

THEATRE IN THE COMBAT ZONE: THE MILITARY THEATRICALS AT PHILADELPHIA, 1778

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Abstract:

This paper will consider the connections between different types of theatre and theatricality under conditions of war in Philadelphia in 1778 during the British occupation.¹ The ethical cleansing of the title refers to the Mischianza, the giant medieval tournament and naval regatta on the Delaware organized by the British on the eve of their departure in May 1778.² Staged theatre, improvised by the personnel of both sides with army and navy soldiers performing texts from the regular British 18th-century dramatic repertoire, was also a feature common both to the winter encampment in Valley Forge and to the British in their conventional theatre in Philadelphia. The Mischianza was an extension of these types of theatricals. What I will be arguing is that a study of the connections between theatre, performance and theatricality allows us to model the disparate forces at work in a society experiencing the irreversible social and political changes of war. The kinds of theatrical modelling I am suggesting will attempt to describe a distributed, dialogic, set of performance inscriptions out of which Philadelphia emerged as an urban space in the post-colonial phase. In short, both the theatricals on both sides, the Mischianza included, were attempts at territorializing space, inscribing ownership, allegiance and cultural value through the repetition of performance. The most promising theoretical model for analyzing these complex cultural interactions arises from the synthesizing the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in Manuel DeLanda in *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*.

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During the winter before the departure of the British army in May 1778, the American war had all but come to a halt insofar as the typical eighteenth-century

¹ The most comprehensive guide is Jason Shaffer, *Performing Patriotism National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary American Theater*.

² For the long term reception of the Mischianza, which is only now receiving the scholarly attention it deserves, see O'Quinn.

military tactics of the field were concerned. From late December 1777 to May 1778 snow and bad weather put a stop to text book manoeuvres of the armies. The British army and navy, along with their Hessian allies, occupied Philadelphia, driving out American patriots and forcing them to encamp at Valley Forge thirty miles to the west while the British commandeered the more comfortable urban areas of Philadelphia. There were front line theatricals on both sides, well within the combat zone. This was most certainly not war at a distance, as in the thesis elaborated in Mary A. Favret's *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*.

Staged acting co-existed within a repertoire of performance types connected directly with the warfare of the American revolution in which the theatrical functions as a repetitive series of inscriptions successively territorialising and deterritorializing. Theatre and theatricality emerges not only as partisan metacommentaries on the progress of the war but also as ideologically formative. Not least, as a means of conducting warfare itself.

Before I move on to discuss different types of theatre, I want first to start with demonstrating the presence of British-produced national ideological markings in the wives of British soldiery stationed in America. This is important because it demonstrates actual ideological presence within the general military population rather than its inferred presence.

In the winter of 1776, Captain John Peebles of the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment, encountered in Newport, Rhode Island, a British woman, Mrs. Abbott, at a military ball. He describes her as "a genteel woman ... a[sic] officer of Artillerys wife Mrs. Abbott who is just come in from having been 14 Months a prisoner with the yankees." The person Peebles describes what appears to be a returning non-combatant exchanged under the cartel system. Peebles relates how, when her incoming ship had grounded, "she wd not stir till every man in the ship were first taken off, saying there[sic] lives were of service & hers was of none." (Gruber 80-1) What I would argue is that, quite apart from signifying the presence of women in the combat zone – the incident indelibly marks the presence in America of a distinctively British national ideology of expressive female valour. This incident – concerning the now untraceable Mrs. Abbott – pre-dates by some ten months the better known incident of Lady Harriet Acland's remonstrance with an American rebel guard from an open boat on the Hudson river on behalf of her wounded husband, an incident rather later commemorated in Robert Pollard's Royal Academy painting of 1784. Mrs. Abbott's case is more significant, however, not only on account of its punctuality but also because it has nothing directly to do with her husband.

