

SHIRLEY NEUMAN

## 'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood conceived the Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* as one logical outcome of what she termed the 'strict theocracy' of the 'fundamentalist government' of the United States' Puritan founding fathers.<sup>1</sup> Her Gileadean government maintains its power by means of surveillance, suppression of information, 're-education' centres, and totalitarian violence. Its major national issue, sterility consequent on nuclear and chemical pollution, it addresses through sexual surrogacy, turning its few fertile women into 'Handmaids' to its highest-level Commanders and their wives, using as justification the biblical story in which the barren Rachel directs her husband Jacob to 'go in unto' her servant Billah: 'and she shall bear upon my knees, that I also may have children by her' (epigraph).

We learn about Gilead through one of its (self-described) 'two-legged wombs' or 'ambulatory chalices' (128), the Handmaid Offred, who records her story after she has escaped the regime. Caught up in a dystopian state that the novel hypothesizes as the logical extension not only of Puritan government but also of the agenda articulated during the 1980s by America's fundamentalist Christian Right, what Offred knows is that power pervades every aspect of Gileadean life. Power: 'who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death,' 'who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it' (126–27). What Offred also knows is that the temptations of power offer a feminine inflection: 'if you happen to be a man,' she addresses her future reader, 'and you've made it this far, please remember: you will never be subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman' (126). The novel's outwardly conformist and once independent Offred has seen her social value reduced to reproduction, and her personal freedom completely curtailed. But the retrospective monologue in which she tells her story reveals her as observant of the

1 'The first government of the United States was a fundamentalist government ... a very strict theocracy especially with respect to sex. Countries continue the way they began; they rearrange the symbols and structures but something remains of their origins. And the Presidents of the United States have continued to quote the first theocrats, who referred to their colony as a "city upon a hill" and "a light to all nations." Reagan, for instance, repeated these early Puritan references to the Bible' (Atwood, *Two Solicitudes*, 72). See Evans for a discussion of the allusions in the novel to events in the early history of the United States.

gendered configurations of power in both the personal and the political realms, in both 'the time before' and the present of the novel. It also shows her as analytic and ironic about those relations and as capable of using them to her own advantage. Offred, in short, is a fictional product of 1970s feminism, and she finds herself in a situation that is a fictional realization of the backlash against women's rights that gathered force during the early 1980s.

Between 1965, when Atwood wrote her first published novel, *The Edible Woman*, and 1985 when she published *The Handmaid's Tale*, women – especially middle-class women like Atwood's heroines – had seen major improvements in their access to higher education and the professions, in employment equity, in access to legal abortion, and in divorce law. Atwood herself had been embraced as a feminist novelist by a panoply of writers and critics representing a wide variety of feminist positions.<sup>2</sup> She had responded initially by resisting the label *feminist* (a label that she noted was sometimes used by reviewers to dismiss her early work), then by carefully defining the kind of feminist she was. By 1976, she described herself as 'probably ... a feminist, in the broad sense of the term' (Sandler, 56), but in a 1979 interview she also found the term insufficiently 'inclusive' of her interests (Gerald and Crabbe, 139). When *The Handmaid's Tale* was about to appear, Atwood gave an interview to feminist theorist Elizabeth Meese, in which she iterated her definition of feminism as a 'belief in the rights of women ... [as] equal human beings' but in which she also firmly distanced herself from feminist or doctrinaire separatism: she would have no truck with attempts – feminist or otherwise – to control what people write or say, and 'if practical, hardline, anti-male feminists took over and became the government, I would resist them' (Meese, 183). She had put the matter more positively two years earlier, just before she turned to the writing of *The Handmaid's Tale*: 'Am I a propagandist? No! Am I an observer of society? Yes! And no one who observes society can fail to make observations that are feminist. That is just ... commonsense' (Jamkhandi, 5).<sup>3</sup>

Such a commonsense observer, alert in the years between 1965 and 1985, could not have helped but see a world that, if still far from perfect, looked to be getting better and better for women. Nor could an alert observer have helped but notice that, for some, the world seemed to be getting a little too free for women. Atwood, like many feminists of the period, was keenly aware of the fragility of the newly acquired rights and equalities of women: of the opposition to these rights and equalities in many quarters, of the

2 Feminist readings of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* include, among others: Bouson, Davidson, Ehrenreich, Freibert, Hengen, Hollinger, Howells, Mahoney, Provençal, Rigney, Rubinstein, Staels, Stein, and Stimpson.

