

The Gendered Journey: Feminizing the Quest Motif in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain or Le chevalier au lion*

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The quest motif in Old French literature has typically been dominated by the male ethos of chivalry, and appears frequently in the highly masculinist genre of the epic. However, the important recent discovery of the text *Le roman de Silence*, in which the knight-hero turns out to be a woman in disguise, along with the rising popularity of both feminist and postmodern criticism in the field of medieval studies, have enabled scholars to consider such previously fixed motifs in a different light.

A brief glimpse at the canon of Medieval French literature reveals several prime candidates for quest motifs that have been gender-subverted, and therefore feminized in different ways: Nicolette's pastiche of conformities of sexual identity in *Aucassin et Nicolette*, Floire and Blancheflor's journey that merges their identities into one asexual or androgenous being; Gauvin's failed chivalric quest in *Le chevalier à la charrette*, which effectively locates his behavior in the "feminine" domain of the Eve/Ave dichotomy in medieval thought, and Laudine's quest in *Yvain* as a negative-space mirror of her absent husband's adventures. It is on this last quest that this study will concentrate, in order to show how a feminist reading of the quest motif can reveal deeper layers of the meaning of journeying, and highlight some of the ambiguities of sexual roles and identities in the French Middle Ages.

The modern re-writing and re-reading of earlier texts with a feminist twist is fast becoming a literary industry. Tracy Chevalier's *The Lady and the Unicorn*, Sena Jeter Naslund's *Abab's Wife* and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* are just three examples of what can be done with a mere sketch of a feminine character in the source text; literally, in Chevalier's case, as her novel is based on a text with no words: the tapestries of la Dame à la Licorne, currently displayed at the musée de Cluny in Paris. Atwood's book is a somewhat irreverent retelling of certain events of the *Odyssey* from the woman's point of view, and Naslund's book draws its eponymous character from this throwaway reference in Melville's *Moby Dick*: "that girl-wife I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the very next day" (qtd. in Naslund xviii-xix); Naslund chronicles in 666 pages the

life and adventures of this wife, Una Spencer, a strong and convincing women character who, somewhat like a literary Forrest Gump, finds her life entangled with the major social, political and religious movements of her century. Naslund's work especially raised several questions in my mind that I believe may equally be applied to female counterparts of the questing male in medieval romance: Did the wife only come into being on the day that she met or married her husband? What is the wife actually *doing* while her husband is off having his adventures? Does her life stop while he's gone? Can we find clues to her life embedded in the quest of her male counterpart? What is she seeking and how is her quest different from that of her husband?

This study proposes a preliminary examination of several of these questions in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain, ou Le chevalier au Lion*, the third of his *romans courtois*, which were probably composed in the latter half of the twelfth century. With their diverse representations of femininity that often cross the boundaries of social status and gender roles, Chrétien's works offer depictions of a multitude of female characters, ranging in depth from the most fully developed psychological portraits of the time, through quick character-sketches, to basic symbols. Yet even with such diverse representations at all these levels of feminine representation, Chrétien's writing is often reduced by a prototypical reading that belies his ability to create complex and convincing female characters.¹ Marie-Noëlle Lefay-Toury's study of the feminine characters in Chrétien's romances reveals a critical attitude that fits squarely into this camp of thought. For her, the ideal of womanhood is presented by Chrétien in his first romance, in the guise of Enide: "modèle de douceur, de bonté, de patience, qui réunit en elle toutes les qualités proprement féminines [...] entièrement soumise à son mari et qui n'agit qu'en fonction de lui" (193).

Conversely, the female protagonists who appear in Chrétien's subsequent romances are shown to attain an increasingly pronounced sense of self and a certain amount of liberty *vis-à-vis* the men in their lives and the society in which they live. This, Lefay-Toury considers to be not at all a positive attribute, but rather one on which Chrétien himself confers a decidedly negative signification. She claims:

Cette promotion de la femme dans le sens de la liberté et de l'affirmation de soi s'accompagne d'une dégradation morale profonde, comme si, en gagnant la liberté elle ne faisait qu'une conquête illusoire et perdait ce qui fait, aux yeux de Chrétien, son véritable prix. (193)

¹ More recently, Melanie Gibson, in her study of the carnivalesque as it applies to Arthurian women, affirms that Laudine is one of those female characters that "speak perversely, in carnival voices" (211).