In short, Mrs. Abbott's actions are clearly ideologically marked by the ideals of female heroism then being continuously presented on the London stage. To take just one example, James Solas Dodd's *The Funeral Pile* (revived in 1779) presented the actress Mrs. Jackson in a prologue dressed as a female

Britannia. *The Funeral Pile* – its title and the play's being a reference to the Hindu practice of *sute* – also reminds us how, in the midst of the American war, the actually anti-French *Funeral Pile* presented a major alternative orientation of the British imperial world, in this case towards India and the east. The brand of personal heroism and ideological commitment displayed by the artillery officer's wife, Mrs. Abbott, was modelled on many such stage representations. For example, John Jackson's Covent Garden, *The British Heroine* of 1778 – written for the same actress – startlingly suggests that the medieval siege of Harlech Castle is an allegory of General Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga. (448) There is a big difference, however. In Jackson's *British Heroine*, the ultimately rescued Burgoyne character – Albertus – takes his own life out of personal shame at the enormous cost of the defeat. Albertus falls on his sword, General Burgoyne returned home to safety. Clearly the London stage, demanded some measure of acknowledgement of Burgoyne's defeat but Burgoyne – as the Valley Forge camp knew – was no Cato.

Of the two competing sets of staged dramas performed as military private theatricals in 1778, the first one I want to discuss is the staging of Joseph Addison's Drury Lane tragedy, *Cato* (1713), in the Valley Forge camp on the 11th May 1778, only week before the *Mischianza* on the Delaware river thirty miles to the east. As Jason Shaffer and others have shown, Addison's *Cato* – not least in its performance at the Valley Forge camp by patriot soldiers – is a key text in the emergence of the political culture of the American republic, exemplifying patriotic ideals and implicitly referencing an overall republican framework of Roman law. Missing from Shaffer's analysis is a full sense of the camp's plans for its amateur theatricals: "If the Enemy does not retire from Philada[sic] soon, our Theatrical amusement will continue—The fair Penitent with the Padlock will soon be acted. The 'recruiting Officer' is also on foot." (*Wallace Papers*) Although plans to stage Nicholas Rowe's *Fair Penitent* and Farquhar's *Recruiting Officer* tell us much about latent attitudes towards gender and the social context of a militarized culture, the most startling drama mentioned here in the camp's prospective programme is Isaac Bickerstaff's farce, *The Padlock* of 1768. In one swoop the serious-minded nobility of Addison's *Cato*, with its plurality of appeal towards the creation of a state founded on heroic republican virtue is radically undermined by the proposal to perform *The Padlock* as one of the next plays. *The Padlock* contained the blackface role of Mungo, and its widespread performance in America in both the colonial and post-colonial period must be considered one of the cultural accelerants of the containment and ridicule of the African-American population.

Of course, in May the British did retire from Philadelphia and *The Padlock* was not performed at Valley Forge. However, *Cato*'s performance, just as much as this prospective *Padlock*, illustrates one of the basic structural features connected with all performances of dramatic texts: that is, that the

cultural meaning of drama changes with every change in the location of the performance venue. The appropriation of *Cato* and *The Padlock* to the patriot cause were expressive of the most reductive instincts of that Valley Forge moment as the camp represented to itself, from within itself, the founding ideologies of a new American republic based around ideals of heroic self-sacrifice and the subjection of others.

Nevertheless, the soldiery at Valley Forge at the time of the performance of *Cato* were emerging from a winter of enormous privation. The record of surviving American army orderly books, with their receipts for leather breeches, woollen stockings, and shoes bears out the severity of the winter campaign and provides stark material evidence which needs to be connected to the attenuated but persistent records of both theatrical performances and the more general types of performativity which took place within the highly porous combat zone. When the British reached Philadelphia in late December 1777, they had to more or less fight their way in. The eventually hanged British officer and spy, John Andre, recorded in his regimental orderly book how the arts of theatre were used to immediate military affect: “28th. At about 8 in the morning the Army marched towards Philadelphia. ... A party of Rebels which was approaching, in hopes of firing upon the rear of the Column, was decoyed nearer than they were aware by a Dragoon who personated a Rebel horseman; twenty-nine of them were taken. It snowed and was very cold the whole day.” (Cabot Lodge 132-5)