3 See Bouson, 2–4, for a summary of Atwood's remarks on her writing in relation to feminism.

many places and ways in which these gains were threatened or actively eroded, and of the intersection of women's issues, feminist issues, and broader human rights issues.

By 1984, the year in which pundits looked back on George Orwell's dystopia to assess how much of his vision we had escaped and also the year in which Margaret Atwood sat down to write *The Handmaid's Tale*, both totalitarianism and those who hoped to retrench some of the gains of feminism had made significant inroads on the successes of the 1970s. Atwood kept a file of these inroads on human rights and women's freedom, which she took with her on book tours as evidence for her insistence that she had 'invented nothing' in Gilead.<sup>4</sup> If Gilead is, in the logic of the novel, one possible extension of the real world of 1984, we can understand something of the impulse to its creation and of the character of Offred by briefly recollecting early 1980s reactions to the successes of the women's movement as well as the intersections of these reactions with some of the totalitarian excesses of the period.

By 1984, Ayatollah Khomeini had forced women out of Iranian universities, out of their jobs, and back into their *burqas* and their homes. Iranian prison refugees reported torture including the use of electric prods and frayed steel cables in beatings, and such a report by one woman found its way into Atwood's file. In Afghanistan, as Atwood herself observed, 'Thinking that it's O.K. for women to read and write would be a radically feminist position' (Brans, 140). And, as Professor Piexoto reminds us in the novel's epilogue, the Philippines, under the rubric of 'salvaging,' engaged in state-sanctioned murder of dissidents, while Ceausescu's government in Romania monitored women monthly for pregnancy, outlawed birth control, and abortion, and linked women's wages to childbearing. The professor appears to have read Atwood's file: both these precedents for the actions of Gilead had found their way into her clippings documenting her assertion that she had invented nothing in Gilead.

By 1984, in the United States, the gains women had achieved during the previous decade had come under attack from several directions. During Ronald Reagan's presidency, women made up an increasing percentage of those in the lowest-paid occupations, and they made no gains or lost ground in the better-paid trades and professions.<sup>5</sup> The number of elected

4 The file of clippings, or some version of it, is deposited in the Margaret Atwood Papers in the Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto (ms Coll 200, box 96). See the interview with John Godard for one of many assertions by Atwood that she 'invented nothing' in describing Gilead: 'There is nothing in the book that hasn't already happened. ... All the things described in the book, people have already done to one another' (8).

5 This was due to a combination of factors: that women made less headway in terms of education and professional and trade employment than could have been wished and that a large number of blue-collar jobs, held disproportionately by men, disappeared during the recession of the early 1980s while the new jobs were in the service industries, long the lowest-paying sector hiring the largest numbers of women.

and politically appointed women declined. One-third of all federal budget cuts under Reagan's presidency came from programs that served mainly women, even though these programs represented only 10 per cent of the federal budget. The average amount a divorced man paid in child support fell 25 per cent. Murders related to sexual assault and domestic violence increased by 160 per cent while the overall murder rate declined; meanwhile the federal government defeated bills to fund shelters for battered women, stalled already approved funding, and in 1981 closed down the Office of Domestic Violence it had opened only two years earlier. Pro-natalists bombed and set fire to abortion clinics and harassed their staff and patients; Medicaid ceased to fund legal abortions, effectively eliminating freedom of choice for most teenage girls and poor women; several states passed laws restricting not only legal abortion but even the provision of information about abortion. The debate about freedom of choice for women flipped over into court rulings about the rights and freedom of the fetus. The Equal Rights Amendment died.<sup>6</sup>

