



CHAPTER III

Rogues, Drunkards, Prostitutes: Shakespeare's Others

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Let me begin with a statement by the Cambridge historian G. R. Elton (1921–1994): “Shakespeare must be read and seen, and not talked about” (1991: 454). Admittedly, the dramatic spectacle of a Shakespeare play on the stage can be most moving, entertaining, thought-provoking and, in the case of his tragedies, cathartic. Similarly a reader’s imaginative reconstruction of a Shakespeare play’s action can also produce in the mind a vast range of new ideas and impressions. Yet Shakespeare’s drama also ought to be analysed, discussed, debated, and argued about from all perspectives, and there is the rub. However profoundly, learnedly, and extensively Shakespeare may have been talked about, he cannot be exhausted and done with. Each time a Shakespeare play is read or, speaking poststructurally, decoded into innumerable signifieds, it is re-written and encoded into many signifiers in the mind of the reader, constantly turning into new signifieds. That is what Shakespeare criticism and scholarship has demonstrated for centuries. Shakespeare’s dramatic constructs of human conditions, his inspiring insights into the nature of man, and his unfathomable dramatic discourse will undoubtedly continue to preoccupy scholars and researchers and urge them into formulating new, creative and eye-opening interpretations, arguments, comments. The core issue in Shakespeare criticism and scholarship has always been the question of emphasis — the question of what subject or topic is more important and worthwhile in Shakespeare for study and research, and hence arises a dialectical relationship of the marginal and the central. For instance, in the analysis and discussion of Shakespeare’s characters, traditional Shakespeare criticism has mostly focused

on major characters. What one may categorize as his marginal and dramatically less focal characters have seldom been taken into account. They appear to be socially and dramatically of secondary importance and mostly include rogues, thugs, vagrants, drunkards, harlots, prostitutes, and other types of low life. Yet in standard Shakespeare studies, they have received little or no critical attention with the exception, of course, of Falstaff who, in this regard, can be called the arch-rogue. These marginal characters, whom one may dub the dramatic projections of Elizabethan London's criminal underworld, can be referred to as Shakespeare's Others. So this paper is a concise discussion, within the social and cultural context of Elizabethan England, of Shakespeare's representation of this criminal underworld and its social Others.

In fact, Shakespeare's creative and working familiarity with Elizabethan London's underworld is well known. Personally, both as an actor and as a playwright, he lived in the suburbs such as Shoreditch to the northwest of the city walls and Southwark on the Bankside (Greenblatt 2005: 293 and 361-362, and Ackroyd 2006: 162-163, 278-279, 328-331). As will be discussed later on, especially these two suburbs were most popular for fun, debauchery, and criminality.

Historically viewed, Elizabethan London did, with the exclusion of Westminster and Greenwich, consist of the City itself and the suburbs around it. Over 73 per cent of London's population lived in the City (Sharpe 1993: 86). The rest lived in the suburbs, which were outside the jurisdiction of the City administration and were characterized by what J.A. Sharpe has called "a distinctly proletarian flavour" (1993: 86). As the socially and culturally vibrant metropolis of Elizabethan England and the fast growing emporium of overseas trade, the London of the élite and the prosperous was, as Sharpe has described,

the national focal point for the arts, for literature, and for taste and fashion. The sons of the gentry and of the patricians of provincial towns were apprenticed to wealthy London merchants. The parents of these youths flooded into the capital in search of patronage, fortunate marriages, or the latest designs in clothes or furniture, or to see the latest play or launch the latest law suit. (1993: 87)

So London, to recall Sharpe's words, "acted as a magnet for the rootless and the workless" (1993: 86) and attracted "the poor and potentially criminal immigrant"