Laudine de Landuc,² the principal female protagonist of *Le chevalier au lion*, offers us an example of such a liberated woman, which may explain in part why her character has long presented a special problem on both the textual and critical levels. Did Chrétien intend her to be viewed favorably or not? Is she a fully drawn character or does she merely fulfill a symbolic textual function?

On both levels, she has been less than favorably evaluated by critics, her character described variously as “imperious”, “fickle”, “vain”, and “proud” (Press 158-159; Adler 283), among other unflattering adjectives. Myrrah Lot-Borodine sees Laudine as a symbolic type that helps underpin the whole novel as “une sourde protestation contre la tyrannie féminine” (201). After viewing such negative press, a reader might be surprised at Chrétien’s opening portrait of Laudine:

...une des plus beles dames
 C'onques veïst riens terriene.
 De si tres bele crestiene
 ne fu onques plez ne parole.³ (1146-49)

Notwithstanding the standardized nature of this description, it is remarkable that at this early stage of her presentation, Chrétien takes pains to draw a parallel between her physical beauty and her moral worth as a Christian. In this context, we may further consider line 1148 to be a linguistic pun in which Chrétien introduces Laudine as his feminine alter-ego; in calling her “crestiene” he is endowing her with a secondary narrative voice as the stories of the two genders’ parallel quests unfold.

The events of this well-known work that catalyze the quest segment of the romance are easily summarized: Yvain, a knight of Arthur’s court, revenges the shame of a kinsman, Calogrenant, when he defeats Esclados the Red, the guardian of the Perilous Fountain, in armed combat. After an interlude during which Lunette, a maidservant, mediates between them, Yvain and Esclados’ widow, Laudine, marry. Yvain requests a year’s leave from his new bride in order to return to King Arthur’s court in response to an admonition by Gauvin, Arthur’s nephew, on the damaging effects of marriage on a knight’s prowess, an admonition with no little homosocial content:

Comant! seroiz vos or de çax,
 Ce disoit mes sire Gauvains,
 Qui por leur fames valent mains?

² Foerster’s edition of *Yvain* names her as “Laudine de Landuc,/La dame qui fu fille au duc/Laudunet” (2151-2153). She is never specifically named in Roques’ edition, simply “la dame de Landuc.” For a full discussion on the naming of Laudine, see Foulet & Uitti, 293-302.

³ “One of the most beautiful ladies that any earthly creature ever saw. Word nor mention was never made of such a fair Christian dame” (Comfort 195).

[...]
 Repons le frain et le chevoistre,
 S'ironz tornoier moi et vos,
 Que l'en ne vos apiaut jalos.⁴ (2486-88; 2502-04)

Laudine grants this boon but threatens to withdraw her love as well as the protection afforded Yvain by her magic ring, should he overstay the term.

Laudine's absence from the text, both during this period when Yvain is tourneying, and during his quest for redemption after overstaying the term, has been seen by some critics as an indication of her lack of importance (Lefay-Toury 198; Spielman 253) and by others as an excuse for a free-for-all condemnation of her character.⁵ Others, while showing an awareness that one quest can often prefigure another, have stopped short of drawing comparisons between a narrated (male) and a textually silent (female) journey. Joseph Sullivan, for example, cogently explores how Calogrenant's failed quest "prepares the way for his cousin [Yvain's] subsequent success in the same adventure" (1). Such comparison is nonetheless located wholly within masculine narrative space and laden with salient and overt information for the reader. In the following analysis, I extend this concept of the prefiguring quest, by showing that although the narration of Yvain's journey privileges the voice and actions of the male character, Laudine's presence also pervades the quest in a more covert reflection of the adventures which befall her husband, hinting at her own quest to survive a year and a half of solitude, at the grief of losing a second husband on the heels of the first, and at her need for peace, protection and comprehension. As Yvain's quest has been studied exhaustively, this analysis will focus on how parallels to Laudine's situation are introduced, and how they facilitate an understanding of Laudine's character and situation, both by the reader and by Yvain.

