

Eumolpus the Poet

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The aging poet Eumolpus, a compulsive versifier with a compulsive sexual appetite, takes center stage the last half of the surviving *Satyrical* as storyteller, poet, actor, and con-man. This paper argues that Eumolpus fills the role as chief bard, storyteller, and master of entertainment, setting the mood in the last half of the novel much as Homeric bards set the mood for their households in the *Odyssey*.

Eumolpus, whose name “good singer” is an advertisement for his talent, suggests the bards Phemius and Demodocus in the *Odyssey*, two poets also with significant names who attach themselves respectively to the households of Odysseus in Ithaca and Alcinoos in Phaeacia (Phemius ‘singer of fame’; Demodocus ‘Pleaser of the people’; see Stanford 1981). Phemius is forced by the suitors to remain in the household and entertain them, and successfully uses this as an excuse to save his life after Odysseus has slaughtered the suitors. His poems about the Trojan war create tension within the household because they distress Penelope, worried about her husband in the Trojan war, and she tries in vain to silence Phemius when Telemachus overrules her (*Od.* 1,337-359). Demodocus, like Eumolpus in the *Satyrical*, sings a poem about the Greek warriors hidden in the Trojan horse. He also anticipates Eumolpus in being about to balance his stories about war by singing a racy story of the adultery between Ares and Aphrodite (*Od.* 8,266-366), entertaining his audience just as Eumolpus entertains his with the Milesian tales of the Pergamene boy and the Matron of Ephesus. Demodocus’ stories about the war move Odysseus to tears and prompt Antinous to ask Odysseus to tell his own story (*Od.* 8,572-586).

Since Eumolpus is a parodic character, his poetry is dreaded by the company and he is sometimes greeted with a shower of stones; but he still shares the Homeric bard’s function of creating entertainment for his household, if not by poetry than by racy stories and the staging of farcical adventures.

When the building superintendent Bargates asks Eumolpus to ‘curse in rhyme’ the woman he lives with, in order that he may ‘put shame in her’ (96), he is harking back, in his low-brow and dim-witted way, to the traditional role of the bard as one who creates moods for the household, raising their spirits with hilarity or making them somber with tales of war.

The mediocre efforts by Eumolpus, the *Troiae Halosis* and the *Bellum Civile* which have received so much attention, are artificial and remote in their subject matter like the contemporary poetry denounced by Persius and Juvenal in each of their first satires. What especially suggests a parallel in these satirists to Eumolpus’ bombastic outpourings are the references in Persius to poetry which is hot air filling the lungs and scraping away at your guts, and in Juvenal, to poetry whose force could tear up marble or knock over statues.¹ Eumolpus dominates the last half of the surviving *Satyrica* and, despite his presenting to Encolpius an unwelcome rivalry for the affections of Giton, is looked up to increasingly by Encolpius and Giton as a leader who initiates much of the action undertaken by the three; indeed Eumolpus becomes a kind of theatrical stagemaster who recites poems, tells stories, and even goes beyond that as a kind of aesthetic overseer who orchestrates their entertainment and activities, both a parody and a reflection of the role of Homeric bard as household entertainer.

But above all Eumolpus as charlatan and master performer suggests the dramatic flair and hypocrisy of Nero himself, the irrepressible poet and singer, the man who notoriously sang a poem about the fall of Troy while Rome burned, the man whose last words were, *qualis artifex pereo*, ‘what a performer dies in me,’ and his sexual appetite and ostentation, even to the extent of performing sex acts in front of an audience, also has parallels in Nero (the marriage to Pythagoras; Tac. *Ann.* 15,37). Tacitus tells us (*Ann.* 14,16) that Nero particularly favored extemporaneous verse and that he would surround himself at dinner with poets of secondary repute who would join him in contests of poetic improvisation. Tacitus, who evidently had access to some of these poems, says that their lack of force was evident given the circumstances of their composition. In Petronius, the mediocre efforts of Eumolpus are not tolerated out of politeness, like those of the poets performing for Nero, but are given the immediate, and hostile, reception they deserve. In the *Satyrica* poetry is often used to signal some kind of disconnect between the verse and reality, or to form a contrast with the would-be poet’s avowed intentions; the lofty curriculum celebrated in verse by Agamemnon in *Sat.* 5 is incompatible with the program he describes in 3-4, the

¹ Cf. Persius *Sat.* 1,13-21; Juvenal *Sat.* 1,1-14; Slater 1990, 99.

poetic denunciation of luxury by Trimalchio in 55 bears no relation to his own practice, the recitation of Vergil by a slave in 68 ruins the enjoyment of the immortal *Aeneid* by barbarous pronunciation and the mixing in of obscene verses. Eumolpus' verse, more ambitious and elaborate as suits a kind of professional entertainer, is an achievement in sustained pompous mediocrity.

