

Susan McClary

“Feminine” in music:

Gender and sexual implications in music analysis

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## Introduction

New directions and developments in musicology can be linked to the rise of feminism and gender studies within the discipline. These were first integrated into musicology by Susan McClary, Marcia Citron and Philip Brett<sup>1</sup>. In 1991, in the US., the work of Susan McClary<sup>2</sup> *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*<sup>3</sup> was published, just three months after the meeting of the American Musicological Society in Oakland which featured sessions devoted not only to feminist issues, but even to rap artists and gay/lesbian criticism – topics unthinkable just two years earlier. Her work includes articles on Monteverdi, Bizet and Tchaicovsky, Janika Vandervelde, Laurie Anderson and Madonna. Drawing on works by Foucault, Catherine Clement and film critic Teresa de Laurentis, McClary is striking to connect music and musicology to other discourses, she reads music from a feminist point of view. Most of the essays in her book – six in total with an introduction - seek to identify and analyze the ways in which music is shaped by constructions of gender and sexuality : cultural representations of women and men in opera, constructions of pleasure and desire in music at various historical moments and the gender metaphors prevalent in discourse about music. Music is now read instead for its ideological content (the idea that music could be studied 'in its own terms'), with gender representation being at the head of the field. The new approach was called New Musicology (or the use of Postmodernism methodology in musical scholarship). Susan McClary defined the New Musicology in relationship to traditional musicology, which she stated: "fastidiously declares issues of musical signification off-limits to those engaged in legitimate scholarship."

## McClary's thoughts

In her book, Susan McClary lists five groups of issues that she deems relevant to a feminist-oriented musicological practice : (1) Musical constructions of gender and sexuality (the association of chromaticism and syncopation with feminine sexuality in *Carmen*), (2)

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<sup>1</sup> Musicologist and biographer Maynard Solomon was one of the first to introduce gender and feminist issues into musicology, as indicated by Susan McClary, who admires the "seriousness, grace and courage with which Solomon has introduced questions concerning misogyny in Beethoven, homophobia in Ives, or homoeroticism in Schubert into a discipline that has steadfastly refused to address such issues" see "Constructions of Subjectivity in Franz Schubert's music." In *Queering the Pitch*. Ed. Brett, Wood, and Thomas. New York:Routledge, 1994,208).

<sup>2</sup> Susan McClary, professor of musicology at the University of California, Los Angeles, specializes in the cultural criticism of music, both the European canon and contemporary popular genres. Her most recent book is *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Reprint in 2002 with a new introduction that discusses the critical reception it received and the debates it has inspired.



Gendered aspects of traditional music theory (such as “masculine” and “feminine” cadences or themes), (3) Gender and sexuality in musical narrative, (4) Music as gendered discourse (music as “feminine” or musicians as feminine or effeminate), (5) Discursive strategies of women musicians (what is expected of women composers or performers in a particular era, “women’s music” vs. “MUSIC” that happens to be written by women). With these issues she constructs her own methodology, a “provisional methodology” as she calls it.

In the introduction, “A Material Girl in Bluebird’s Castle”, McClary mentions the problems that have historically afflicted musicology as a discipline. She uses the fairy tale of Bluebird, and through Judith – the protagonist - links herself both with the generally cultural - materialist type of feminism she practices<sup>4</sup> and the equally controversial superstar Madonna (the subject of her last chapter). The seek for truth behind the locked doors symbolizes the hidden “meaning in music” and why musicology as a discipline has been so reluctant to investigation into music’s emotive and psychological power. Feminist criticism, for McClary, has provided the key doors up to now considered off-limits to intellectual inquiry. The hole chapter is an establishment of the bases of her feminist examination of Western music. Feminism came to the disciplines of music – musicology, music theory and music education – later than in almost any other field and McClary is aware that work in other disciplines made it possible for her to proceed nevertheless she is very cautious mentioning that it’s impossible to transfer the key questions of other branches of feminist study directly to music because music has its own constraints and capabilities that have to be identified and queried.

Music theorists have used the metaphors of gender to describe musical practice, such as the designation of a “feminine cadence” as one that falls on a “weak” beat or similarly describing the second theme in sonata principle as “feminine” in opposition to the “masculine” opening theme.

