized as dealing with literary, historical, legal, or theological texts. The entire field is still contested, but it has already produced true landmarks of seminal research that can withstand the test of time (I have recently surveyed the entire field of Queer Studies and

evaluated the extensive body of research on this topic, Classen 2021). As legal and religious studies have demonstrated, throughout the entire Middle Ages, the Church, along with its arms of lawyers, consistently struggled hard to repress homosexuality and identified it as one of the worst sins. Over and over again, papal bulls, decretals, and specific laws were issued that condemned homosexuality in strictest terms. This 'unmentionable sin' was viewed with utmost horror, but the regular repetition of those condemnations clearly indicates that the phenomenon itself was observed, that it could not be repressed as completely as the authorities desired, and that the various legal authors faced the challenge to address something which they profoundly objected to.

However, the very existence of countless monastic communities, for instance, exclusively inhabited by men (monks) or women (nuns) strongly suggests from early on that there must have been forms of homosexual desire already then. After all, as modern research has clearly determined, we can always assume that ca. ten percent of every human society has been determined by homosexuality, whether those individuals were allowed to or able to come out of their hiding (closet) or not (Payer 1984; Brundage 1987; for more theoretical, hence also more problematic approaches, see Kłosowska 2005; Pugh 2008; research on this topic is rather legion by now). Most tellingly, the Dominican Thomas of Cantimpré formulated in his *Bonum universale de apibus* (ca. 1263–1270) severe warnings of the danger of the 'unmentionable' sin and even provided concrete examples of the transgressions committed by some monks (Burkhardt 2020; see also my review in *Mediaevistik* 35, forthcoming). He was particularly concerned by the danger/sin when a monastic teacher seduced his male students (II, 30, 8; II, 30, 13). We could easily identify parallel warnings in contemporary or later sermons or didactic treatises, so negative comments actually sustain the observation that homosexuality was more widespread also in the Middle Ages than the official statements seem to indicate. In other words, despite the great fear of this major sexual transgression, as the authorities perceived it, we are now in a fairly good position to identify a complex discourse on this phenomenon. Literary examples can also be relied on to examine this discourse further.

Dietrich von der Gletze, *The Belt*

Let us begin with two fascinating examples in late medieval German literature, first, Dietrich von der Gletze's*The Belt* (ca. 1280), then Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Frauenbuch* (also ca. 1280 or 1290). In both cases, homosexuality is not of primary concern, and it is even viewed highly negatively. But its treatment itself serves exceedingly well to identify the subtle and yet not repressed discourse. on this phenomenon, which allows us to examine the issue itself more in depth. While the first example represents a verse narrative (*mære*) by a virtually unknown poet, the latter consists of lengthy dialogues between a courtly lady and her lover about the fundamental conflicts between the genders and the problem both sides experience regarding their ethical and moral ideals. In both texts, quite unexpectedly, the issue of homosexuality emerges; very explicitly in the first and only indirectly in the latter. The more the authorities tried to repress alternative forms of sexuality, the more the phenomenon itself found its confirmation, as the literary discourse also indicates.

In Dietrich's verse narrative, we learn about a young couple who enjoys its married life, except that he (Conrad) faces considerable self-doubts and feels unrecognized by his peers. In order to improve his social status, Conrad decides to attend a tournament nearby, which his wife accepts as a good decision for him. However, while she stays behind and

enjoys her free time in a garden, a mysterious knight arrives who is immediately smitten by love for her and tries to seduce her with all of his means available. Basically, he tries to buy her love, offering her first his falcon, then his two greyhounds, and finally his horse, all magical animals that would prove to be better, faster, and stronger than any others. But the lady refuses all those offers since she is a loyal person and loves her husband, not willing to sell her happiness for material goods. However, when the knight goes one step further and throws in also his belt which is not only studded with extraordinary gems, but also commands the property of giving the person wearing it the guarantee of gaining honor, the lady can no longer resist and accepts the entire package in return for their lovemaking. There is no doubt that she submits to this final offer not for her own sake, but for that of her weak husband.