The characters from the *Satyrica* are enveloped in complexity, as implied by their brazen ability to live 'outside the law' (*extra legem viventibus* 125) while their words and the reality they live often appear to be at cross purposes. Eumolpus certainly fits this description. His first words to Encolpius in the art gallery are *Ego poeta sum et ut spero, non humili spiritus*, 'I am a poet and one, I hope, of no mean imagination,' (*Sat.* 83); nobility and dedication are filtered by him into a kind of cheap theatricality. The emphasis from the start is on who Eumolpus is, a kind of living, walking poetry book, as Catherine Connors says.² His introduction to Encolpius is in the context of an *ekphrasis* which Encolpius has begun to make about the power of love as it is shown in various paintings, like the learned interpreters sometimes found in Greek novels.³ Eumolpus is impressive; he 'seems to have the promise of something great about him,' (*et qui videretur nescio quid magnum promittere*), he is clearly a man of letters, one sign of which being that he is shabbily dressed (compare Horace's claim in *A.P.* 295-297 that poets deliberately neglect their bodies in order to follow the advice of Democritus that no great poet should be in his right mind). Eumolpus puts these facts together as part of a pattern among the wealthy to conspire to keep wealth away from a 'lover of genius' who 'shuns all vice' and 'treads a straight path in life.' After boasting of his virtue Eumolpus immediately tells the story of his seduction of the boy at Pergamum (85-86), in which he deceives the boy's parents by posing as an abstemious philosopher; this episode immediately reveals his untrustworthiness and self-indulgence in dramatic fashion, but also does so in a roguish, charismatic way, in which the final joke is on Eumolpus himself who cannot after all satisfy the passion of the boy he has been eagerly trying to seduce. In the *Odyssey*, Demodocus' story of the love of Ares and Aphrodite, though lighthearted and humorous, has a moral which reflects that of the main narrative; Hephaestus' punishment of his

² Connors 1998, 61-62; Rimell 2002, 63.

³ Bartsch 1989, 26: 'This point is not reached until the inevitable introduction of the learned interpreter. Often a wise and elderly figure, or a character with privileged knowledge (such as a native of the region where the painting was seen), this interpreter speaks up soon after the narrator has expressed his own reaction...'

adulterous wife and her lover is parallel to Orestes' murder of Aegisthus, or Odysseus' murder of the suitors.⁴ But in Eumolpus' story of the Pergamene boy, much as later in his story of the Matron of Ephesus, it is the sexual predator whose intrigue both prevails and, for the most part, is applauded; the moral tenor of the *Odyssey* has been reversed. It is noteworthy that Encolpius' next words are (89) *erectus his sermonibus* 'encouraged by this conversation...' He has already begun to come under Eumolpus' spell and see his value as an entertainer, and one who unabashedly embraces the out-law code of the *Satyrice* by courageously embracing his own hypocrisy.

Eumolpus' notion of the dedication of artists is that devotion to art is bound to involve fanaticism and sacrifice. He claims (88) that Lysippus died of poverty as he concentrated on the lines of a single statue, and that various other artists and scientists all had a tendency to obsession with their craft that recall the compulsion of Eumolpus himself. Attention to one's craft seems to necessarily involve neglect of the basic needs of life—a fanatical devotion to virtue which he contrasts with today's supposed love of money. All his exaggerated, cartoon-like stories about high-strung scientists and artists provide a rationale for Eumolpus' obsession with poetry, even his willingness to die for it, as when he tries to finish a poem and go down with the ship when his friends want to rescue him during a storm at sea (*Sat.* 115).⁵

