

ISSN 0104-1886

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DOS SUL  
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS

CADERNOS DO I. L.  
Nº 17  
JUNHO DE 1997

**U F R S U**

**Biblioteca Setorial de Ciências Sociais e Humanas**

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## Love, marriage and power in *The Clerk's tale* and *The taming of the shrew*

Ana Maria Kessler Rocha\*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Genesis

The idea for this article first occurred to me while working with Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (hereafter TS) as part of the work developed in the project "Aparência x Realidade na Obra de William Shakespeare - uma Abordagem Psicanalítica. Fase II: as Comédias". Indeed, the story of Katherine's "taming" by Petruchio, and Walter's "testing" of Griselda in Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale* (hereafter CT) are similar in more than one aspect.

It might be argued that a medieval "pious tale" and a sixteenth-century Shakespearian comedy, or farse, which does not in the least provoke pity in the reader, would not apparently lend themselves to parallelisms, for the simple reason that they so diverge from each other in gender, form and style, that no common ground for comparison would be attainable.

I intend to show not only that the comparison is possible, but also that it manifests itself mainly in terms of the treatment given to love and marriage in relation to questions of power and authority in both poem and play, as reflections of English Medieval and Renaissance societies. It will become clear that both Walter and Petruchio are mainly concerned with power in their attitudes toward their wives; love, if any exists, is pushed to a secondary position.

The method and concepts used in this analysis are those proposed by Cultural Materialism, the mainly British wing of New

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\* Professora do setor de Inglês do Depto. LET 2 e doutoranda do PPG-Letras

Historicism, "a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis", as defined by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in *Political Shakespeare--New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985).<sup>1</sup> Other terminology involved will be explained in Section III.

### Review of Criticism

Major Chaucerian scholars have followed Kittredge's description of "the marriage group of tales" in which CT is listed with *The Wife of Bath's*, *The Merchant's* and *The Franklin's* tales. The Clerk's story about Griselda and her "cruel" husband offers an idealistic view of marriage; her acceptance of his trials can be read as a religious fable, or parable, as is clear in

For since a woman showed such patience to  
A mortal man, how much the more we ought  
To take in patience all that God may do. (371)<sup>2</sup>

Critics have systematically called attention to the tale's indebtedness to Petrarch's *de Insigni Obedientia et Fide Uxor* (1373-74) and its undated, anonymous French version *Le Livre Griseldis*, both ultimately based on Boccaccio's last story in the *Decameron*. In a comprehensive study about Boccaccio's influence on English literature<sup>3</sup>, professor Herbert G. Wright calls attention to the different traits existing in Chaucer's and Boccaccio's stories, especially the fact that Chaucer seems to be mainly concerned in his tale with the minds of human beings; Boccaccio concentrates on outward events rather than the inner lives of his characters. As for the political aspect in the tale, Wright emphasizes that in the feudal society depicted by Chaucer, the gap between Walter and his subjects is wider than anything seen in earlier versions, implying a more complete submission of those subjects to the will of their lord.

<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Dollimore & Alan Sinfield; eds. *Political Shakespeare--New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Cornell, 1985), p.vii.

<sup>2</sup>All references to Chaucer's work are from the Penguin edition of Nevill Coghill's modern English translation of *The Canterbury Tales*; page numbers are given in parentheses.

<sup>3</sup>Herbert G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England* (Athlone, 1957), pp.116-122.

Elizabeth Salter shares Wright's opinion about Chaucer's additions to Boccaccio and Petrarch, and about the role of the marquis as the means by which Griselda is proved perfect-- "He has, in fact, the authority of a symbol."<sup>4</sup> She contrasts the poem's pathetic realism, as represented by Griselda, and its dramatic realism, in the figure of Walter. The reader is involved with the heroine, and is gradually led to feel more and more critical toward Walter, "even though we know that complete reparation for Griselda's injuries will be made."<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Catherine Belsey offers a feminist study of several Griselda characters in *The Subject of Tragedy* (1985)<sup>6</sup>, extending her analysis to seventeenth-century versions of the story. She points out a paradoxical situation in the tale--marriage, as an absolutist male institution, is checked by the moral superiority of Griselda, who emerges victorious in the end. Belsey's study of the "silent female" in Renaissance drama is of paramount importance in the analysis of the relation between power and discourse developed in section III of this article.