By 1984, the American New Right had metamorphosed into Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Televangelists, some of them at home in the White House, told their congregations that 'feminists encourage women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians' (letter of Pat Robertson to his congregation, quoted in Lapham, 37) and that AIDS was divine retribution for the 'sin' of homosexuality. Right-wing wives such as best-selling Phyllis Schlafly made a handsome income telling other women to return home, to let their husbands provide, and to use their femininity and feminine wiles as the core of their success and fulfilment as women. Schlafly put forward Katharine Hepburn as a role model – not Hepburn the successful actress to be sure, but Hepburn at the feet of Spencer Tracy, 'submissive and more abnegating than any wife this side of the Orient' (Schlafly, 55).<sup>7</sup> Several

6 See Susan Faludi, *Backlash*, for much of the data and the documentation of the 'backlash' against feminism cited in this and the next two paragraphs and for careful documentation of the false premises, weak methodologies, and unreliable conclusions of many of the studies by government, media, and academia in support of 'backlash' arguments. Bouson also frames her discussion of oppositional strategies in *The Handmaid's Tale* with reference to the 1980s backlash against 'women's independence and autonomy' (135); Pawlowski, 144–46, briefly discusses *The Handmaid's Tale* in terms of the resurgence of the Right in Iran, Britain, and the United States.

7 Schlafly also quotes Lauren Bacall as putting husband and home well ahead of any career satisfactions, noting that Bacall gets 'Bogie' for her reward. Atwood has some fun with this in *The Handmaid's Tale* by having Offred remark on the very different image these actresses projected on screen in her recollection of the annual 'Humphrey Bogart festival, with Lauren Bacall or Katharine Hepburn, women on their own, making up their minds. They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then' (24).

readers identify Schlafly as the prototype of Aunt Lydia at the 'Red,' or re-education, Centre of *The Handmaid's Tale* and of her 'implicit' (136) advice to the Handmaids: 'Men are sex machines ... and not much more. ... You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. ... It's nature's way. It's God's device. It's the way things are' (135). Others find in her the prototype for the Commander's wife, Serena Joy, of whom Offred ironically observes, 'She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word' (44).

In 1984, the 'most popular talk show' in the United States was hosted by Rush Limbaugh, who used it as a platform from which to attack what he called "'femi-Nazi[s]'" (Faludi, xxi). The media began to announce that the world had moved into a 'post-feminist' era, while at the same time it gave wide circulation to a number of badly designed, badly analysed, badly misrepresented, or dishonestly co-opted studies claiming to prove that single career women had high rates of neuroses and unhappiness, that women's incomes declined an average of 70 per cent post-divorce, that the United States was in the grip of an 'infertility epidemic,' that a professional woman over thirty was about as likely to win a lottery jackpot as to find a man (see both Faludi and Bouson). Across North America, young women in universities, in the confidence born of their mothers' success, in the desire for self-differentiation that ever characterizes the young, overly credulous of the media and perhaps anxious to find a man, asserted that they didn't need feminism.

Offred, in 'the time before' of *The Handmaid's Tale*, is one such young woman, sceptical of and embarrassed by her mother's feminist activism, which includes 'Take Back the Night' marches, bonfires of pornography, and planned single motherhood. 'As for you,' her mother tells her, 'you're just a backlash. ... You young people don't appreciate things. ... You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him,' pointing to her son-in-law, 'slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?' (115). The scene finds its way into the opera, where the oddly non-idiomatic use of the term *backlash* is replaced by Offred's mother's emphatic 'God knows where *you* came from' (Ruders and Bentley, 139). The substitution effectively contributes to the opera's erasure of a historical 'backlash' against feminism as one of the strongest motivations in the novel for the establishment of Gilead.

Reading the novel, we spend a great deal of time inside Offred's head. And Offred spends a great deal of time not only remembering 'the time before' and observing the circumstances of her present, but also commenting on both. Her commentary is often ironic, often analytic, often critical of herself and of her peers in 'the time before.' It also shows her as having gained political awareness and as reassessing her earlier more individualist positions. In her thoughts, for example, she engages in a rich dialogue with

her mother, recollecting her earlier negative reactions to her mother's feminist activism but also learning to acknowledge some of the ways in which her mother was right. Like the novel's historically based premise of a backlash against women, this recognition gets lost in the opera.