(1993: 87). Consequently, a sizeable portion of the population (actually over 25 per cent) consisted of “[an] underclass of criminals and prostitutes” (Sharpe 1993: 87). In this regard, for Shakespeare, London was a metaphorical platform where a huge variety of people from different walks of life intermingled with each other and constituted an extraordinary human resource which he was to tap for his dramatic purpose. The privileged and the underprivileged, the high and the low, the noble and the common, the rich and the poor, the gentleman and the rogue, the innocent and the criminal, the chaste and the voluptuous, the virtuous and the immoral all made up this extraordinary resource and were mirrored through Shakespeare’s plays. What seemed to be the elegant and socially agreeable London of royal residents, the exclusively privileged nobility, wealthy and prosperous merchants, respectable families, and law-abiding men and women, was sharply contrasted with the Other London which was located in the suburbs outside the city walls and embodied the dark and inhospitable underworld of crime and social degeneration. Among London’s suburbs, it was Shoreditch, Cheapside, Clerkenwell and Southwark that attracted large crowds since they were the site of public entertainment and all sorts of pleasure activities. At Shoreditch were the two early Elizabethan theatres “The Theatre” (1576) and “The Curtain” (1577). As Peter Ackroyd has described with quotations from the Elizabethan humourist Richard Lichfield’s pamphlet of invective *The Trimming of Thomas Nashe* (1597) against Thomas Nashe, Shoreditch was a neighbourhood

where ‘poore Scholers and souldiers [wandered] in backe lanes and the outshiftes of the Citie with never a rag to their backes’ in the society of ‘Aqua vitae sellers and stocking menders’ together with prostitutes ‘sodden & perboyled with French surfets;’ there were fortune-tellers and cobblers and citizens on the search for ‘bowzing and beerebathing.’ (2006: 162)

As for Southwark, where were located several Elizabethan theatres such as “The Rose” (1587), “The Swan” (1596), “The Globe” (1599) and “The Hope” (1613), it was evidently a more popular hub with its pleasure facilities. In addition to taverns, alehouses, and pits for blood games such bearbaiting, bullbaiting, dogfighting and cockfighting, Southwark was also noted for its brothels (Greenblatt 2005: 180; Ackroyd 2006: 278). In fact there were more than a hundred brothels in London and its suburbs including Southwark (Ackroyd 2006: 112). Therefore, besides the plague epidemics which often struck London and caused temporary theatre

closures throughout the 1590s and after (Ackroyd 2006: 174, 188, 205 and 398-399), there was also a high rate of venereal disease infection. Shakespeare was well aware, through his close affinity with London's underworld, of the unhygienic circumstances in which the brothels operated. Obviously he also knew how often the City authorities, seriously concerned with public health, had to issue edicts for the demolition of the brothels. As Stephen Greenblatt has aptly described,

whorehouses ("stews") figure frequently in his [Shakespeare's] plays—*Doll Tearsheet*, *Mistress Overdone*, and their fellow workers in the sex industry are quickly but indelienably sketched, along with assorted panders, doorkeepers, tapsters, and servants. He depicted brothels as places of disease, vice, and disorder, but also as places that satisfy ineradicable human needs, bringing together men and women, gentlemen and common people, old and young, the educated and the illiterate, in a camaraderie rarely found elsewhere in the highly stratified society. Above all, he depicted them as small businesses that struggle against high odds—stiff competition, rowdy or indifferent clients, hostile civic authorities—to make a modest profit. (2005: 180)

Undoubtedly, bearing these facts in mind, Shakespeare must have decided to conceive and construct the brothel scenes in *Measure for Measure* and portray a brothel owner under the name "Mistress Overdone" with an explicit pun implying her professional seniority and long experience of prostitution. Indeed, he brings the question of prostitution and brothels to the fore right at the beginning of the play. Within the play's plot context of fornication and adultery, he problematizes how the rule of law can be subverted by the very authority itself and, thus, apparently making an implicit critique of corruption among some members of London's city administration for their lenient attitude towards the brothels. Called "Madam Mitigation" (I. ii. 41) as a pun on her trade that offers services for the gratification and, thereof, mitigation of sexual desire, Mistress Overdone and her roguish tapster Pompey are worried about the damaging effects on their trade of the new anti-fornication and anti-adultery proclamation made by the Duke of Vienna:

- Pompey : [...] You have not heard of the proclamation, have you?
- Mis. Overdone : What proclamation, man?
- Pompey : All houses in the suburbs of Vienna must be plucked down.
- Mis. Overdone : And what shall become of those in the city?
- Pompey : They shall stand for the seed: they had gone down too, but that a wise burgher put in for them.
- Mis. Overdone : But shall all our houses of resort in the suburbs be pulled down?
- Pompey : To the ground, mistress.
- Mis. Overdone : Why, here's a change indeed in the commonwealth! What shall become of me?
- Pompey : Come: fear not you: good counsellors lack no clients: though you change your place, you need not change your trade: I'll be your tapster still; courage, there will be pity taken on you; you that have worn your eyes almost out in the service, you will be considered.
(I. ii. 85-103)

Like London's actual brothels, Mistress Overdone's brothel has always infected its customers with venereal disease, which was also called the "French disease" in Shakespeare's time (I. ii. 48n). This is what her lewd customer Lucio complains about to two other customer gentlemen and teases the First Gentleman with a pun on the more valuable French coin that he, the First Gentleman, has in fact contracted the French disease far more frequently than him and still suffer from it:

- Lucio : [...] I have purchased as many diseases under her roof as come to—
- 2 Gent. : To what, I pray?
- Lucio. : Judge.
- 2 Gent. : To three thousand dolours a year.

1 Gent. : Ay, and more.

Lucio. : A French crown more.

1 Gent. : Thou art always figuring diseases in me; but thou art full of error; I am sound.

Lucio. : Nay, not, as one would say, healthy: but so sound as things that are hollow; thy bones are hollow; impiety has made a feast of thee. (I. ii. 42-53)

In the colloquial speech of daily life in Elizabethan London, there must have been various terms of reference with regard to the brothels. As can be understood from Shakespeare's usage of them in his plays, the brothels must have been referred to as "leaping-houses" (*1 Henry IV*, I. ii. 9), "houses of resort" (*1 Henry IV*, I. ii. 93), "bawdy houses" (*1 Henry IV*, III. iii. 158), "the stews" (*2 Henry IV*, I. ii. 53-54), "common houses" (*Measure for Measure*, II. i. 43), "hot-house[s]" (*Measure for Measure*, II. i. 65), and "house[s] of profession" (*Measure for Measure*, IV. iii. 1-2). In fact, the brothels in Elizabethan London were among profitable enterprises. This explains somewhat why, as pointed out earlier, there were so many brothels in London and its suburbs. However, for reasons of public health and also due to constant Puritan aversion, the city administration often tried to restrict the activities of the brothels or applied penal measures to them (Ackroyd 2006: 295, 330). Clearly, this was to the economic disadvantage of the owners. That is why Shakespeare makes Mistress Overdone react against the Duke's prohibition of free sex and complain that, besides wars, death penalties, and poverty, the prohibition gone into effect by the proclamation is bound to reduce her clientele significantly:

Thus, what with the war, what with the sweat,
what with the gallows, and what with poverty, I am
custom-shrunk. (I. ii. 75-77)

As can be seen from her tapster and pimp Pompey's catalogue of the prisoners, "many of her old customers" and "forty more, all great doers in our trade" have already been put in prison (IV. iii. 1-20).

Lucrative profitability in the entertainment industry and, in this regard, especially the popularity of Southwark must have encouraged some theatre owners to invest in the sex industry. For instance, the Elizabethan impresario Philip

Henslowe (1550?-1616) and the great Elizabethan actor Edward Alleyn (1566-1626) jointly owned not only the Rose Theatre but also the brothels around, and Alleyn's wife was publicly disgraced for her connection with a brothel (Ackroyd 2006: 112). Ackroyd describes the relationship as follows:

[In Southwark] there were indeed many brothels, some of them owned by the ubiquitous business partners Alleyn and Henslowe. Henslowe's playhouse, the Rose, was named after a well-known house of assignation in the vicinity. They were, you might say, all-round entertainers. (2006: 330)

So it seems that, besides high-revenue overseas trade and shipping, the economy of the Elizabethan metropolis was, as pointed out by Sharpe,

heavily dependent upon the leisure and service industries. There were endless openings for domestic servants and for innumerable others, from sedan-chair operators to brothel-keepers, whose living depended upon the disposable income of the rich. (1993: 88)