As for TS, critics have traditionally discussed a number of familiar subjects over the centuries, but perhaps the most significant issue emanating from such criticism is that which equates love and marriage with power, or social standing. E.C.Pettet concedes that "a large part of the action concerns matchmaking and marriage", but we cannot fail to see that in the sixteenth century "marriage is primarily an economic and social institution, and love has little to do with it."<sup>7</sup> John Russell Brown, in his influential study of Shakespeare's comedies basically shares the same view by saying that "In this play love and commerce are brought together"; he suggests that a certain degree of

<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Salter, *Chaucer: "The Knight's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale"; Studies in English Literature*, vol.5, p.40.

<sup>5</sup>"Complete reparation" (Salter, p.58) is, in my opinion, a fallacy, for though we are told that Griselda lived happily thereafter with her husband and children, nothing can make up for the twelve years during which she was deprived of her children's presence, watching them grow up, accompanying their development, and so on. This essential part of a woman's accomplishment as a mother is irrecoverably denied to her.

<sup>6</sup>Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy--Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (Methuen, 1985).

<sup>7</sup>E.C.Pettet, *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition* (Methuen, 1949), p.72.

“complicity” is achieved between Petruchio and Katherine--they “exchange kisses, and her speech is confident and joyful.”<sup>8</sup>

Feminist criticism has also found much to say about TS. While reinforcing the relation between love/marriage and commerce in this play, Marilyn French stresses that “marriage is a purchase made between men.”<sup>9</sup> Running along the same lines, Marianne Novy calls attention to the “mutuality” (or complicity) in Shakespeare’s conception of marriage,

“which allows women, though technically and theoretically inferior to men under patriarchy, to be accepted in practice as real partners.”<sup>10</sup>

I conclude this section with a quotation from director Michael Bogdanov’s interview to Christopher J. McCullough about his 1978 Royal Shakespeare Company production of TS. Says Bogdanov,

I believe Shakespeare was a feminist, and all the plays I direct ... analyse the roles of women from that ideological point of view. I think there is no question of it: he shows how women are ill-treated, abused, and how often they have to dress themselves up as men in order that they may be treated on an equal basis, if they are not at the seat of power. (...) He shows women used as commodities, not allowed to choose for themselves. In TS you get that extraordinary scene between Baptista, Grumio, and Tranio, where they are vying with each other to see who can offer most for Bianca, who is described as “the prize”. (...) There is no question of it, Shakespeare’s sympathy is with the women, and his purpose, to expose the cruelty of a society that allows these things to happen.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>J.R. Brown, *Shakespeare and his Comedies* (Methuen, 1962), pp.57-61.

<sup>9</sup>Marilyn French, *Shakespeare’s Division of Experience*, (Ballantine, 1981), p.77.

<sup>10</sup>Marianne Novy, cited by Ann Thompson, “The Warrant of Womanhood--Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism”, Graham Holderness; ed., *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester U.P., 1988), pp.74-88.

<sup>11</sup>“Michael Bogdanov interviewed by C. McCullough”, in G. Holderness, op.cit., pp89-95.

## GRISELDA & WALTER; KATHERINE & PETRUCHIO

This section aims at selecting and discussing a few comparative points between CT and TS, especially in terms of the attitudes of the two heroines and those of their husbands. It is not my intention here to analyse the characters of Griselda, Katherine, Walter, or Petruchio--this would lie outside the scope of the present article.