Opera, of course, is a particularly difficult medium in which to represent a character's book-long interior monologue. The brute physical reality of the time it takes to sing means that such monologues get reduced to emblematic moments of particularly intense feeling, such as Offred's aria in the doctor's office, 'Every moon I watch for blood.' In opera, such moments of sung introspection focus on emotion and do not dwell analytically on the political or social circumstances in which the characters find themselves.

Typically, too, a novel's interior monologue is dramatized in opera as stage action around recitative, duets, and ensemble singing. This dramatization can, and often does, shift the balance away from the introspection of a character's interior monologue. We see this happening, for example, in this opera's depiction of Offred's life with her husband Luke and her daughter, and in its 'flashbacks' to the moment when she and her family are intercepted in their escape, Luke shot, her daughter taken away, and she imprisoned to be 're-educated' as a Handmaid. Necessarily relying on action and sung dialogue, the libretto offers us a harrowing scene of capture but it cannot recapture the level of analysis and expanded, if bitter, knowledge recorded in the novel's interior monologue. The opera's effect is to increase the emphasis on the personal trauma suffered by Offred and her family, but to diminish the novel's emphasis on its social and political roots.

Remembering this past, the novel's Offred concludes that 'I took too much for granted; I trusted fate, back then' (27). As her story unfolds she becomes tougher on her earlier life: 'We lived,' she says, 'by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. ... There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. ... We lived in the gaps between the stories' (53). Her willed ignorance anaesthetizes any impulse to resist the increasingly repressive actions leading to the coup that establishes Gilead. When a strange woman attempts to abduct her child, Offred works at ignoring: 'I thought it was an isolated incident, at the time' (59). When the Pornomarts and the mobile brothels on Harvard Square suddenly disappear, she fails to challenge a sales clerk's apathetic comment: 'Who knows, who cares' what happened to them' (163). And when all women are told they no longer have a job, she asks, 'What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?' (166). Willed ignorance, Offred learns, is sister to victimization and to passive acceptance of blame for what is done to one.

In Gilead, Offred decides against being a victim: 'I intend to last' (7), she declares. To last, she must pay attention. Especially early on in the novel, she is alert to every detail around her. Some of her observation is undertaken to fill the time, as when she minutely inspects every corner of her room. Some of it is a device to distance herself from the horror of her situation: 'One detaches oneself. One describes,' she remarks as the Commander does his 'duty' on the lower half of her body (89) in the 'Rachel' ceremony, or as she lays her hand on the rope about to hang two women. Most of her attention is in aid of survival. Entering the Commander's household, meeting her shopping companion Ofglen for the first time, she pays the closest heed to the smallest gestures of everyone around her, 'reading' them constantly. 'Watch out, Commander, I tell him in my head. I've got my eye on you. Once false move and I'm dead' (83).

The measure of the distance Offred has travelled, by means of attentiveness, from her willed ignorance in 'the time before' comes when she gains some small power over the Commander as a consequence of having read the signs of what happened to the Handmaid before her. When she once would have worked to ignore those signs, she now seeks knowledge. Asked what she would like, she responds, 'I would like to know. ... Whatever there is to know. What's going on' (176).

We must be wary, however, of the impulse to make an unmitigated heroine of the novel's Offred. Her desire to survive and to know comes with a necessary degree of complicity and a tendency to relapse. In her new self-awareness, Offred specifically accepts the element of complicitous choice in her situation. Lying on her back, she reasons: 'Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose' (88). She also recognizes and acknowledges her enjoyment of her own small exercises of power, however ignoble: her sexual teasing of the Guardians at the checkpoint, her slight power not only over the Commander, because he wants something from her, but over his wife, whom they are deceiving. She comes to understand that the Commander craves some unspoken forgiveness for the conditions of her life and that to bestow or to withhold forgiveness is 'a power, perhaps the greatest' (126), as well as a temptation. 'How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all,' she reflects, thinking of the Commander's request that she play Scrabble in the same breath as she recollects an interview with the mistress of one of the supervisors of a concentration camp (137).