Dramatic music and the binary oppositions between male and female’s roles in music and specifically in opera provides another starting place for McClary. The issue of women’s roles in opera is already raised by Catherine Clément but McClary goes further, beginning with the rise of opera in the seventeenth century by examining of how composers seek to delineate through music the gender natures of their characters. She argues that composers

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<sup>4</sup> McClary’s work is informed by the theoretical writings of Gramsci, Adorno, Benjamin and Althusser, as well as Teresa de Lauritis, a feminist film critic of materialist orientation. Like other with a materialist perspective, her book focuses on the historical construction of categories of gender, analyses the “importance of culture in the representation and transformation of those categories” and “offers an alternative both to the homogenizing author-centered readings of the Anglo-American critics and to the often ahistorical an idealistic categories of the French feminist theorists” (Moi, *Sexual/Tectual Politics*, p. 94-95).

delineated these same semiotic codes on to instrumental (absolute) music in consequence of that allowing for a gender reading even without the presence of a “narrative impulse”.

McClary’s most incendiary issue about music concerns its impact on the human body. She connects music with the arousal and channeling of desire that creates unmediated and powerfully intimate feelings and “participates actively in the social organization of sexuality” (1991:9) and she bases her feminist music criticism on these understanding of the semiotics of the process of desire, arousal, and sexual pleasure. The idea that music is a metaphorical re-creation of the physical sex act is dominant throughout all the essays of this book. McClary hears “erotic friction” in the two voices of trio sonatas from Monteverdi to Corelli that “rub up against each other, pressing into dissonances that achingly resolve only into yet other knots, reaching satiety only at conclusion” (1991:37). The narrative structure of instrumental music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century becomes for McClary a “prolonged sexual encounter of intense foreplay that results inevitably in a cataclysmic metaphorical ejaculation” (1991:125). Beethoven becomes the supreme perpetrator of sexual violence in music, whose recapitulation of the first movement of the Ninth Symphony “unleashes one of the most horrifyingly violent episodes in the history of music” (1991:128).

## **Over the Past**

Over the last two-hundred years, analysts of Western music have concentrated increasingly on structural issues, appealing to the concept of “autonomy”, and a formalist account of music, to secure music’s exemption from cultural criticism. The writings of Eduard Hanslick and, later, Stravinsky cemented the notion that music has no other content than music itself, and this attitude continues to prevail in studies of Western music.

Before the early 1980s, musicology was mainly a positivist discipline. The concept of gender did not exist in the study of music. The object of study was male and usually undifferentiated as to class, race, sexuality and other social factors. Because these variables were unstated, such studies tended to lay claims to universality. Therefore, important differences were concealed and other groups marginalized, especially women.

In 1985, Joseph Kerman’s *Contemplating Music* seemed to reflect a change of attitude in the field. We see the appearance of critical studies providing an environment in which the study of music and gender was capable of flourishing. Musicologists started looking to the fields of history, literature and anthropology for methodology and content, and feminism and gay and lesbian studies became some of the most important beneficiaries of this interdisciplinary theory. The American Musicological Society have sponsored a gradually

increasing number of sessions on topics like aesthetic and critical issues, music and politics, fact and value, literature and literary theory, deconstruction, narrative studies, ideology, affect and meaning, composers and sexuality, feminist studies, gender studies and gay studies. New journals have been founded, and an increasing number of books that have been published can be considered “criticism”.

### **Analyzing McClary**

More thoroughly, Musical constructions of gender and sexuality has to do with the “fabrication of sexuality” in music. The “meaning” of femininity was not the same in the 18<sup>th</sup> as in the nineteenth century. With the rise of opera in the seventeenth century, composers tried to develop a set of conventions for constructing “masculinity” or “femininity” in music – a musical semiotics of gender. Composers developed these codes based on their every day attitudes of their time. McClary claims that some codes are recognizable up to the present not because of the “universal language” of music but rather “because certain social attitudes concerning gender have remained relatively constant throughout the stretch of history” (1991:8), i.e. Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après midi d’un faune*, Madonna and Prince’s “This Is Not a Love Song”, they seem erotic pieces but they are just constructions. The “erotic” is familiar to us because it managed to prevent its code through cultural transformations. Furthermore, Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* points that the West altered radically its attitudes toward the treatment of human erotic behavior in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The new public arts develop techniques for arousing and manipulating desire, which is witnessed through the emergence of tonality at that time, against the prevalent modality.