Safely inside Philadelphia the theatrics continued with the re-opening of the Philadelphia theatre. On the theatre’s first night under military control, army and navy personnel presented Arthur Murphy’s *No One’s Enemy But his Own* along with George Colman, *The Deuce is In Him*. Both plays seem to reference Lord Howe’s disastrous campaign, not least in the title of *No One’s Enemy But his Own*, implicating Lord Howe’s conduct in already having decided to stall or avoid orders from London about engaging with the enemy. Not least, Murphy’s play’s allusion to French wig-makers and very precise references to London coffee houses and taverns, the Long Room spa in Hampstead, Ranelagh gardens, balls and assemblies in the provincial places such as Salisbury provides a high degree of specificity to these dramas, now displaced to an American performance and military audience reception. The final lines of *The Deuce is In Him*, “I wish every brave officer in his majesty’s service had secured to himself such comfortable winter-quarters, as we have, after a glorious campaign,” would have been the last spoken lines performed that night due to *The Deuce*’s role as an afterpiece (Colman the Elder 48). It obviously ironized the current military situation, reminding us that one of the surviving occasional prologues referred to these actors as “Howe’s strolling company”.

Just to pause and take stock for a moment. These British productions represent a type of theatre deterritorialized from their original metropolitan London foundations. The idea of military theatricals occurred spontaneously to

both sides in appropriations adapted to their immediate local circumstances and in new sets of decodings. With the Murphy play or Colman's *The Deuce is In Him*, as much as with *Cato* or *The Padlock*, the British Georgian repertoire was being played reterritorialized and reconfigured so as to perform sharply ideological functions. One surprise perhaps is the expressive ability of these now largely obscure plays. At a moment of mutually chaotic political and military circumstance, perhaps prefaced by new prologues contingent to the situation, these plays were found wholly relevant to their new spatial and temporal locations. Issues about any original intentionality of the author, or even their conventional canonical or repertoire status, have just about disappeared.

Instead, as the season of plays progressed, the few surviving reports of the performances capture personal audience responses to the acting. The British officer Captain John Peebles who was in Philadelphia in March 1778, went to see Farquhar's *The Inconstant or, The Way to Win Him* paired with Garrick's *Lethe*, where he saw his fellow officer, William Schaw Cathcart, later Earl Cathcart, then commander of the 17th Light Dragoons act in both plays: "a Play tonight the Inconstant & L[ethe] pretty well done ...Ld. Cathcart play'd in both, with more propriety in speech than in some of the parts chosen—ridiculous in a man of his rank & fashion to play the part of a Valet & suffer the ceremony of being kick'd—The Play full of bawdy sentiments indelicate to a modest ear." (Gruber 169) Cathcart was already a successful young commanding officer. His role in *The Inconstant* as the Valet, Petit, is a reminder of the general cultural dynamic of private theatricals in Britain which produced this type of urbane elite gentleman who expected others to afford unfailing respect. As such, Peebles's journal comments reveal a perspective probing the faultlines of a British military effort whose energies were already dispersed and dissipated.

If Mrs. Abbott was the carrier of a distant national theatricalised ideology of female valour transposed directly into the American combat zone, then Lord Cathcart on the stage of the Philadelphia playhouse and acting in *The Inconstant* was effeminizing the masculine role required of him in the field. In Peebles's view, these two roles were incompatible yet they speak powerfully of the ingrained cultural tendency towards eighteenth-century amateur theatricals in which highly localized reterritorializations of play texts were commonplace amongst both elite and plebeian societies. At the very least, we can be sure that it was qualities relating to the performers and the performance – rather than the interpretive meaning of the play or its author's intentions – which were the salient features of its reception that night.

The performance context for the Philadelphia British military theatricals clearly moved towards a new set of meanings decoded by the officers and civilians who attended them. Towards the middle of April, for example, they performed William Whitehead's obscure farce, *A Trip to Scotland* (1770). Beginning in a north London coaching inn, the farce includes the magical figure

of Cupid who speeds the scene up the Great North Road (past Stilton) to Yorkshire where sets of courting-couples are en route to take advantage of Scotland's more relaxed marriage laws. *A Trip to Scotland* is a slight piece. It only makes sense in the context of this British group of military – many of whom came from Scottish regiments – sojourning in Philadelphia in the late spring of 1778 and fondly imaging their return. A trip to Scotland is what they hoped for.