After Yvain overstays his year's absence and Laudine's messenger arrives at court, she recounts before Arthur and all his knights how Yvain has betrayed his lady's trust. As Fredric Cheyette and Howell Chickering have pointed out (83), the insults the messenger levels at Yvain in this scene reflect the consequences that Laudine has suffered because of her husband's broken covenant:

le mancongier, le guileor,
 le desleal, le thricheor,
 qu'il l'a guile et deceüe;

⁴ "What? Will you be one of those" said my lord Gauvin to him [Yvain], "who degenerates after marriage? [...] Slip off the bridle and halter and come to the tournament with me, so that no one may say you are jealous" (Comfort 212).

⁵ A.R. Press, for example, muses "[I]s it simply to be assumed that he [Chrétien] had no interest whatsoever in presenting his heroine as a strongly and positively impressive, consistent and meaningful partner, worthy in all respects to partner his hero?" (159)

bien a sa guile aparceüe
 qu'il se feisoit verais amerres,
 s'estoit fos, souduianz et lerres.⁶ (lines 2721-26)

They offer the following commentary:

Yvain is a liar, a trickster, unfaithful, false, a thief, and a seducer (a word that denoted misdeeds far beyond the sexual, Satan being a seducer). These terms of invective point specifically to the injury he has done to Laudine's honor: by not keeping the agreement he has tricked and deceived her and thus diminished her good name. In an aristocratic world, no offense could be greater than this. (84)

The pathos of Laudine's abandonment is further underlined when the messenger describes how Laudine has spent her days and nights since Yvain's departure:

Ma dame en sa chambre poinz a
 Trestotz les jorz et toz les tans,
 Car qui ainme, il est en espans,
 Mes tote nuit conte et asome,
 N'onques ne puet panre boen some,
 Les jorz qui vienent et qui vont.⁷ (2756-2761)

Even though she is absent, Laudine's clear comprehension of the social and feudal importance of keeping one's word as well as her understanding of the responsibilities of love are revealed. She knows how Yvain's behavior should have been guided by the memory of her, the trust she placed in him, and the sacrifice of her own safety that she made by letting him leave. In Yvain's ensuing madness we may detect a stylistic parallel of Laudine's grief following the death of her husband, Esclados. Yvain, however, is self-indulgent in his grief. His concern is for himself, not for what he has caused Laudine to suffer in his absence: what is left undescribed, and in turn, often unconsidered, is Laudine's reaction upon realizing that her new husband had neglected to return.

Yvain's subsequent quest reveals itself as a series of adventures that provide him with a mirror in which to see, if he is able, how his failure to fulfill his promise to

⁶ "The liar, the deceiver/the unfaithful, the cheater/for he had beguiled and deceived her/she had clearly seen through his deception /for although he had pretended to be a true lover/he was a deceiver, and a thief (Translation Cheyette and Chickering 84).

⁷ "My lady has marked every day in her chamber, as the seasons passed; for when one is in love, one is ill at ease and cannot get any restful sleep, but all night long must needs count and reckon up the days as they come and go" (Comfort 216).

Laudine mirrors the unnarrated conditions of her solitary survival. Alfred Adler confirms that the quest's pervading message is the necessity of male comprehension of the female world, as for Yvain, "the impression of woman as an enchantress gives way to the emphasis upon her [...] state of need".

In the quest's first episode, Yvain recognizes the Dame de Noroison's need for a defender against Count Alier, a man who wishes to rob her of her property, honor and lands. She has no husband to serve as protector and the men of her household are too cowardly to afford her any security. However, despite the striking parallels, Yvain is not able to internalize the connection between this woman's situation and that of his own wife. He therefore continues his quest unenlightened as to one of the possible threats she has endured in his absence—the challenge to her property by a powerful and unscrupulous man. Yvain has, however, made *some* progress on the chivalric level by fighting in defense of a woman, rather than in the vainglorious pursuit of tournament victories, an aspect of the quest that has already been well documented critically.⁸

Yvain's next challenge occurs when, seeing a terrible battle in the forest between a lion and a serpent, the knight decides to intervene:

N'ala mie regardant mervoilee
 Mes sire Yvains cele;
 a lui mesmes se consoille
 Auquel d'aus dues il aidera;
 Lors dit qu'au lyon se tanra,
 Qu'a venimeus ne a felon
 Ne doit an feire se mal non,
 Et li sepanz est venimeus,
 Si li saut par la boche feus,
 Tant est de felenie plains.
 Por ce panes mes sire Yvains
 Qu'il occira premierement.⁹ (3348-59)