She mocks the foreign knight afterwards, ridiculing him as a man bereft of all of his knightly attributes, hence having been out of his mind when he offered all of his animals and even the belt, but he argues against her, emphasizing that he did not mind and now actually expresses his happiness about the exchange that satisfied him fully. We never hear of this knight again, so he might well be an allegorical figure in the poet's mind.[1]

The story gains in relevance for our topic only subsequently because one of Conrad's servants has observed the adulterous couple and tattles to his master. Conrad is so distraught about this situation that he immediately decides to abandon his wife and leaves both the tournament and the country, without ever having confronted his wife. She waits for him for two years during which she runs their estate all by herself, but Conrad does not return from Brabant and does not signal any willingness to forgive her transgression, the reasons for which he does not understand or even tries to analyze. This forces her to take actions, in which she then proves to be extremely creative, bold, and daring, emerging as a highly self-assertive female protagonist.

She disguises herself as a knight, pretending to be Heinrich (Henry of Swabia), follows her husband, and joins Conrad at the court of Brabant. But the poor man has obviously not achieved much there as a knight, whereas this Heinrich immediately proves to be a superior hunter, being in possession of the magical animals. The duke of Brabant would have liked to purchase one of those, but Heinrich refuses, waiting for his/her opportunity with Conrad, whom she intends to test, if not to seduce.[2]

At one point, the two 'men' spend time together at a military post, and Conrad then appeals to his new 'friend' to share at least one of his animals so that he could also gain some triumphs. After some hesitation, Heinrich finally concedes, but only on the condition that Conrad submits under his wishes. He only desires to sleep with men, and not with women. This is simply an expression of her heterosexual orientation, but she pretends to be homosexual. Conrad, not being aware of the masquerading, at first laments the fact that this excellent knight has this bad shortcoming, being a homosexual, as we would say it today, but then simply accepts the condition and prepares himself for the sexual union, not demonstrating any further hesitation, and not expressing any embarrassment or shame. He prostitutes himself without delay and would have gone through with the act if not Heinrich would have exposed her true gender identity in the last minute and thus demonstrated her husband's lack of morality and ethical ideals. She lambasts him furiously, excusing her own shortcoming in the past, which was, as she declares, justifiable because she had committed adultery for his sake; so she had voluntarily victimized herself in order to strengthen Conrad's public honor and self-respect. This brave woman

vehemently attacks the other man, ridicules and vituperates him, berates him as a heretic for his willingness to sleep with another man, and explains the entire situation. Conrad feels deeply humiliated, but he admits his fault, begs for forgiveness, which she grants him, and the couple then returns home, finally unified again in their marital love (7).

Neither Conrad nor Heinrich are homosexuals, but both have teased each other with this form of queer love as if they were seriously interested in it. As the narrative set-up indicates, Conrad would not have hesitated to allow the other man to sleep with him in return for one of the mysterious animals, meaning that he would have easily sold his sexual boy for material gains. Heinrich, on the other hand, felt no restraints to play the role of a homosexual as if that were a common situation, at least in his case. His/her male partner laments the fact that Heinrich only loves men, but he then accepts it as a fact of life that he cannot and does not want to change, as much as he identifies this situation as a pity considering the young man's splendid performance and appearance as a knight. And a knight would not display any homoerotic desires, so the argument goes, at least according to this narrative.

Of course, the entire set-up was only a pretense, and Heinrich can thus demonstrate her husband's hypocrisy in sexual matters. Undoubtedly, the wife had committed adultery, but she never truly revealed any interest in homosexuality. By the same token, Conrad was not really interested in men as sexual partners, but he followed the instructions by his friend so that he could gain one of those animals.

Dietrich can thus be credited with being one of the most unusual medieval poets who openly experimented with explicit allusions to homosexuality, although he has his characters reject it, to be sure. The verse narrative thus reflects in an intriguing, ambivalent, and duplicitous manner the fact that some men could enjoy a homosexual relationship. Lesbianism, by contrast, is not even thought of here. Although Conrad's wife vehemently condemns her husband for his weak morality and his readiness to participate in a homosexual act, she does not accuse him of being a homosexual, and thus she can let this whole charge drop after he has apologized and begged for forgiveness. After all, he himself had voiced rather regret about the 'fact' that his new friend Heinrich embraces homosexuality, something which would not be worthy of a good knight.