Gendered aspects of traditional music theory concerns the construction of the cadences or themes in musical pieces as rhetorically generated and the metaphors of gender and sexuality that music theorists and analysts have used (“masculinity” vs. “femininity”). According to the *Harvard Dictionary of music* (1970) the designations “masculine” and “feminine” are based on the strength which means masculine/feminine mapped on to strong/weak. The beliefs of West concerning sexual difference influenced the musical structure. The “feminine” is weak, abnormal and subjective. The “masculine” strong, normal and objective. “And this whole metaphysical apparatus is brought to bear and reinscribed in the conventional terminology used to distinguish mere cadence-type” (1991:10). The examples discussed include A.B. Marx’s description of “masculine” and “feminine” themes in the sonata-allegro form, Georg Andreas Sorge’s account of the minor and major triad chords as representing male and female, Arnold Schoenberg’s concerns of male/female as

representing sexual urges of attraction/repulsion and his expressed desire for an “asexual” music, and last H. Schenker’s graph systems of musical analysis with the gender and sexual metaphors.

Gender and sexuality in musical narrative. McClary argues that in Western common practice tonal music relies on transmitting semiotic codes of gender, sexuality, and sexual activity itself to produce its effects on the audience. Since music influences and “even constitutes the ways listeners experience and define some of their own most intimate feelings, participates actively in the social organization of sexuality”<sup>5</sup> and because the social construction of sexuality, gender, and desire are crucial to the maintenance of patriarchal, hegemonic structures, music is political. This sets the questions: How is gender being constructed? What is the listener being invited to desire, and why?<sup>6</sup> McClary, through the use of narrative will answer these questions, using the example of sonata-allegro form. McClary relies on Teresa de Lauretis’ application to film of one of the feminist revisions of traditional structural narrative. “regardless of the manifest content of particular stories,...two functions [male-hero/female-obstacle] interact in accordance with a schema already established in advance – the masculine protagonist makes contact with but must eventually subjugate (domesticate or purge) the designated (feminine) Other in order for identity to be consolidated, for the sake of satisfactory narrative closure”<sup>7</sup> According to McClary, this narrative is essential to the conventions of absolute music because “the sonata procedure that comes to characterize instrumental music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries carries out the scheme with the first theme/key area in the position of the protagonist, and the “less dynamic” second theme/key area in the position of the feminine Other”. Although McClary claims that she always focuses “on the music itself”, she describes a nineteenth century conception of sonata form. Furthermore, in the nineteenth century A.B. Marx formulated the theoretical description of masculine/feminine themes, but although McClary knows it she argues that “the fact that themes were not referred to in this fashion until the mid-nineteenth century does not mean that earlier pieces are free of gendered marking: the themes of many an eighteenth-century sonata movement draw upon the semiotics of “masculinity” and “femininity” as they were constructed on the operatic stage, and thus are readily recognizable in their respective positions within the musical narratives”.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in early sonatas feminine moments were not used as structural elements but more as a contrast in the same key. These feminine

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<sup>5</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, p.13.

<sup>7</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, p.14.

<sup>8</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, p.14.

moments cannot serve as the "feminine Other," because it is never brought back to the original key, it has the same function "masculine" theme.

Music as gendered discourse focuses on music as "feminine" or on musicians as feminine or effeminate. McClary claims that male musicians retaliated because of the charge that musicians are "effeminate" in many historical periods and their body and subjectivity has been relegated to the "feminine" realm. So they defined music as the most ideal of the arts, they insistingly supported its "rational" dimension, and virtues of objectivity, universality and transcendence and prohibited the female participation. Since the whole enterprise is monolithic claims that a feminist critique can provide a "fruitful way of approaching some of the anomalies that characterize musical institutions".<sup>9</sup> Linda Austern and Richard Leppert have shown that the English have produced so little music because they have associated music with effeminacy.

Discursive strategies of women musicians is about that, if women composers want to be taken seriously then they have had to learn how to write like men so to obliterate any feminine sign in their work. McClary sets her criteria that should women use to write their MUSIC. Women artists should be "involved with examining the premises of inherited conventions, with calling them into question", "with attempting to reassemble them in ways that make a difference inside the discourse itself", and "with envisioning narrative structures with feminine endings".

### **Reception - Reactions to McClary's theory**

McClary with *Feminine Endings*'s proved influential at the conference on "Feminist Theory and Music" held in Minneapolis in 1991. She proved highly influential in many culturally diverse outlets<sup>10</sup>. Her work was an inspiration for other works to follow: Ruth Solie with a collection of essays of other scholars in the *Musicology and Difference*, and Susan C. Cook and Judy S, Tsou began planning *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives in Gender*