The “battle” that rages between Petruchio and Kate is necessary, to a certain extent, since she does not conform to the expected norms of family and social behaviour. Most critics agree that her haughtiness and her noisy temper are but a disguise to cover her deep sorrow and humiliation at being neglected by her father, who favours Bianca. In this context, it might be difficult to agree that she “deserves” to be tamed. What Petruchio does is to raise a mirror up to her in order to show her the true Kate behind all that feigned mask of shrewishness. “...when that special thing is well obtain’d,/That is, her love”, as Baptista says (II.1), she is free to be herself, “a household Kate”, and no longer “Kate the curst”.<sup>12</sup> Since love is the instrument of her taming, it can be properly said, then, that she did deserve to be...loved.<sup>13</sup>

In CT, on the contrary, Griselda is never rebellious or untoward: since the very beginning, she is the model of all virtues--kind, loving, and obedient to both her father and Walter. She accepts all the trials her husband piles on her without questioning his motives, and no word of protest is ever heard from her. Unlike Kate, Griselda does not change in the course of the story; she is the same virtuous, submissive, obedient woman throughout.

Kate is transformed from a shrew into a “comfortable” Kate; more important than that, she is taught how to give and receive love without the fear of exposing herself in the process. In CT, love is not questioned--there is no doubt that Griselda loves her husband and her

<sup>12</sup>Quotations from Shakespeare’s play refer to the Spring Books edition of the *Complete Works* (1958); act and scene numbers are given in the text.

<sup>13</sup>I may appear to be contradicting myself, as I have stated that love is not involved in either case. Actually, what I mean is that love is not part of Walter’s or Petruchio’s main plans in getting married. Of course, affection and tender feelings develop later, especially in TS, where Kate had become a shrew for lack of love and ceases to be one when she is in love and loved.

children. The question is how much suffering she can stand for love's sake. Patience and endurance are at the stake, not love.

The study of Walter's and Petruchio's attitudes is much more relevant to the central theme being discussed here than that of their wives'. They are dictated by an unflinching concern with their social and political positions, and the maintenance of these positions through power. The Clerk opens his tale by describing the Saluzzo region in Italy and adds, "There was a marquis once ruled that land,/ As had his ancestors in days gone by." (340) Thus, not only Walter's status as ruler is established, but also his right to govern, as descending from a noble lineage.

In TS, Petruchio introduces himself to Baptista quite bluntly: "Petruchio is my name; Antonio's son,/ A man well known throughout Italy." (II.1) Having declared his social position, he also establishes his economic situation: "You knew my father well; and in him, me;/ Left solely heir to all his lands and goods./ Which I have bettered rather than decreased." (II.1) He also asserts his authority and superiority to Kate herself:

Thus, in plain terms: - Your father hath consented  
That you shall be my wife: your dowry 'greed on;  
And will you, nill you, I will marry you.  
Now, Kate, I am a husband for your turn;  
For, by this light, whereby I see thy beauty,--  
Thy beauty that doth make me like thee well--  
Thou must be married to no man but me; (II.1)

When it comes to comparing the means by which power is exercised over their wives, however, Walter and Petruchio make use of very diverse methods. Considering what has been said about Griselda's submission throughout the tale, it becomes clear that Walter is a ruler who abuses his power over his wife. The Clerk himself is the first to call attention to this fact:

Needless, God knows, to frighten and dismay her,  
He had assayed her faith enough before  
And ever found her good; what was the need

Of heaping trial on her, more and more? (351)

Walter does not offer a convincing reason for his attitude, except that he did it "for the trial of your womanhood", and "Till I had proved the purpose of your heart" (369). Given that the proof is unnecessary and the trial excessive, his "power abuse" is obvious.

Petruchio does not really make abusive use of his power over Kate, even though her "taming" requires some physical privation (rest, food, clothing). However, he never strikes her; instead, he strikes the priest during the wedding ceremony, and all the servants and attendants in his house--a "mad" attitude which is part of the taming process itself. Considering the farcical nature of TS, we understand that Shakespeare purposefully avoids physical violence, which would be intolerable in this play--humour must relieve tension, and romance is offered as a substitute for violence. When Kate puts her hand on the floor for Petruchio to step on it, if so he wishes, we are on the verge of witnessing power abuse. His answer is famous: "Why, there's a wench!--Come on, and kiss me, Kate." (V.2)

As representatives of high social classes, both Petruchio and Walter violate the norms of society by breaking rules and scandalizing people with their unexpected behaviours. Petruchio breaks the social norm several times, especially on his wedding day; his clothes, his actions, the apparel of his horse, the scandal in the church--all serve to confirm him as a "rebel", or, we might say, a man who, finding himself in a position of authority, feels free to "twist" the rules a little, to his convenience.