In this economically vibrant world of Elizabethan London, vagrant men and women, cut-throat criminals, drunkards, rogues, pimps, harlots and prostitutes mostly populated the suburbs and practised their ways of self-maintenance. Shakespeare closely knew and intermingled with them. As Ackroyd has put it, for Shakespeare

it was an inevitable and inalienable part of his profession as a player [and as a playwright] ... It is undoubtedly true that he knew at first hand the depths, as well as the heights, of urban life. (2006: 279)

Officially the Privy Council and the city authorities were seriously worried about the control of the poor and the repression of crime since there was a noticeable growth in the number and crime rate of the poor (Roberts 1994: 32). For instance, in an injunction issued in 1598 by the Privy Council, it was clearly stressed that the suburbs were the abode of "base people and lewd persons that do keep evil

rule, and harbour thieves, rogues and vagabonds” (qtd. in Beier 1985: 43). As this injunction demonstrates, crime and various forms of illegal trafficking were certainly widespread in the suburbs, and the judicial and municipal authorities were seriously concerned about the prevalence of unlawfulness linked with the poor and the vagrants. In this regard Sharpe has stated that

the most familiar product of these fears was the vagrant stereotype created in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods by both of string statutes and a lively body of popular rogue literature. But the vagrant was simply the best publicized symptom of much wider processes in which the poor were identified as a problem, attempts were made to control them, and hence they found themselves increasingly likely to be prosecuted for infringements of an ever-widening legal code. (1993: 113)

Indeed, rogues, vagrants, prostitutes and criminals constituted what Shakespeare's contemporary John Downname called in his book *The Plea for the Poor* (1616) “a promiscuous generation, who are all of kin, and yet know no kindred, no house or home, no law but their sensual lust” (qtd. in Beier 1985: 51). They often resorted to intimidation, fraud, dissimulation, and all other similar forms of roguery to practise lawlessness and commit acts of violence. In London as well as in the rest of the country, roguery became so widespread that there developed among the Elizabethan writers a literature of roguery. Especially Thomas Nashe and Robert Greene were prolific writers of roguery pamphlets. In this regard, Greene, whom Elton has described as “[a] journalist of genius” (1991: 260), has been referred to as the pamphleteer who “both recorded and invented the traditional Elizabethan rogue in his pamphlets on their practices” (1991: 260). Actually the word *rogue*, which seems to have been coined in the 1560s, was initially used in Elizabethan England, as Craig Dionne and Steve Mentz have explained, “to describe vagrants who used disguise, rhetorical play, and counterfeit gestures to insinuate themselves into lawful, social and political contexts” (2004: 1-2). Basically, they were “displaced figures, poor men and women with no clear social place or identity” (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 1). However, this specific meaning was expanded in time so as to refer to “a variety of social deviants and outcasts, from rural migrants to urban con artists” (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 2). So the word *rogue* came to be used in Shakespeare's time to

indicate villains, scoundrels, swindlers, atheists, double-crossers, pimps, thugs and all other kinds of social outcasts, whom Robert Greene called “shifters and cozeners” (qtd. in Dionne and Mentz 2004: 6). To these may also be added what Elton has described as “the brawling soldier, back from France and eager to spend his loot on drink and women” (1991: 1), of whom Falstaff and his thugs become a grotesque representation. In daily speech and slang such social deviants and outcasts were called “molls, doxies, cony-catchers, masterless men, [and] caterpillars of the commonwealth” (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 1). The Elizabethan criminal underworld was their social and cultural space, in which they moved freely and displayed their social and professional identity. In other words, as Dionne and Mentz have further pointed out, “the urban underworld became a semi-independent site of cultural meaning, an alternative to the court and the stage, and a leading indicator of changes in English society” (2004: 2). In this underworld, rogues developed their own language and codes of behaviour, and formed fraternal bonds and social solidarity among themselves (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 2). As can be seen in Robert Greene’s *A Notable Discovery of Cosenage, Now Daily Practiced by Sundry Lewd Persons* (1591), which was one of his several slanderous and bawdy pamphlets, known as “cony-catching pamphlets” (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 2-3), there was a distinct rogue vocabulary, which in fact constituted the rogue slang. For instance, a harlot or prostitute was a “traffic,” while a customer deceived by a pimp was called a “simpler;” similarly, an act of deceiving or a con game was referred to as a “crossbite” or “crossbiting,” just as a deceiver was a “crossbiter” (qtd. in Dionne and Mentz 2004: 6). Moreover, what Greene called “cony-catching” was another example of the rogue slang, which in fact meant deceiving a person, such as a merchant, an artisan, an apprentice, a peasant, a traveller, or a foreign visitor, of his money or belongings by various tricks and pretensions; since the word “cony” or “coney” means a rabbit, it was a phrase coined out of the practice of tricking and trapping rabbits (Brayton 144). Indeed, by their ruffian behaviour, moral laxity and unchecked tendency for crime, rogues defied the established norms and values of “the self-fashioned gentleman who has traditionally been the literary focus and exemplar of the age” (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 1). In social and economic terms, they have been considered to be the products of the “emerging economic and social changes” under Elizabeth I (Dionne and Mentz 2004: 1). One may also add that the social ideals and hierarchy of Elizabethan England and the values of the age were radically challenged and subverted by rogue culture and values. The focal milieu of the rogue culture was pubs and alehouses, which not only functioned as venues for social gathering and interaction but also served various other purposes. Though in appearance a social