Eumolpus seems little more than a nuisance to the others after his introduction in the art gallery (90), when Encolpius invites him to dinner only on the condition that he forswear his madness for the rest of the day. Eumolpus, however, quickly replaces Ascyrtos as a rival for the affections of Giton. After Encolpius admits Eumolpus to the inn in 92, the old man begins to ogle Giton, which initially alarms Encolpius, but as soon as Eumolpus tells the tale of Ascyrtos' discomfiture at the baths, when he loses his clothes and is led away by a lecherous Roman knight, he ingratiates himself with Encolpius, ending with the joke that it is better to have a big tool than a big talent. Encolpius' reactions to the story, in which his expression keeps changing depending on the fortunes of Ascyrtos being described, suggest Eumolpus' ability to change the moods of his listeners and weave a spell by his storytelling, like Demodocus and Phemius in the *Odyssey*, who have been chosen to tell stories in order to create and vary the moods of the households which employ them.

⁴ Clarke 1989, 55.

⁵ Just as Thales fell down a well while observing the stars, showing that his devotion to science prevented him from seeing what was before his feet (Plato *Theatetus* 174A).

The mock suicide scene in 94 and 95 in which first Encolpius tries to hang himself, then Giton attempts to cut his own throat, is aided and abetted by Eumolpus. Having been angrily ejected from the room by Encolpius along with Giton, Eumolpus' re-entry to interrupt Encolpius' suicide attempt is inconsistently greeted with great relief by Encolpius who credits him with 'call[ing]me back to light from the very bourne of death.' Eumolpus then keeps the action going by supplying a harmlessly blunted razor in order to turn the pathos into a farce, a *mimicam mortem* (94), in which Giton and Encolpius satisfy the prerequisites of melodrama by a mutual suicide attempt in the name of love. At this point in the scene, Giton and Encolpius both fall off the bed and they are rolling on the floor when they are interrupted by the landlord, who accuses them of trying to escape without paying their rent. The farcical nature of the scene, with its resemblance to a mime, might be compared to the scene at Trimalchio's dinner (*Sat.* 64) where Trimalchio and his catamite Croesus get into a jealous tussle involving a dog and end up crawling around on the floor; both Trimalchio and Eumolpus know how to stage raucous slapstick as good entertainment. The reminder of the increasing centrality of Eumolpus to the novel is greatly reinforced by this scene where all the emotion and action stem from Eumolpus, whose poem on exotic birds (93) starts the quarrel between Giton and Encolpius, his protestation of love to Giton dramatically heats up the quarrel, and he keeps the pot of anger and melodrama stirring by picking fights. Just as Trimalchio seems to have stage-managed much of the events at his *cena*, Eumolpus would appear to have arranged the scene at the inn so that Bargates made a timely entrance to restore order to the chaos, and turned him from a victim of the mob into a hero by hailing him as a genius. His ability to create such sure-fire entertainment is the key to his success.

When Giton suggests on board ship that they escape Lichas and Tryphaena by covering their heads and drowning themselves in the ocean, Eumolpus rejects the plan because it would cause them to end their lives with a vile conclusion (*turpi exitu*, 103). Here Eumolpus exerts his power as a stage-master; it is not their possible deaths but the shameful, lower-class manner of them without any flair that he resists, and a graceful conclusion to life is often compared to the conclusion of a play which merits applause (see the death of Augustus, who asks for applause, in Suet. *Aug.* 99).⁶ His alternative is to create another mime-scene by shaving their heads and making them up with enormous letters on their foreheads like banded slaves. After the danger is over for the moment, he delivers a poem lamenting Giton's baldness

⁶ Bartsch's translation (1994, 28).

which he says, now makes him the object of scorn by girls (*ridentes fugis et times puellas*). This poem is specifically mocked by Encolpius as silly, and it prefigures the ridiculous encomium to hair delivered by the narrator Lucius in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*; it can stand as an emblem of the superficiality of all of Eumolpus' moralizing; but in Eumolpus' eyes it elevates the dramatic effect of the baldness of Giton by adding a tragic pathos.⁷

Eumolpus, increasingly exerting his leadership with the other two, is even given the title of *dux* in 109 where he negotiates a treaty with Lichas and Tryphaena on board ship, suggesting his generalship over a troupe of soldiers who owe him allegiance. After this success Encolpius seems to have lost all his earlier incentive to resist Eumolpus and promotes him dramatically, hailing him as 'our spokesman in peril and the begetter of our present peace,' *et periclitantium advocatus et praesentis concordiae auctor* (110). Eumolpus at this point has become a kind of theatrical toastmaster for Eumolpus and Giton, making sure that their activities measure up to his standards for entertainment. On shipboard after he has arranged the peace with Lichas and Tryphaena, he tells the famous anecdote of the Matron of Ephesus as a good story to increase their happy mood (*hilaritas*).