In CT, Walter breaks the norm in a more serious way. By accepting his subjects' request that he should marry soon, the marquis chooses a bride from the lowest social class, a very poor, humble girl who lives in the most miserable village in the valley. His reasons for doing so will be discussed later; the fact remains that he marries below his social class. Considering the religious interpretation of the tale, it may be said that Walter also violates the Christian rules in several ways--he lies to Griselda by saying that his lords have not accepted her (352, 356), and by making her believe that her children are dead (353-358); he does not allow himself to show any sign of pity or kindness toward her during all the "test" (353, 355, 357-8), and he deceives not only

Griselda, but all his subjects in relation to his second wedding (360). Words used by the narrator to describe Walter and his machinations are “stubborn”, “cunning”, “cruel”, and “murderous”.

### **LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND POWER**

Perhaps this section should be called “Power, Love, and Marriage”, for power is the main issue being discussed here. According to New Historicism, power is the fundamental category of human experience, the Nietzschean concept of “libido dominandi”, or drive for domination. Two aspects of the question must be taken into consideration, and these are the Marxist view of power as the object of (class) struggle, shared by Cultural Materialists, and the view proposed by the American current of New Historicism, which states that power is an effect of discourse. Discourse must be understood as a set of statements governed by its own rules, which makes a series of claims or assertions in opposition to those of other discourses; hence, male discourse x female discourse, white x black (or non-white) discourse, ruling class x proletarian discourse, and so on.

The Marxist and the “discourse” views may stand in opposition to each other theoretically, but, in relation to the texts studied here, their practical application is, as I see it, perfectly possible in both cases. This is what the present section intends to show.

#### **The Clerk’s Tale**

The importance of Walter’s social position in this tale has already been demonstrated. He is the Marquis, the Lord who governs his land and his people with the power inherited from his ancestors. He does not need to fight for power, but he must be vigilant in order to keep the power he already has. As a ruler, he must avoid at all costs any attempts at popular rebellion or insurrection, and he is very keen in identifying the first symptoms of social discontentment when his subjects request that he should get married. “Did you but choose, my Lord, to take a wife,/ What sovereign comfort to your country’s life!” (341) Behind the words of concern for the marquis’ health and long life, there stands a veiled threat of loss and discontinuation of his power:

For if it so befell--which God forbid!--  
Your line should end, then might not fortune rake  
Some strange successor in to come and take  
Your heritage? (342)

Thus, Walter’s primary concern is the public’s opinion, for he agrees to marry soon in order to appease the worries of his subjects. Here we can see what the most recent critical currents refer as “differential”, or “dialectical power”--no longer unilateral (top-down), but in relation to both ends of the formula (top and down). This means to say not only that Walter has power over his people, but also that his people have power over him--the power to complain, criticize, oppose him, and even overthrow him from power.

When Walter agrees to get married, he determines to choose the bride all by himself, and he chooses Griselda. As I see it, his reason for this choice is also related to power--it is a demonstration of power, a reinforcement of his social position as absolute ruler, who can do as he wishes, even if that is unexpected or shocking.

His subjects are sworn and bend their knees to him in submission--in this mutual relation of dialectical power, an agreement has been achieved, for a while. However, throughout the text we can find passages which reinforce Walter’s position as he “performs” his role in public audiences and speeches--important decisions and announcements are always openly given to his court and his people (349, 361, 369).

As for love, we are told by the narrator that Walter had noticed Griselda before; “Hunting perhaps, a something in her features/ Caught his regard”, and he decided “were he to marry, she should be his bride.” (345) This is not exactly what might be called “love at first sight”. Therefore, marriage comes as a result of power enforcement, and love is pushed to a secondary position.

Griselda is used by Walter as an instrument to ascertain his power over his people. Moreover, their marriage is clearly also based on power. Just as he does with his subjects, Walter establishes with his wife a mutual relation of dialectical power in which hers is the power of

resistance and silence. She is tried to the top of her capacity, and she never complains, never fights back--it is a matter of seeing how far one can push, and as we know, she wins.