Theatre under the wartime conditions of Philadelphia had become something more than a straightforward literary, cultural or artistic form. Its repetition, compounded by the Georgian practice of running a mainpiece with an afterpiece, produced deterritorialized London dramas which were then reterritorialized with new cultural meanings in their Philadelphia and Valley Forge locations. To many Philadelphians holed up for the winter, the British military theatre was not only a manifestation of the colonial presence, but it also served as a site where many unresolved fractures already present within Philadelphian society became materialized. The diary of the Society of Friends member or Quaker, Elizabeth Drinker, – to take an example of someone who lived through the occupation and recorded her experiences – offers a typical complex set of such displacements. Elizabeth Drinker was an elite Philadelphian woman, born in America but whose husband was at that time interned in Virginia for refusing to take the oath of allegiance to the patriot cause yet whose pacifist religion also made it difficult for her to confront a drunken British soldier who broke into her home one night or to wholeheartedly accept a British officer quartered on her. Not least, an officer whom she later recorded as visiting the Philadelphia theatre. We might ask here what was the national ideological allegiance of Drinker? At any rate, the British Major who lived in her house went to the first night of the theatre: “The play-House was open'd last night for the first time, our major attended, he came home a little after 10 o'clock.” (Biddle 82) Drinker's careful recordings of the times of his comings-and-goings, the assemblies he attended, almost certainly signifies her moral disapproval. John Peebles, who – of course – also went to the theatre in the same weeks, comments on how “The performers are gentlen. of [the] army & navy & some kept mistresses.” (Gruber 161) Again, Elizabeth Drinker's response has little to do with the play texts but, rather, much more to do with the cultural role of drama within her immediate society. It clearly exerted a social influence on her even though she never went to the theatre herself.

In Philadelphia under wartime conditions, theatre played an extensive role, not only materializing British rule but also fracturing the allegiances of its colonial subjects, placing someone like Drinker into a hinterland of being neither a patriot or a crown loyalist yet with plenty to lose from both sides. These historical traces are important precisely because they incorporate within them the emerging shape of future change. Emerging from the repertoire of cultural

exchange arose a new social and political order later manifesting itself, not least, in the closure of the American theatres.

Theatre's absolute role as a political, social and cultural mediator – a material zone potentially transformative not only ideologically but also materially – can best be seen in the attempt by American patriots to blow up the Philadelphia playhouse. This is a new discovery. It has long been known that one night's theatricals had been postponed for what were described as "very particular reasons." However, an anonymous Glasgow account of 1781 provides eye-witness evidence of a plot to blow up the theatre: "The play-house, which was duly attended, and always full, was one night, as I happened to be there, within a trifle of being blow up, by a diabolical plot, laid by some unprincipled incendiaries, who had found means to convey a large quantity of gun-powder, into one of the cellars below the theatre; by which they would have had it in their power, to have blown up the commanders in chief, and principal officers of the army and navy." (*A View Of North America* 208-12) The plot had been planned through the use of a female American patriot agent. Even on its own, this is a remarkable feature of the planning. The 1781 narrative describes an unnamed "miss" who was the mistress of a married British officer. By piecing together both Peebles's and Drinker's diary entries, it's now possible to extrapolate that the officer implicated was a certain Captain Alexander Campbell. There was an immediate court martial against Campbell which was aborted through lack of evidence and the whole affair was apparently hushed up. There are no references to it in the Philadelphia or other extant newspapers of the time. The targeting of the theatre, complete with its potential for collateral damage and the loss of civilian life, raises a number of issues about the conduct of the war at this point. Not least, there's also a reminder of lost female agency. One of the orders contained in the Valley Forge orderly book for late January 1778 mentions the "most pernicious Consequence having arisen from Persons (Women in Particular) [being allowed] to pass and repass from Philadelphia to Camp" (*Orderly book*). It looks like the American patriots took advantage of this natural porosity of the lines in order to use it for the furtherance of the war.

From the evidence I have given, it's quite clear that many highly competent and diligent officers would have been present in the theatre, maybe Lord Cathcart, maybe Captain Peebles or Major Cramond. Quite clearly the ground rules of warfare were beginning to break down. The cartel system under which Mrs. Abbott was returned, and an honourable pledge not to re-engage as combatants, sufficed to allow both General Burgoyne and his army to be freed. Elsewhere, in the combat and occupation zones, demarcations were falling apart. The whole legal status of crimes against civilians within the war zone was still being formulated, a process hugely accelerated during the American revolutionary war. The process of revising ancient and unwritten codes of chivalry was largely begun by a Royal Artillery officer, Stephen Payne Adye,

who advised Howe's predecessor, and who published *A Treatise on Courts Martial* of 1769 which helped evolve the modern basics of war's legal framework. These reforms were sorely needed and help explain much of what was happening by the time Howe evacuated Philadelphia.