It is in this matter of humanizing the Commander that the opera makes its largest gesture towards domesticating Atwood's plot, especially in the brothel scene when Offred's refusal of sex – 'I'm sorry. I don't think I can' – is met by the Commander's 'Don't worry about it. I understand' and a kindly pat (Ruders and Bentley, 239). Emotionally, that scene runs directly counter to its prototype in the novel, where no such 'out' for Offred is on

the bed: 'Fake it, I scream at myself inside my head. You must remember how. ... Move your flesh around, breathe audibly. It's the least you can do' (239).

The personal is political, this scene tells us, just as feminism had already told us in the wake of Virginia Woolf's eloquent demonstration in *Three Guineas* of the relationship between domestic and fascist despotism. Nowhere is the personal more political than in Gilead, where the very choice of becoming a Handmaid or a Jezebel over going to the Colonies to sweep up radioactive waste signals a degree of complicity with the regime and where playing a game of Scrabble with the Commander renders him both human and comic. Nowhere more so than in Gilead, where each Handmaid must pull the rope to tighten its noose around the necks of state-murdered women. Nowhere more so than in Gilead, where the Handmaids accept the party line that the men given them to kill in 'particutions' are rapists and where Offred acknowledges her own 'bloodlust; I want to tear, gouge, rend' (262).

If Offred's survival depends on attention and on astute choices about complicity, her affair with Nick marks a relapse into willed ignorance. Readers have tended to identify strongly with the sense of connection and renewed sexuality Offred discovers in her relationship with Nick and to understand this couple in light of the conventions of the romance plot, in which the male lover rescues the hapless heroine.<sup>8</sup> Atwood is, I would argue, telling us something else. There is no evidence in the novel that Nick's 'rescue' of Offred is motivated by anything other than self-preservation. In the world of sexual relationships, after all, his final words, 'Trust me' (275), are as clichéd and unreliable as the Commander's explanation that his wife doesn't understand him or as Serena Joy's final reproach as Offred is hustled out the door: 'After all he did for you' (276). Most importantly, when Offred falls under the spell of her rendezvous with Nick, she no longer wishes to escape and she no longer wants to know from Ofglen what is going on. Her relapse into willed ignorance partly motivates the shame that so strongly marks her narrative at this point. She has ceased, she realizes as she sees the dreaded black van arrive for her at the end of the novel, 'to pay attention' (275).

In dystopias, the present is co-opted to evil ends, driven to one logical (though not inevitable) conclusion, its understandings and language perverted. In dystopias, Handmaids greet each other with words from the Catholic litany to the Virgin, 'Blessed be the fruit,' while the state hangs

8 The movie *The Handmaid's Tale* (screenplay by Harold Pinter, direction by Volker Schlöndorff) succumbs even more than most 'readers' to the seductions of the romance tale while ignoring the numerous markers in Atwood's text telling us to be wary of those same seductions: in its final scene we see Offred, pregnant at last, living in an isolated area in a mid-twentieth-century Airstream trailer receiving via the underground the occasional love letter from Nick.



priests. In dystopias clichés from 'the time before' signal both normalcy and extreme differences of power. In dystopias, the call of some radical feminists for a 'woman's culture' becomes the birthing scene of *The Handmaid's Tale* or the brothel called Jezebel's. In dystopias, the doxology of the Christian fundamentalist Right that would return women to their homes to fulfil their putative biological destiny is realized by a Handmaid lying between a wife's legs in a parody of the biblical story of Rachel and her servant Billah.<sup>9</sup>