Griselda's trial has a further effect on the public, as the demonstration of Walter's power. The Clerk says that after her children "disappear", the marquis' "ill-fame" starts to grow among his people. We can conjecture what their thoughts are-- "if Walter can do what he has done to his wife and children, whom he loves, what might he do to rebellious subjects?" Nevertheless, before he attempts his next trial of Griselda, he is sure to secure the Pope's "permission", to "calm the rancour and the indignation/ Between his people and him." (360)

The analysis of power in CT is also possible in relation to the line proposed by American New Historicism regarding discourse. As we have seen, Walter's position as a public figure reinforces the importance of his discourse in opposition to that of his subjects. Power is displayed through language, as well as through acts. We must also notice the opposition between Walter's power over Griselda as a result of his discourse as husband and lord, and her power over him as a result of her obedience and silence. Since she never contests his authority, as he had required when they were married, we can say her discourse is 0 (zero), or at least, the same as his. In agreeing with Walter, she uses "the discourse of the oppressor", so there is no conflict.

This is in accordance with Catherine Belsey's assertion that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries--and aslo before that, we can assume--women were "enjoined to silence, discouraged from any form of speech which was not an act of submission to the authority of their fathers or husbands. Permitted to break their silence in order to acquiesce in the utterances of others, women were denied any single place from which to speak for themselves."<sup>14</sup> Whenever Griselda speaks, it is to agree, to accept, to comply, and ultimately, to thank Walter for being so good a husband and father. The more he tests her, the more she submits to his will, until he is finally led to admitting--again publicly--her constancy and loyalty.

<sup>14</sup>Belsey, op. cit., p.149.

As already suggested, the moral victory of the tale is hers; she gains recognition and is "rewarded" in the end, as a result of her silent patience and submissiveness. But Walter also gains something--once more, his power is reinforced, not only by the fact that things come out exactly as he had planned, including his subjects' acceptance and compliance, but also because Griselda herself, in her final words, endorses his discourse:

'All thanks to you, my dearest lord', said she,  
'For you have saved my children, you alone!

...  
But God in mercy brought  
You back to me and your kind father sought  
In tender love to keep you safe and sound' (370)

"All's well that ends well", goes the saying, and this is precisely Walter's intention from the beginning-- "to live my life in quiet if I may." (357) So, we can attest that Walter does not change in the end, for he still believes he did the right thing--his discourse does not change. He never asks Griselda's forgiveness for what he made her suffer, simply because it was done "neither in malice nor in cruelty/ But for the trial of your womanhood." (369)

So we can conclude that Walter's and Griselda's positions--and discourses--remain unaltered at the end of CT. The idea of "complicity" between husband and wife--or mutual power, we might call it-- is to be reached only in *The Franklin's Tale*, and is also a central issue in Shakespeare's TS.

### **The Taming of the Shrew**

Unlike Walter, who has power as ruler, Petruchio must, first of all, conquer his power as husband over Kate. In the "taming battle", power is clearly the object of struggle, according to the position of Cultural Materialism. Kate resists Petruchio's domination, she complains, she fights back (their first scene together is the best example and one of the funniest in Shakespeare); however, critics agree that her reaction is superficial, a show of resistance, because in fact she wants to be married and she believes she has met her match. As a result of this,

Petruchio's job is made much easier, since she wants to be tamed — which would explain the relatively short time taken to dominate a reputedly “impossible” shrew.

This leads to the consideration of two other interesting aspects in relation to power. First, the two-sidedness of the power process determines Kate's power over Petruchio as well as his over her. She also “tames” him, to a certain extent, into believing that husband and wife can achieve harmony and happiness by accepting a pattern of mutual respect and complicity. This is where love comes in in their relationship, and though it is not emphasized in the text, hints can be easily identified.<sup>15</sup> The second aspect is the element of “challenge” in Petruchio's “taming” of Katherine; this conquest is like a sport to him—he compares it to falconry:

My falcon now is sharp, and passing empty  
And, till she stoop, she must not be full-gorg'd,  
For then she never looks upon her lure. (IV.1)

Kate is a “prize” to be won, a riddle to be deciphered and, as such, has the power of a mystery to him. At the same time, being a riddle, Kate is rich soil on which Petruchio can exercise his power and demonstrate his methods and his authority.