Another manuscript orderly book, that of General Sir John Campbell, recorded the execution in April 1778 on Staten Island of two British soldiers for rape and murder. They were to be "Hanged & Gibbeted[sic] on the Spot where the murder was Committed." (HM 617 U8 B5) I assume the crime had reached some kind of local notoriety, especially since the original court martial had originally met in January 1778. It goes without saying that the gibbeting of the two murderers on the spot of their crime is extraordinarily theatrical and gives yet another dimension to our understanding of the operation of theatricality within the war zone. Indeed, the British heritage of private theatricals was never absent. General Burgoyne, the general defeated at Saratoga, was already a successful playwright before he came to America. His *Maid of the Oaks* of 1774 had become and remained a repertoire staple originating – before being extended by Garrick – as a private theatrical for an Epsom wedding *fête champêtre*. Even within this apparently unpromising vehicle, Burgoyne introduced a British Druid to revive "Grace and strength of Britain's isle / ... Bear her triumphs o'er the deep." Well, "o'er the deep" might be over to America, but there Burgoyne the playwright found himself in a different situation.

Another of the campaign journals, one kept by an unknown officer of the 47th Regiment of Foot, shows the disposition of Burgoyne's forces in July 1777. As you can see, the forces in the most forward positions are listed as "Savages and other irregular Troops." (HM 66) In the middle of the troops is a playwright: General John Burgoyne. Alongside the deteriorating civilian conditions typified by the rape and murder in Staten Island, the decision to deploy Ottawa Indians resulted in the scalping of Jane MacCrea in July 1777. The most widely used account of the murder was not written up until 1789 and the painting by Vanderlyn was not painted until 1804. However, immediate reportage of her death – with its correct date – is included in the 47th Regiment journal. What I would argue is that misgivings about the conduct of the war were well understood by British combatants and were, in any case, formulated within specifically literary discourses. This journal keeper, a year earlier in 1776, had recorded for himself a well known tombstone epitaph eulogizing scalped American patriots: "Britannia blush,![sic] Burgoyne let fall a tear / ... Death, & Revenge, await you with disgrace." Given the pervasiveness of the figure of Britannia in theatrical culture, its counter-deployment in a negative register must have struck him as worth recording. That this journal keeper knew of such registers is evidenced by his brief eye witness recollection of the firing of Charles Town in 1775: "During the Action Charlestown was set on fire, which considerably heightened the Grandeur of the scene, and exhibited a most striking

view of the terrible sublime.” (HM 66, 15 June 1775, 21 June 1776) The journal keeper’s notable usage of the official language of the picturesque sublime, as much as his misgivings about Britannia’s and Burgoyne’s rule, tells us much about the linguistic cultures of nationhood and sentiment then available to combatants within the war zone.

However, one needs to piece together many more of the various elements of the theatrical in order to explain the giant Mischianza regatta as the culmination of these various usages of public theatricalised space. The Mischianza was a large scale piece of outdoor theatre aimed at inscribing into the inhabitants of Philadelphia a positive view of the departing British. Perhaps one of the most remarkable things about the event is that it was universally condemned by Howe’s colleagues. Even his aide-de-camp wrote that it was “a strange kind of Entertainment, wch[sic] the Projectors styled a Meschianza or Medley, consisting of Tilts & Tournaments, in Honor of the General upon his Departure. It cost a great Sum of money. Our Enemies will dwell upon the Folly & Extravagance of it with Pleasure. Every man of Sense, among ourselves, tho’ not unwilling to pay a due Respect, was ashamed of this mode of doing it.” (Serle 1776 29; 1787 144). Indeed, the Mischianza’s combat by tournament (with both swords and guns) and elaborate chivalry towards women was an attempt to reinstate the codes of chivalry which had been lost in the scalplings. Burgoyne, who had returned to Lodon by then, knew there were scalplings of Europeans going on – and under his direction – as his orderly book reveals: “Four German Recruits in different British Regiments having been absent at two roll callings, yesterday, and it being supposed they are deserted, Parties of Indians and Provincials have been sent in search, and it is not doubted but they will be brought in or scalped.” (O’Callaghan 78) The Mischianza – as much as Lord Cathcart playing the valet in *The Inconstant* – returned to that recurrent problem of eighteenth-century British culture – the nature of masculinity and the challenge to chivalric ideals which the American war imposed.