Eventually Eumolpus takes the initiative in the con-games of Encolpius and Giton and setting in motion a legacy-hunting scheme. The trio on the way to Croton hear that the people of that town are ripe for the taking, either legacy-hunters themselves or the victims of legacy-hunters. Eumolpus proposes, (117) *Quid ergo cessamus mimum componere?* 'Well then, why shouldn't we make up a farce?' The others take an oath to obey Eumolpus in whatever he ordered, even to endure in his cause burning, flogging, or death by the sword, pledging their very bodies and souls to him, like members of a gladiators' troupe. It is noteworthy how Eumolpus' power over Encolpius and Giton has grown in the course of his acquaintance with them, and in Croton in order to fool the legacy-hunters those two masquerade as his slaves. This masquerade apparently is carried out very consistently and realistically because in 139, after Encolpius has been absent for two days while dallying with Chrysis, Eumolpus sends word that he is going to have Encolpius beaten for dereliction of his duty.

Near the end of the surviving novel the legacy hunters of Croton have been bled dry and are growing impatient with Eumolpus' promise that a ship is arriving from Africa with money and slaves. They are no longer willing to

⁷ Much more on Encolpius and hair in Jansson 2004, 239-241. Connors 1998, 67-68 thinks that in view of the coming shipwreck, 'Eumolpus' frivolous verses on sudden baldness as a reminder of death take on foreboding undertones.'

keep playing the game of pretension that Eumolpus has been putting them through, so he must come up with some crueler trick. As Shadi Bartsch points out,⁸ in the odd theatricality of the age of Nero, pretension and role-playing are always rewarded, while the punishment for revealing that you know a crime is being committed is death; in Tacitus *Ann.* 13,25,2 a certain Julius Montanus was accosted by Nero in disguise on the street and defended himself by punching the emperor; if he had kept up the pretence of ignorance Nero would have let him off, but when he begged the emperor for pardon, thus revealing that he saw through Nero's disguise, the emperor forced him to commit suicide. The possibility that the legacy-hunters are beginning to see reality rather than fantasy leads to Eumolpus upping the ante of the ghoulish prank with which, in fact, the existing novel closes: he makes the public recitation of a will in which he required his would-be heirs to eat his body, in full view of witnesses, after his death.⁹ Apparently even this does not discourage the legacy-hunters but somehow seems to add credence to the rumors of Eumolpus' wealth. Presumably, having to endure this nauseating act will make their shock even more delicious afterwards when they discover that Eumolpus left no fortune to inherit. Eumolpus even insists on the legacy-hunters using their imagination to overcome their nausea and pretend that they are devouring millions of sesterces. Thus even as they carry out the sadistic prank the legacy hunters cannot express their true feelings but must keep up the spirit of the practical joke by pretending they are having a good time, the kind of hypocrisy encouraged by Nero,¹⁰ who wanted spectators to turn a blind eye to his crimes. The only problem with Eumolpus' final practical joke is that he cannot be around to witness it, since he will be a corpse by the time the legacy hunters become cannibals, indeed he will have to die or kill himself in order for it to happen. It seems quite possible that Eumolpus in the complete novel actually did kill himself as a way of playing a cruel joke on the legacy hunters by driving them to cannibalism, all for nothing (you cannot sue a corpse); Eumolpus' legacy is that when you have lived your life as a joke you must maintain it to the very end and not allow a note of seriousness to creep in (like Petronius himself in the death scene de-

⁸ Bartsch 1994, 17-19.

⁹ The question is, whether Eumolpus has the will read out before his death as a way of discouraging the legacy-hunters (so Sullivan 1968, 76; but if so, the ruse does not work) or whether he is actually dead by the time the will is read. Sullivan at any rate thinks Eumolpus dies before the close of the novel (1968, 80).