It is undeniable that Petruchio's discourse is one of power from beginning to end, even though it is considered rough and “mad” at a first glance. Just as Kate assumes a cloak of shrewishness to protect herself from her father's “un-love”, so also Petruchio puts on his “mad-cap ruffian” attitude (II.1) in order to allow Kate to see herself in it. He forces her to re-examine her own behaviour by affecting a manner more ridiculous, rude, and noisy than hers. Being in a position of superiority, he can see “through” her and understands what he must do in order to conquer her. Toward the end, as she is “gained”, his attitude becomes more affectionate, his words less rude, but he still maintains a position of power which is reinforced by means of discourse: “Kate, I charge thee,

<sup>15</sup>Petruchio's words of affection are initially ironical, for he intends to call her the very opposite of what she is. Later, as she becomes more submissive, his words come to reflect the truth about his feelings, since he, too, falls in love with her.

tell these headstrong women/ What duty they owe their lords and husbands”, and “Come on, and kiss me, Kate”, and still “Come, Kate, we'll to bed.” (V.2)

Her own discourse, on the other hand, matches her shrewish ways in the beginning, but little by little she changes, on realizing that Petruchio will not relent in his treatment of her until she yields—“it will be what o'clock I say it is”, he tells her (IV.3), and from this moment on she starts to understand. In the end, completely “tamed”, she is using his (male) discourse, just like Griselda in CT. The best example is her famous speech at the end of the play:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,  
Thy head, thy sovereign;  
.....  
Such duty as the subject owes the prince,  
Even such a woman oweth to her husband (V.2)

## CONCLUSION

What I have attempted to demonstrate is, briefly, that the attitudes toward love, marriage, and power as depicted by Chaucer in CT and by Shakespeare in TS are basically the same, in spite of the two hundred years or so that separate them in time.

For both Walter and Petruchio power is of paramount importance, and every possible effort should be directed toward either its achievement or its maintainance. Walter wants to keep his power as ruler, and therefore complies to his subjects' petition. Petruchio must conquer his power over Kate before he can rule as her husband and lord. In both cases, these men must get married in order to achieve their goals, and so marriage comes as a result of the contingencies required to obtain and secure power.

Marriage is, thus, directly related to power, but the same cannot be said of love. In both texts, love is born during or after the “taming” process. In CT, Griselda's love for Walter is emphasized, as any dutiful wife's should be; his love for her is hardly mentioned—it exists, but is not important. In TS, on the other hand, the process of falling in love runs side by side with the “taming” itself, and a “mutuality” in love is



finally reached. Nonetheless, Petruchio's domination and Kate's submission are still stressed above the idea of love.

From all that has been discussed and analysed here, one important conclusion can be drawn. Both CT and TS demonstrate clearly that women's position in society in Chaucer's and in Shakespeare's times remained basically the same--having almost no voice at all, and taking very little part in decisions affecting their own lives.<sup>16</sup> Those who conformed to the rule were "models of virtue", like Griselda, and those who did not were labelled "shrews", like Katherine.

The concepts of power, domination, struggle, and discourse proposed by New Historicism and Cultural Materialism have been shown to apply closely to the questions related to love and marriage discussed in the above sections. As two of the most influential and controversial movements in literary theory, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism have had great impact on the study of Renaissance literature, focusing on a moment (16th -17th centuries) when both language (discourse) and forms of power were in radical transition and the subject of intense debate. As such, the study and application of these theories have proved of fundamental importance for the development of this article.

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<sup>16</sup>The discussion of this idea could be enlarged, for instance, to include the figure of the father, that appears in both texts--Janicula in CT and Baptista in TS. They are important in relation to the question of power, since each daughter is "handed over" from father to husband, i.e., from one "lord" to another. However, I have chosen to leave this aspect of the question outside the present article.

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