Although much critical time and energy have been spent analyzing the possible symbolic value of the lion, an examination of Yvain's actions is more pertinent to this study. Although initially unsure of which animal he should save, for perhaps the first

⁸ See especially Norris Lacy "Organic Structure." Saul Brody, however, cautions us against too much optimism regarding Yvain's personal development, pointing out that the romance "does not provide us with a single passage that shows us Yvain explicitly formulating 'the meaning of his experience or the insight gained from any encounter' (Goldin 2000)" (277).

⁹ "My lord Yvain did not gape at this strange spectacle, but took counsel with himself as to which of the two he should aid. Then he says that he will succour the lion, for a treacherous and venomous creature deserves to be harmed. Now the serpent is poisonous and fire bursts forth from its mouth—so full of wickedness is the creature. So my lord Yvain decides that he will kill the serpent first" (Comfort 223-24).

time, Yvain stops and thinks about an action that he is about to undertake. He makes this decision based on the inherent goodness of the two creatures, and thus decides that the lion is more worthy of his help. Here, Yvain recognizes the distinction between the right and wrong reasons to fight—a positive step towards understanding Laudine’s need for a protector. Additionally, this episode draws attention to the fact that the real mistake he made was a much earlier one, when he privileged Gauvin’s desires over Laudine’s needs in requesting a year’s leave. However, Yvain’s fear of the lion’s subsequent behaviour parallels his continuing inability to recognize the complexities of the female psyche:

Se li lïons après l’assaut,
La bataille pas ne li faut,
Mes que qu’il l’en aveigne après,
Eidier li voldra li adés.¹⁰ (3365-68)

Yvain’s trepidation that the lion will attack him is based on an *idée reçue* that lions are ferocious creatures unable to control their killer instincts, a simplistically polarized vision of what proves to be an inordinately complex animal. Adler states “A symbol of knightly *courtoisie*, the lion also displays occasionally uninhibited ferocity. We may [...] describe this paradoxical existence of gentleness with ferocity as an *amplificatio* of the paradoxes in the personality of Yvain himself” (297).

But this is only half the story. It is not only within the masculine self that such contradictions may co-exist. Logically, in order to extend this metaphor into its more global meaning, we cannot restrict its significance by gender. Like Laudine, the lion is possessed of a complex psychology, which may only be discerned fully by a constant and watchful companion.

A more striking comparison is illustrated by the quest’s next episode, which occurs back at the magical fountain. As Yvain swoons from grief on remembering Laudine, the lion believes that his lord is dead and attempts to commit suicide. This wish for death occasioned by a belief in Yvain’s abandonment thematically unites Laudine and the lion.¹¹ However, Yvain’s reaction in both cases is most disappointing: he doesn’t pay any attention to the suffering of ‘death.’ He enters into another state of temporary madness, and in the wake of the lion’s attempted suicide, he falls into a long lament, selfishly expounding upon his own sadness and despair. The lion and Laudine both suffer silently: the lion because he is a dumb beast, Laudine because her voice is absent from the text.

¹⁰ “If the lion attacks him next he too shall have all the fight he wishes, but whatever may happen afterwards, he makes up his mind to help him now” (Comfort 223-24).

¹¹ At the denunciation scene, Laudine’s messenger tells Yvain that he has killed his mistress through neglect.

Marc Glasser posits an interpretation of the lion that points to a further subtext. He states: “The lion is used by Chrétien as a symbol of fidelity and caring sympathy. Its unshakably selfless behaviour, loyalty, and refusal to be separated from Yvain contrast with Yvain’s hasty departure from Laudine and his selfish failure to abide by his oath” (493). The lion’s behavior parallels that of the exemplary courtly lover who is obedient and protective. Staying by Yvain’s side provides the lion with many opportunities to protect him. The lion thus mirrors how Laudine has behaved in an exemplary “masculine” way, giving Yvain her protection and bowing to his whims without complaining or dwelling upon her own sacrifice.