Under regular conditions, if a man would have been exposed as a homosexual, he would have faced the most severe punishment, including castration, hanging, and burning, as an overwhelming body of legal, historical, and religious documents confirms (Hergemöller 2013). In Dietrich's story, however, the entire situation proves to be only a part of the wife's strategy to expose her husband's double standards and as a defense method to explain her own 'weakness' when she had slept with the unnamed knight in order to secure the magical animals and especially the belt for her husband. In short, Dietrich shed important light on the discourse of homosexuality which was obviously more prevalent than the majority of our other (historical) sources indicate. Despite the wife's explicit rejection of homosexuality as an evil transgression of the fundamental rules and regulations, it proved to be an easy opportunity for the poet to incorporate the theme and to play with it in a rather sarcastic fashion (Classen 2019; Classen 2021).

Ulrich von Liechtenstein, *Frauenbuch*

Our second source reflecting homosexuality as an allegedly evil deviation from the standard practice of heterosexuality is the *Frauenbuch* by the Styrian (southern Austrian) poet Ulrich von Liechtenstein (ca. 1257), which has survived in only one manuscript, the famous *Ambraser Heldenbuch*, copied by the Bozen toll keeper Hans Ried on behalf of his patron, Emperor Maximilian I, between 1504 and 1516 (today kept in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Codex Ser. nova 2663).[3] We do not know why this text, which certainly addresses fundamental issues pertaining to the values of courtly love, the relationship between the genders, social and ethical concepts, and the discourse about the ideals of courtly communication (Philipowski 2010), did not experience greater popularity. It belongs, although it is only a very early example, to the rather popular genre of late medieval *minnereden* (poems consisting of dialogues about courtly love) and highlights the problems which courtly ladies have with men, and problems which knights face with women at large. Both sides, who appear to be very similarly minded regarding ethics, morality, gender roles, and public culture, lament the downfall of the general values and ethics, and try to explain to each other the reasons for the decline in courtly ideals, unearthing significant problems both among courtly ladies and knights (for this genre, see the contributions to Klingner and Lieb, ed., 2013).

At one point, we also learn about sodomy which severely interrupts the traditional exchange between the sexes and undermines deeply the ideals of courtly love; hence the homoerotic is identified as a major source of the corruption of society at large. Both speakers address profound shortcomings among women and men, as perceived from the opposite perspective. The man addresses, for instance, the grave problem that increasingly women sell their bodies, or sexual pleasures, for money or valuable gifts, which would undermine all the ideals of love (565–70). Those women guilty of that transgression would have to be identified as evil, and they should never be copied by good women. The latter should grant their love only those men who would aspire for honor and ethical ideals, which then would enhance her own social status (622–26).

The lady then responds by referring to those men who have lost the path toward honor and have subscribed to homosexuality, which she circumscribes only in subtle, though still very clear terms. She raises the question whether this sexual practice, which is not to be found, as she claims, among any animal, could be morally right or not. In fact, she condemns it explicitly: “und alle crêatiure dunket ungehiure?” (653; all creatures regard as abominable). She considers the homosexual act as such a horrible crime that she does not even want to put the word into her mouth. God had created women so that men would have a sexual partner, which entails for her that a male-male relationship would be directed specifically against God’s own wishes (660–66).

For this lady, even to think about homosexuality seems to be unbearable, but she referred to this ‘problem’ among evil men in order to defend herself against the knight’s charge of women who prostitute themselves for money and thus betray the value of love and the ideal of honor. While there are certainly some evil women, the majority of them would have to be appreciated for their high standards and courtly values. In essence, hence, the countercharge that some women commit the sin of sodomy served her as a defense strategy, insisting that only some women would have to be identified as evil: “ir sult uns niht gelîchen hân” (699; you should not treat us all as the same).