¹⁰ E.g. Octavia's reaction when she is forced to witness the murder of her brother Britannicus: 'Even Octavia, notwithstanding her youthful inexperience, had learnt to hide her grief, her affection, and indeed every emotion,' Tac. *Ann.* 13,16.

scribed by Tacitus, *Ann.* 16,19), or to put it another way, just as a good entertainer should be kept at all costs, a good practical joke is worth dying for.

Eumolpus' various skirmishes with death seem perverted versions of the dedicated artist who is willing to sacrifice himself for his creation; they are notable for their theatricality. This tendency can be partially clarified by comparison with Horace's description of the mad poet at the conclusion of his *Ars Poetica*,¹¹ the poet whose *ingenium* has taken over completely to the detriment of his *ars*. Like Eumolpus, the mad poet is shunned by many but pursued and tormented by incautious children (*agitant pueri incautique sequuntur*, 456; there is a close parallel for this in Petronius 92, when Eumolpus is taunted by children at the baths as he recites, *et me quidem pueri tamquam insanum imitatione petulantissima deriserunt*). At any rate, says Horace, the mad poet rages like a bear (*certe furit, ac velut ursus*, 472; compare Eumolpus raging like a caged animal on board the ship), killing people by catching them like a leech and sucking all their blood. The mad poet has lost total sight of the importance of art of high quality and focuses instead on himself as a kind of artifact who must convince everyone by his neurotic behavior that he is a poet; the emphasis is on the melodrama of his performance, not the aesthetic quality of its content.

If one of the inspirations for Eumolpus is Horace's satirical portrait of a mad poet, the hilariously twisted logic and lack of introspection of Petronius' creation are put in vivid perspective by a comparison with a parallel passage in a work roughly contemporary with the *Satyrica*, namely the philosophical dialogue Πίναξ (Latin *Tabula*) of pseudo-Cebes of Thebes.¹² The *Tabula* or 'Tablet' is also an *ekphrasis* by an old man of a painting in an art gallery, but in this case, clearly intended by its author as a serious moral and philosophical lesson. The old man in the *Tabula* lectures his interlocutors on the allegorical meaning of figures in a painting. If Petronius knew the dialogue he may have been parodying it in his own art-gallery scene, (the fact that there are no less than two parodies of the *Tabula* by Lucian suggests that its strait-laced advice was quickly regarded as open to ridicule) by introducing a wise old man whose pretensions to virtue turn out to be an utter sham, and whose attempted *ekphrasis* of a painting on the fall of Troy turns out to be nothing but an excuse for unenlightening rant, an effort that does

¹¹ On this comparison see Conte 1995, 68-69.

¹² The Πίναξ was edited by Praechter 1893; there is an English translation and commentary by Seddon 2005.

not even seem to attempt to contain a plausible explication of the features in any possible painting.¹³

Whatever the true explanation, the connections between the *Tabula* and the art-gallery scene are compelling and suggest a commentary on the behavior of Eumolpus by a strait-laced philosopher or teacher, who gives a common sense perspective which we never find in the *Satyrica* itself, a nonsense exposure of the character's inconsistencies and hypocrisy. Eumolpus, in the self-introduction which he delivers to Encolpius, speaks of himself as a poet who has missed out on riches because he is a lover of genius (*amor ingenii* 83), and just below speaks of lovers of letters (*litterarum amatores*) who are tempted by the wealthy to pursue wealth as a goal. Eumolpus' self-description can be compared with *Tabula* 13, where poets are first on the list of lovers of false learning (ψευδοπαιδείας ἔρασταί) who deceive themselves into thinking their pursuit is of true learning. The Old Man preaches against men who have arrived at Pleasure and Incontinence (τὴν Ἠδυσπάθειαν καὶ τὴν Ἀκρασίαν, 28), and fail to blame themselves but rather the followers of Discipline (Παιδείαν) that they have become so miserable and wretched, and are not able to share in the goods of the Disciplined. This provides an answer to Eumolpus' complaint that he has been hounded by the wealthy who resent his superior character; the passage from pseudo-Cebes is a reminder that those who complain about persecution from the wealthy aristocrats ought to put the blame on their own behavior. An even more pointed reply to Eumolpus' self-serving view about his superiority as an intellectual is the remark of pseudo-Cebes' Old Man (33) that learning is not an essential ingredient for moral improvement and (34) that '...there is nothing that prevents a man who is educated in letters (οἱ μαθηματικοί) and in every kind of learning, from being a drunk, intemperate miser and unjust, a traitor and a fool.' Later in pseudo-Cebes (40) the old man warns against the acquisition of wealth by ignoble means such as treachery and fraud, a charge that would apply to Eumolpus and his legacy-hunting schemes. The attack in Lucian's *Professor of Public Speaking*, 10 supposedly written against the moralism of Cebes, includes a section that warns against entrusting oneself to pious philosophers who claim to have all the answers.