Yvain shortly realizes that he is not alone at the fountain. A damsel who turns out to be none other than Lunette, Laudine’s maidservant, is imprisoned there. She tells the incognito Yvain that she has been accused of treachery by a jealous seneschal in Laudine’s household because she counseled her mistress to marry a man who had abandoned her. Before noon the next day, Lunette must find a defender, or she will be put to death.¹² Yvain reveals his identity and vows to return the next day to fight as her champion. In the interim he and the lion seek lodging and are welcomed. But their host sorrowfully relates how, the very next day, an evil giant called Harpin de la Montagne intends to take his daughter and allow his male servants to rape her. The daughter is revealed to be Gauvain’s niece. Yvain pledges his aid, provided the giant arrives in time for him to be back at the fountain at midday to defend Lunette. Harpin duly arrives to carry out his threat but is thwarted and killed by Yvain and the lion, who then race off, arriving in the nick of time, as Lunette is about to be burned at the stake. They vanquish the seneschal and his two brothers.

In as much as these episodes function as learning experiences on the road to the discovery of self and the other, we can see in their tensely interlaced structure a recreation of the dilemma in which Yvain previously made the wrong choice. Norris Lacy identifies this process as an important part of Chrétien’s artistic style:

Chrétien incorporates into his narrative certain episodes which seem to have only a general relation to the situation or theme, but which are in fact analogues or recollections of it. Thus, while these incidents advance the narrative, they also reflect or restate the theme of the work and organize the romance into a unified whole. (“Thematic Analogues” 267-68)

In the above episodes, although Yvain is again made to choose between Laudine’s interests and Gauvain’s (in his defense of their respective household members), he is

¹² A complex interlace of plot is taking place here: Gauvain had pledged to be Lunette’s protector, but he is on a quest to find the abducted Queen Guinevere, a story related in another of Chrétien’s romances, *Le chevalier à la charrette*. See Kreuger for an excellent discussion of the possible order of composition of the romances.

not in a parabolic situation like he was with the Dame de Noroison, where he learned an abstract lesson about chivalry. Rather, these two cases show the extreme vulnerability of Laudine's actual situation. When Yvain worries about having enough time to save Lunette, the audience is made to realize the kind of difference the passing of even a few minutes can make to the life of a woman in danger, which in turn suggests the numerous dangers that Laudine must have faced alone during Yvain's absence of more than a year. The physical proximity of Harpin de la Montagne's lair to Laudine's fountain indicates that there are external threats to Laudine's safety. Large, ugly creatures are planning dangerous acts of sexual abuse practically in Laudine's back yard. The insidious attack planned by the jealous seneschal shows Laudine's powerless to thwart a domestic rebellion without a lord to impose discipline and reason upon her subjects.

Following Yvain's victory over the seneschal, Laudine, ignorant of his true identity, invites him to stay until he and the lion have recovered, but he refuses, stating obliquely the reasons for his continued quest:

...Dame, ce n'iert hui
 que je remaigne en cest point
 tant que ma dame me pardoint
 son mautalant et son corroz.
 Lors finera mes travauxz toz.¹³ (4582-86)

Laudine replies with a generous amount of feminine intuition:

Certes... ce me poise,
 ne tieng mie pour tres cortoise
 la dame qui mal cuer vous porte.
 Ne deüst pas veher sa porte
 a chevalier de vostre prix
 se trop n'eüst vers li mespris.¹⁴

Laudine's choice of words indicates that she has learned a hard lesson: things are not always what they seem. From the appearance of the situation, she is inclined to be sympathetic towards the knight who is seeking his lady's forgiveness, but she is acutely aware that she, like the reader, has not heard both sides of the story. Perhaps this is Laudine's warning to her readers not to judge too quickly with only half the facts, but to

¹³ "Lady, I shall not now tarry here until my lady removes from me her displeasure and anger: then the end of all my labours will come" (Comfort 240).

¹⁴ "Indeed...that grieves me. I think the lady cannot be very courteous who cherishes ill will against you. She ought not to close her door against so valorous a knight as you, unless he had done her some great wrong" (Comfort 240).

delve deeper into the subtext of this silence if they wish to discover the woman's story as well.

Yvain's penultimate adventure, during which he must fight two black devils at the Château de Pesme Aventure in order to secure the release of three hundred malnourished *tisseuses*, portrays the Lord of the town as a man who, like Yvain, has sacrificed the well-being of women to secure his own pleasure. The sheer number of suffering women is illustrative of Laudine's situation for it reveals the state of need into which a woman may be cast through her husband's neglect and lack of resolve.