Richard Hurd’s *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* of 1762 had made quite clear both a longer tradition of ‘women-warriors’ as well as the traditional role of men as protectors of women from “violations of chastity” (12, 17-18). The Staten Island murder and rape, as well as the murder of Jane McCrea, were all testimony not only to this lost role for British martial masculinity but, much more important than that appeared to signal the possible retreat into lawless anarchy threatened by the evacuation of the British. Again, as an elite woman who might be conjectured as part of the hearts-and-minds the British might have looked to win over, entries in Elizabeth Drinker’s journal are significant. In Philadelphia in 1777, while Philadelphia was under patriot occupation, she recorded a firing squad execution for desertion. Yet if the British sought to win over the likes of Elizabeth Drinker, they enormously misjudged it. One of the very few surviving pictures of the Mischianza shows the high headdress

apparently recommended by the organizers – who were an array of army and navy officer-subscribers allegedly led by Major Andre. Even on its own it was enough to affront the likes not only of the Quaker Elizabeth Drinker but also many other Philadelphians. Again, one of Drinker’s diary entries about a type of rough-music incident in Philadelphia on the first Independence day after the liberation is interesting. “A very high Head dress was exhibited thro the Streets, this Afternoon on a very dirty Woman with a mob after her, with Drums &c. by way of ridiculing that very foolish fash[i]on.” (Crane et al. 314) Again, theatricality or enacted representation was basic to the tense cultural economy of early post-colonial Philadelphia.

For the departing army, the Mischianza became an attempt to theatricalise on a gigantic scale the lost standards it had been unable to impose or maintain. It would take too long to elaborate the detail and scale of the Mischianza but it included hundreds of army and naval personnel, transport ships decked out with flags, two naval fighting ships, the Vigilant and the Roebuck, as well as tournaments on horseback with jousting and an elaborate ritual involving the display of ladies ‘favours.’ There was also dancing, feasting, Pharoah tables for gambling and, perhaps most symbolic of all, an extensive use of mirrors and a triumphal arch topped with a statue of Fame. Major Andre had a major role in its organization but engineer in charge of it was Captain John Montessor of the Royal Engineers. Montessor’s own journals provide only the briefest of comments on the Mischianza or his role in it but, unlike the accounts emanating from Andre himself or others, Montessor’s transactional tone actually serves to calmly underemphasise its scale, consisting of “a Regatta, Fete Champetre, Tilts and Tournaments, Caro[u]sal, Procession through Triumphal Arches, Dancing, Exhibition of Fire works, musick and Feast.” (Scull 492) The cadre of soldiers who organized the Mischianza were themselves emblematic of the breakdown of chivalric codes. Major Andre would eventually be hanged by the Americans for spying – being out of uniform – and four years earlier, here in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1774, Montessor had been the victim of a murder attempt by an unknown American patriot.

What I’ve tried to bring out is the centrality of theatre in the American war zone. The American patriots and the British turned naturally towards performance as a method of territorializing for themselves the things they considered important, whether that was the republican virtue of Cato, the habitualization of auto-responses to African Americans signified in *The Padlock* or commentary on the predicament of the British army and navy encapsulated in *The Deuce is in Him* or *A Trip to Scotland*. Play texts and their performance allow such new and localized decodings. Elizabeth Drinker and John Peebles had very different attitudes to the theatre yet theatre impinged directly on their lives, reminding us that theatre was part of a cultural economy of difference where new audience reterritorializations were initiated. Like Elizabeth Drinker,

or the unrecorded Philadelphians who watched the strange antics of the Mischianza from afar, the cultural economy of theatre was a major component of the contemporary social assemblage.

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