The male speaker accepts her argument but also pleads with her not to charge all men with that horrible sin. He himself

rejects all homosexuals and would help women to stone those culprits or to burn them to death at the stake (712–03). Both persons thus use the reference to homosexuals as a defense mechanism which allows them to discriminate between good and bad representatives of their gender. He calls them “die selben gar unreinen” (711; those unclean ones). And he goes so far as to condemn them utterly, wishing to wipe them off the face of the earth (717). However, he also admits that the phenomenon itself would not be rare, as much as those homosexual men would bring shame on their entire gender (729–35). Although he completely agrees with the lady, he cannot deny the fact that there are homosexuals. He even wonders aloud why God would allow the sun to shine on them and implies some criticism, which would be blasphemous in itself: “daran tuot got vür wâr niht wol” (736; God does not act right in that).[4] Would we have to suspect, reading this line correctly, that he expresses deep trouble about the actual existence of those men, feeling forced to acknowledge their existence?

Both the poet and the male speaker then drop the topic because it is too uncomfortable (737), but this does not mean that the issue itself has thus been taken care of. The more negative the comments are, the more we recognize here again that Ulrich addresses a specific discourse, takes up exclusively the negative position, rejecting homosexuality outright, but by the same token he has to acknowledge its existence and also the impossibility for the critics to eliminate homosexuality as such. Other contemporary poets such as The Stricker also formulated similar opinions,[5] and we can thus preliminarily conclude that the negative discourse in courtly literature directed against homosexuality was stronger than we might have expected. This, in turn, indicates that various poets were rather aware about it, as little as they might have liked it. They did not hold back in their radical condemnation, but the very drastic rejection of sodomites might also signal a deeply-seated fear of this sexual deviation which seems have been more common than they would have liked to admit (Grabmayer 1999). Major late medieval poets such as Alain de Lille, Dante Alighieri, and Geoffrey Chaucer offered significant statements about this phenomenon, which our two sources nicely complement, adding their personal comments, though without differing from their models.

The Homoerotic in Late Antique and Early Medieval Poetry

To what extent would medieval courtly love poetry help us to approach this topic more closely? The theme of courtly love was widespread and highly popular across Europe, and we find major collections in virtually all significant languages, including Latin, such as the famous *Cambridge Songs* (ca. 1160) or the *Carmina Burana* (ca. 1220), normally expressing standard heteronormativity, but at times also homosexual inclinations. The extent to which there are more extensive allusions to homosexuality in these mostly Latin songs remains to be studied.

Since late antiquity, many Latin authors, both theologians and poets, added comments about their homoerotic desires, such as Paulinus of Nola, Venantius Fortunatus, Alcuin of Tours, and others.[6] A good example would be Baudril of Meung sur Loire (1046–1130), who was abbot of Bourgueil and later archbishop of Dol. In one of his Latin verses, he reflects on his youthful follies, enjoying love with maids and young men:

> *Obicunt etiam, juvenum cur more locutus*

> *Virginibus scripsi quaedam quae compliectuntur amorem; Carminibusquae meis sexus uterque placet*
>
> *[This their reproach: that wantoning in youth,*
> *I wrote to maid and wrote to lads no less*
> *Some things I wrote, 'tis true, which treat of love*
> *And songs of mine have pleased both he's and she's.]*

Commonly, the poets reflect in their youthful folly and reject their dallying with homoerotic desire, such as Marbod, Bishop of Rennes, (ca. 1035–1123):

> *Errabat mea mens fervore libidinis amens…*
> *Quid quod pupilla mihi carior ille vel illa?*
> *Ergo maneto foris, puer aliger, auctor amoris!*
> *Nullus in aede mea tibi sit locus, o Cytherea!*
> *Displicet amplexus utriusque quidem mihi sexus.*
>
> *[My mind did stray, loving with hot desire Was not he or she dearer tome than sight? But now, O winged boy, love's sire, I lock thee out! Nor in my house is room for thee, O Cythera! Distasteful to me now is the embrace of either sex.]*

The barely veiled references to homoerotic love is intricately embedded in sophisticated Latin verses, playfully alluding to love for a male youth in the past, which is all no longer relevant, so it seems, but still matters for the poetic discourse. The world of Hebrew-Arabic culture in the Iberian Peninsula also appears to have facilitated some poetic writing about homoerotic feelings (Roth 1989), such as in the work of Yishaq ben Mar-Saul (eleventh century) and Isaac Ibn Abraham (twelfth century) (Roth 1982).