But also implicit in every dystopia is a utopia. As Atwood herself observed, 'we the readers are to deduce what a good society is by seeing what it isn't' ('Justice'). And here some readers of *The Handmaid's Tale*, and, to a considerable degree, the opera libretto, have misread the novel by conflating Offred's desire to have 'everything back, the way it was' (116) with Atwood's implicit utopia. I quote John Updike in his egregiously nostalgic *New Yorker* review: 'among [the novel's] cautionary and indignant messages, Miss Atwood has threaded a curious poem to the female condition. Offred's life of daily waiting and shopping, of timorous strategizing and sudden bursts of daring, forms an intensified and darkened version of a woman's customary existence, a kind of begrimed window through which glimpses of Offred's old, pre-Gilead life – its work and laughter and minor dissipations, its female friends and husband and child, its costumes and options – flicker with the light of paradise' (121). The novel, he concludes, 'is suffused ... by the author's lovely subversive hymn to our ordinary life, as lived, amid perils and pollution, now' (126). Updike is working hard at willed ignorance.

9 Not all of Atwood's initial reviewers or later critics found her dystopia plausible. Updike's paean to the 'paradise' of 'the time before' is contextualized in terms of what he regards as the failure of Atwood's dystopian premises to convince. Dean Flower described Atwood's premises in *The Handmaid's Tale* as 'so lacking plausibility or inevitability as to be embarrassing' (318). Tom O'Brien acknowledged the parallels between Gilead and 'contemporary events' but, failing to acknowledge the fictional premise that Offred has no access to information, found it hard to take Atwood's dystopia 'too seriously' because of its lack of reference to industry, business, the economy, and the international context; 'business culture can include coercion, and of course it has been complicit in so many right wing authoritarian dictatorships around the world. But it also includes vast numbers of people in this country [i.e., the United States] whom it would be difficult to tame into cooperative roles in any planned economy' (252) – it couldn't happen here, in short. Mary McCarthy found that the 'essential element of a cautionary tale, the 'surprised recognition' which warns us by letting us see 'ourselves in a distorting mirror,' is completely absent from the novel: 'The book just does not tell me what there is in our present mores that I ought to watch out for unless I want the United States of America to become a slave state something like the Republic of Gilead' (1). Chinnoy Bannerjee mounts the most sustained critique of Atwood's dystopia, seeing it as grounded in 'a media-generated awareness of the threat of Christian fundamentalism and a somewhat retrospective sense of women's oppression in North America' and concluding that 'Atwood is concerned with the aesthetic enjoyment of a particular kind of victimization, and not with a critical examination of its determinant relations' (80).

For what does *The Handmaid's Tale* – the novel, not the opera libretto – tell us about 'the time before' by means of Offred's memories, Aunt Lydia's lectures, and the Commander's rationalizations? It tells us that one's husband could slice the carrots for dinner, that one could live with him and one's daughter and cat and argue and banter with one's mother and friends in an easy, loving intimacy, yes.

But it also tells us that it was not safe for a woman to go for a run or into a laundromat at night, to open the door to a stranger, to help a stranded motorist; that women didn't walk in certain places, locked doors and windows, drew curtains, left lights on as precautions or perhaps 'prayers' (212); that women needed to 'take back the night' and to replace kitchen-table abortions with legal freedom of choice; that date rape was common enough to be an accepted subject for a term paper; that pornography, including snuff movies, was a fact of life (112); that women were 'found – often women but sometimes they would be men, or children, that was the worst – in ditches or forests or refrigerators in abandoned rented rooms, with their clothes on or off, sexually abused or not; at any rate killed' (212); that one did not allow one's children to walk alone to school because too many disappeared; that less terminally lethal circumstances included singles bars, blind dates, 'the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't' as well as a dedication to anorexia, silicone implants, and cosmetic surgery (205) as means to realize the 'possibilities' proffered by fashion magazines (146); that fathers left without paying child support, mothers wound up on welfare, and the 'wretched little paycheques' of women would have to stretch to unsubsidized daycare (206).

The implicit women's utopia of *The Handmaid's Tale* is not in 'the time before.' It exists outside the 'either/or' thinking so beloved of Aunt Lydia, and outside the novel: outside of the dangers, humiliations, inequities, and backlash that women experience in its 'time before,' but also outside totalitarian Gilead's claims to have improved their lot. A first step to utopia, Atwood's novel tells us, requires that we 'pay attention' and bear witness, as does Offred when she uses her uncertain freedom to tell her story.

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