The final combat at the court of King Arthur, which pits Gauvain and Yvain against each other as the respective champions of the older and younger daughters of the Noire Espine, is prefigured by an intertextual device used by Chrétien that suggests that women are also actually *doing* something while the men are off questing. As the younger sister's envoy searches for Yvain, she retraces the adventures he has performed, and her experiences correspond to aspects of Laudine's suffering: the multiple references to woods, rain, solitude and fear that characterize the female envoy's quest recall that Laudine is alone, facing the danger of someone again unleashing the destructive storm that could decimate her forest and lands.

This last quest episode also ties up some of the semantic threads in the story: the battle serves in part as a lesson on the dangers of dissimulation, linguistic and otherwise¹⁵: Yvain, who has harmed Laudine through his linguistic trickery, now receives grievous physical wounds because both he and Gauvain are fighting incognito. Laudine's lasting wounds caused by Yvain's broken promise are reemphasized when Yvain makes his final return to the fountain. Although he demonstrates a final level of comprehension that will necessitate the re-introduction of Laudine into the text, she is still laboring under a miscomprehension born of the lack of communication between her and her spouse, as she says bitterly to Lunette:

Se Damedex me saut!
bien m'as or au hoquerel prise!
Celui qui ne m'anme ne prise
me feras amer mau gré mien.¹⁶ (6750-53)

Having never received any indications to the contrary, Laudine believes Yvain's love to have been a dissimulation, and their reunion to be a shallow and bitter trick. Only when Yvain admits that he too has greatly suffered from their separation, assures

¹⁵ Gibson asserts that this is a romance that "places the ability to manipulate language above the ability to fight well" (211).

¹⁶ "God save me! You have caught me neatly in a trap! You will make me love, in spite of myself, a man who neither loves nor esteems me" (Comfort 268).

Laudine that he acknowledges his guilt, and swears never to wrong her again, is a resolution possible.¹⁷

Yvain's quest following his rejection by Laudine, which takes him to Broceliand, the forest of self, is a quest for comprehension and knowledge essential to the ultimate integration of masculinity and femininity necessary to the courtly world order. As Chrétien provides his male protagonist with obvious clues to his nature and character, he also offers for interpretation the more subtle clues offered by the female protagonists, both present and absent, around whom the adventures of the quest are centered. Far from indicating her lack of importance or her heinous character, Laudine's absence increasingly influences the text as analogies between fault and expiation begin to revolve less around generic and metaphorical situations and characters, to become more and more literal, gradually re-encompassing the central characters and nature of the plot's initial dilemma.

In *Le chevalier au lion*, the portrait of Laudine contains the multiple facets of a complex psychology, rendering her character perhaps more developed than that of her male counterpart. Edda Spielmann feels that Laudine's portrait conforms closely to that of other French literary heroines such as Phèdre, the Marquise de Merteuil and the Duchess of Sanseverina, "known for their lucidity and passion and for their realism in evaluating the world in which they live" (253). We might well add Naslund's character, the eponymous Ahab's Wife, to the list, for Una's quest, prefigured by and interwoven with her husband's, serves partly to rehabilitate Ahab in the eyes of readers who have long considered his obsession with the whale to be a fatal character flaw. However, Una's very first line, "Captain Ahab was neither my first husband nor my last" (Naslund 1), indicates that she has moved on and lived a life outside of the information-laden (and futile) quest of her absent husband. Similarly, although Laudine's quest is undoubtedly the catalyst for the social rehabilitation of Yvain, we are left with a feeling that he is an episode in her life rather than her whole life. For Laudine may discover when looking back on her life that her current husband was not the center of her existence or identity, chevaliers and captains of whaling ships being, as they are, engaged in somewhat perilous professions. There may be more adventures, more quests, and if her story is written, it could, like Naslund's novel, reflect the universality and complexity of feminine experience unclipped and unconstrained by the masculine: a journey, ungendered.

¹⁷ See Cheyette and Chickering for a close study of line 6789 ("or a mes sire Yvains sa pes"), which many critics and translators have found to be ambiguous and unsatisfying.

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