¹³ There are two parodies of the *Tabula* by Lucian. One is at the end of Lucian's *De Mercede Conductis*, consisting of an ekphrasis of a painting in which many try to climb a steep hill trying to attain Wealth, who sits within a gateway while his lover goes through a series of degrading trials while evaded by Hope, finally reaching Old Age without wealth and being ejected. Another is the *Professor of Public Speaking* 6. See Seddon 2005, 177-178.

Lucian and Petronius could both be writing parodies or satirical reactions to the *Tabula*, which Lucian characterized by blatant and open sarcasm at the success which it promises to the dedicated artist, with Petronius' satire the more subtle, presenting Eumolpus as a kind of cheesy and run-down hypocrite, denouncing the degeneration of contemporary morality and preaching artistic dedication in the art gallery but himself an example of the degeneracy he denounces, both moral and artistic. If you allow a man like Eumolpus to gradually take control of your life you had indeed better watch out lest he kill you with his poetry or lead you on the path to ruin.

Petronius chooses such an outrageous and flawed character as Eumolpus as a narrator for considerable stretches of his novel, like Apuleius' ass-narrator whose behavior as a man and judgments as an ass we are invited to question at every point. In the description offered by Achilles Tatius at the start of his novel,¹⁴ Jupiter seduced Europa by tempting her, in the form of a bull, to sit on his back, while Eros leads the bull and looks back at him with a sly smile. In the *Satyrica* Eumolpus himself is the *poeta mugiens* (*Sat.* 115), mad and bellowing like the poet out of control in Horace but also the bellowing bull of a poet who flaunts his physicality while boasting of his intellect, and who tempts Philomela's daughter to sit on his manhood, his 'much-admired goodness,' for a ride with him, inciting the laughter of all the onlookers of the grotesque scene; it is the performance of yet another mime, complete with comic reversal as the generous and kindly patron becomes a panting seducer of a child; the mother seemingly solicitous of her children deliberately leaves them with adults she knows will exploit them and thus becomes a procuress for her little girl, and grotesque and violent sex, indeed a kind of *ménage à trois*, is witnessed by a group of voyeurs; and finally, the scene ends with the inevitable laughter of the spectators.

Phemius, the bard left behind in the palace at Ithaca, escapes the wrath of Odysseus after the slaughter of the suitors by claiming that he worked for the enemy under duress, that the suitors forced him to sing for them, (*Od.* 22,344-353), and Odysseus accepts this explanation after it is backed up by Telemachus. Eumolpus' more far-fetched excuse for his roguery is, first of all, that he dare not tread a straight path in life because this will arouse jealously and anger in the average man; secondly, the rich have made their wealth seem attractive by flaunting it before poverty-stricken intellectuals, thus forcing a poor man like him to constantly scheme up ways to get rich (*Sat.* 84). This kind of self-serving excuse, which must hardly be convincing even to himself, is bound to appeal to the self-pitying Eumolpus as he stands

¹⁴ On this see Bartsch 1989, 12-14.

in the art gallery weeping at his misfortune in love, and looking for an easy way out that will not seriously challenge his view of life.

The parallel between Eumolpus and Demodocus is another Odyssean touch which enriches the comic parody and depth of the *Satyricon* like the ‘wrath of Priapus’ which offers an echo of the Wrath of Poseidon which plagues Odysseus. The hero of the *Odyssey*, the man of many turns who can talk his way out of any situation, is metamorphosed in the *Satyricon* into Encolpius, the impotent, third-rate trickster. Meanwhile Demodocus, the bard beloved by the gods who can weave magical spells and create moods, has become the disreputable bard and picaresque sidekick Eumolpus, whose poetry has degenerated into bombast but who has not lost his ability to entertain.

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