Without going further into details, we can be certain that particularly learned medieval poets such as eighth-century Alcuin advocated strongly eroticized relationships with their pupils and friends, although we can never be fully certain about the actual intentions of their poems. Strong bonds of friendship are not automatically identifiable with homoeroticism, but a careful analysis of the wide gamut of available texts, primarily in Latin, far into the sixteenth century, clearly confirms the presence of a homoerotic discourse (Wilhelm, ed., 1995).

Conclusions

As the examples of Dietrich von der Gletze and Ulrich von Liechtenstein have indicated, however, secular poets were often much more aggressive in their evaluation and then rejection of homosexuality. Nevertheless, even those negative voices contributed to the kaleidoscope of opinions regarding the complex of sexual relationships already in the pre-modern age. While we have already recognized the high value of friendship as a central theme in the Middle Ages and

beyond (see the contributions to Classen and Sandidge, ed., 2010), the examples examined here underscore the ease with which that discourse could have led over to the homoerotic one. While conservative critics such as Dietrich von der Gletze and Ulrich von Liechtenstein, in their roles as poets at least, vehemently rejected homosexuality as a grave danger for society at large, numerous medieval Latin poets playfully alluded to this aspect in human life as delightful, powerful, and intriguing. Many severe warnings about homosexuality by late medieval preachers and other clerics indicated as well that this 'sin' was observable more often than not, but it could apparently not be repressed or eliminated. The more critics raised their voice against this deviant form of sexual practice, the more we recognize, almost ironically, how much homosexuality was actually a real part of daily life, certainly repressed, but certainly also in existence.

One final example revealingly illustrates this phenomenon. In his well-known penitential song "Mein sünd und schuld eu, priester, klag" (Kl. 39), the South-Tyrolean poet Oswald von Wolkenstein (ca. 1376/77–1445) lists many different sins that he has committed and also includes this comment: "ich kenn die sünd von Sodoman, / verdienten lon nit halb gewär" (III, 11–12; I am familiar with the sin of sodomy; and I do not grant half of the reward that is due). This does not mean, of course, that he would have confessed publicly any act of homosexual transgression; instead, the poet plays with the tradition of penances and demonstrates here his expertise in those theological issues (Butz 2022, 76). In short, the topic of this sexual deviation was commonly discussed and could easily be thematized also in religious confessional poetry. In fact, its highly negative connotation served a specific, if not important purpose within that framework.

Footnotes

[1] Here I draw from my own translation in *Erotic Tales of Medieval Germany*, 2007; rev. and expanded sec. ed. 2009, no. 3; now also online at: https://aclassen.faculty.arizona.edu/sites/aclassen.faculty.arizona.edu/files/07-dietrich%20gletze.pdf.

[2] For the history of cross-dressing in the Middle Ages, which was not automatically transvestism, see Hotchkiss 1996.

[3] Ulrich von Liechtenstein 2003. The entire *Ambraser Heldenbuch* is now available online as a facsimile and transcription, ed. Klarer 2022); here vol. 11; online at: https://www.degruyter.com/serial/ahg-b/html?lang=en#volumes (last accessed on Jan. 13, 2023).

[4] Cf. Dina Aboul Fatouh Salama, "'ir sult uns niht gelîîche hân, ob ir wænet sîîn ein hövescher man' (V. 699f.): Ulrichs von Liechtenstein 'Frauenbuch' (1257) zwischen Ästhetisierung und Ethisierung hegemonialer und genderspezifischer Positionen." *"Die Wissenschaft ist ein Meer ohne Ufer": Beiträge zum Forschungskolloquium an der Abteilung für Germanistik der Universität Kairo*, ed. Michael Fisch and eadem. Beiträge zur transkulturellen Wissenschaft, 4 (Berlin: Weidler, 2017), 51–85; here 63.

[5] Der Stricker, "Klage," 422–23; quoted from *Ulrich von Liechtenstein*, ed. Young 2003, note to v. 660–61.

[6] See the anthology, *Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse*, ed. Coote 1983. All poems edited and translated here are taken from Curtius 1948/1953, 115–116. For a good selection of relevant texts, see the appendix to Boswell 1980.

Disclaimer

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