setting, they were mostly the settings for violence, debauchery and all sorts of trafficking. As Sharpe has pointed out,

alehouses might be centres for receiving stolen goods, vagrants lodged in them, they were often scenes of violence, prostitutes plied their trade in them, and they constituted an encouragement to poverty and a threat to family life. Yet they also offered the lower orders their sole recreational institution, and, moreover served a number of useful functions, as pawn shops or labour exchanges, for example. (1993: 283)

In this regard, the tavern scenes in *1* and *2 Henry IV* become the most memorable and dramatically most vivid depiction of this Elizabethan world. If we recall Coleridge's remark in his lecture on *Hamlet* that Shakespeare "never wrote anything without design" (2008: 655), he may have intended through these scenes and low-life types not only to cater for the groundlings in his audience and stimulate their sense of belonging in this underworld but also to create an awareness in the high and the élite as regards the Other and the Other's subculture. In fact, this is what Prince Hal, the future Henry V, has come to learn and associated himself with the social Others of this subculture. Understandably, his father King Henry IV, already in trouble with the war in the North (*1 Henry IV*, I. i. 1-76) is worried about what he considers to be his son Prince Hal's delinquent and prodigal behaviour (*1 King Henry IV*, I. i. 83-85) and his association with what he calls "the rude society" of London's underworld (*1 King Henry IV*, III. ii. 4-17). Helpless because of Hal's pursuit of what he terms "barren pleasures" (*1 King Henry IV*, III. ii. 14) motivated by the prince's "inordinate and low desires" (*1 King Henry IV*, III. ii. 12), the king envies the Earl of Northumberland for having a loyal and brave son in Harry Percy, nicknamed "Hotspur" (*1 Henry IV*, I. i. 77-89 and *passim*). In fact, Hal has deliberately grafted himself to this "rude society" of rogues, drunkards and prostitutes. Actually his aim has been to observe and learn about the ways of low life among the commonalty and have a full and constructive experience of their world. He knows what he is doing and regards his underworld companionship as a temporary process of self-education for what he calls his "reformation." Indeed, once he has learned the ways of the world and the manners of the people from all walks of life, he will again be himself and reveal his royal nobility just like the sun shining most brightly after the clouds that have darkened it have dispersed. He stresses this point in his rhetorically well-constructed soliloquy; referring to Falstaff and his low-life company, he says:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyok'd humour of your idleness.
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted he may be more wonder'd at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.

[...]

So when this loose behaviour I throw off,
And pay the debt I never promised,
By how much better than my word I am,
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly, and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
I'll so offend, to make offence a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

(*1 King Henry IV*, I. ii. 190-198, 203-212)

Indeed, this world is a subcultural space inhabited and exploited by rogues, drunkards and their doxies, who speak in their own slang or, more properly, canting jargon and exhibit a salacious and criminal behaviour. Gathered around the drunken rogue and braggart knight Sir John Falstaff and presided over by him, the social Others of this world include the swaggering company of desperados Bardolph, Gadshill, Poins, Peto, and Pistol, and also Hostess Quickly of the Boar's Head Tavern in Eastcheap and the prostitute Doll Tearsheet. By presenting such a company of rogues and prostitutes and appropriating their jargon extensively, Shakespeare constructs in *1* and *2 Henry IV* those scenes of robbery, brawls, drunkenness, promiscuity, bawdry, prostitution and criminality that give us an insight into his sociological reading of London's underworld. His rogue jargon consists of sexual allusions and puns, swearing, cursing, slang phrases and expressions, slandering utterances, and sarcastic references. Below is an amusing example of the subcultural rogue discourse with latent allusions to sexuality. In the dialogue, Falstaff's swaggering rogue comrade and ensign Pistol, whose name

emblematically gestures to phallic associations, has dropped by to join his army captain Falstaff in Hostess Quickly's Boar's Head Tavern, which is the gathering and feasting place for Falstaff and his rogue company and soon gets into a brawl with the hostess and her prostitute customer Doll Tearsheet:

- Pistol : God save you, Sir John!
- Falstaff : Welcome, Ancient Pistol! Here, Pistol,
I charge you with a cup of sack; do you
discharge upon mine hostess.
- Pistol : I will discharge upon her, Sir John, with
two bullets.
- Falstaff : She is pistol-proof, sir; you shall not hardly
offend her.
- Hostess Quickly : Come, I'll drink no proofs, nor no bullets;
I'll drink no more than will do me good,
for no man's pleasure, I.
- Pistol : Then to you, Mistress Dorothy! I will
charge you.
- Doll : Charge me? I scorn you, scurvy companion.
What, you poor, base, rascally, cheating,
lack-linen mate! Away, you mouldy rogue,
away! I am meat for your master.
- Pistol : I know you, Mistress Dorothy.
- Doll : Away, you cutpurse rascal, you filthy bung,
away!
- By this wine, I'll thrust my knife in your
mouldy chaps and you play the saucy cuttle
with me. Away, You bottle-ale rascal, you
basket-hilt stale juggler, you! Since when,
I pray you, sir? God's light, with two points
on your shoulder? Much!

(2 *Henry IV*, II. iv. 108-130)

Though she may be a prostitute, Doll Tearsheet, whose name metaphorically sums up her voluptuous and equally aggressive conduct, not only reveals her possession

of dignity and self-respect but also fully deconstructs Pistol's cheap masculinity and misogynistic attitude. Another scene with a similar gender issue takes place between Hostess Quickly and Falstaff, who has exploited her to the extent that she is almost economically ruined and, for years, physically abused by him. Complaining to the security officer Fang, Hostess Quickly explains with sexual quibbles how Falstaff has exploited her:

Hostess Quickly : Alas the day, take heed of him—he stabbed
me in mine own house, most beastly in
good faith A cares not what mischief he
does, if his weapon be out; he will foine like
any devil, he will spare neither man,
woman, nor child.

(*2 Henry IV*, II. i. 13-17)

In fact, one can infer from Doll Tearsheet's dignified defiance and Hostess Quickly's final stand against Falstaff's abuses of her that Shakespeare was not prejudiced against the low-life women of the social underworld. On the contrary, he seems to have sympathized with them and implied that these women, who really were strong enough to survive among rogues and cut-throat criminals, deserved respect and understanding. This may of course be considered an indication of Shakespeare's impeccable humanism and sense of freedom. In general terms, he of course subscribed to the social hierarchy and class difference in his time. Yet, his approach to the underprivileged, the commonalty and the social Others never seems to have been motivated with hatred, contempt and aversion arising from class discrimination and social Otherness, although in his plays he teased them, mocked at them and described them as ludicrous and grotesque types. So his rogues, drunkards, prostitutes of the criminal underworld in *1* and *2 Henry IV* and *Measure for Measure*, just like his peasants, shepherds, and artisans in his other plays, arouse our sympathy and social tolerance.

To conclude, as a resident, an observer, a dramatist, an enterpriser, an actor and a playwright, Shakespeare was closely associated with the Other London of rogues, drunkards and prostitutes. It was in this socially and morally uncouth environment that he practised his art, made money, and attained fame.

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