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<sup>9</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, p.17.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Ambrose, *Belles Lettres* 6 (1991), 40; Elaine Barkin, "either/other," *Perspectives of New Music* 30 (1992), 206-33; Robert Carl, *Music Library Association Notes* 48 (1992), 1288-91; Robert Christgau, "Theory of the Rhythmic Class," *Village Voice*, 4 June 1991, p. 66; Susan C. Cook, "Musicology and the Undoing of Women," *American Quarterly* 44 (1992), 155-62; Tia DeNora, *Contemporary Sociology* 22 (1993), 116-17; Claire Detels, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50 (1992), 338-40; Lesley Ferris, "Absent Bodies, Dancing Bodies, Broken Dishes: Feminist Theory, Postmodernism, and the Performing Arts," *Signs* 18 (1992), 162-72; McClary, "A Response to Elaine Barkin," *Perspectives of New Music* 30 (1992), 234-38; Jann Pasler, "Some Thoughts on Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings*," *Perspectives of New Music* 30 (1992), 202-05; Edward W. Said, *The Nation*, 30 December 1991, p. 860; David Schiff, "The Bounds of Music: The Strange New Direction of Musical Criticism," *The New Republic*, 3 February 1992, p. 32; Ruth A. Solie, "What Do Feminists Want? A Reply to Pieter C. van den Toorn," *Journal of Musicology* 9 (1991), 399-410; van den Toorn,



and Music. Later Leslie Dunn and Nancy A. Jones with *Embodied Voices: Female Vocality in Western Culture* concerning the uses of "music" in English Renaissance texts. Nevertheless, McClary's work drew negative responses from van der Toorn, Barkin and Schiff.<sup>11</sup>

George Biddlecombe, who specializes in popular music, criticized McClary saying that her semiotic theory is incomplete. Although McClary recognizes that a theory of musical signification is essential her efforts are not adequate. She writes that the soundtrack music of the classic cartoon movies foregrounds music as a code while classical music attempts to efface it, both rely on the same code. Furthermore, she doesn't explain how these codes operate and fails, according to Biddlecombe, to recognize that the same signs can represent in a different way in different idioms, i.e. the way she read the structure of harmony in Madonna's "Like a Prayer." Madonna's music and Tchaikovsky's music cannot work within the same musical encoding system.

McClary's semiotic theory is annotated by Tia DeNora in *Contemporary Sociology*. DeNora's sociological approach focuses on the signifying character of music rather than its feminist direction. She finds that McClary's theory of signification is incomplete since it fails to give an explanation for differences amongst listeners assuming the universality and singularity of the system of musical codes. Furthermore, she argues that coding and decoding systems can also overlap and a single musical sign can have several meanings, even contradictory ones. However, DeNora suggests that the improvement of McClary's work in the future should engage with interactionist approaches: to be more like sociology. (1993:117).

From the point of Women's Studies, Lesley Ferris in "Absent Bodies, Dancing Bodies, Broken Dishes: Feminist Theory, Postmodernism, and the Visual Arts" in *Signs* simply identifies that musicology is still dominated by the idea of Master Narrative of "Absolute Music" and that McClary will succeed with her work to make a new shift. (1992:171-172).

From the point of Feminist theory, Pieter van der Toorn published the first review of *Feminine Endings* in the *Journal of Musicology* entitled "Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory".

Van der Toorn approaches McClary's writing by showing that she is misguided. Van der Toorn uses every argument of traditional musicology, from Hanslick and Dalhaus to the

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"Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory," *Journal of Musicology* 9 (1991), 275-99; Elizabeth Wood, "Settling Old Scores," *Women's Review of Books* 8 (1991), 11.

<sup>11</sup> See, in particular, the exchange between van der Toorn, "Politics, Feminism," and Solie, "What Do Feminists Want?" and between Barkin, "either/other," and McClary, "A Response to Elaine Barkin."



graphs of Schenkerian analysis, concluding that the experience of art is everything except social/cultural. In the middle of his article loses his focus arguing about "today's...ideologies of inter-, cross-, and multi-everything" and blaming McClary for being a "severely separatist" because of her suggestion that female sexuality may be less concerned with closure than that of men (1991:283-284). In his concluding section he fills in the definitive definition of feminism: "Feminism is the desire of women to receive special treatment in legal and employment situations and to avoid childbearing in order to pursue their selfish ambitions. Women aim to secure this advantage by claiming to be constantly threatened by the MSD (his abbreviation for male sex drive) which is hopelessly predatory and objectifying. What feminism wants is not substantially different from the history of Christian moralism: to contain the MSD" (1991:295).

Ruth Solie in her response to van der Toorn in the *Journal of Musicology*, in the next issue posed her objections to his work. More important is that she thinks that the reviewers should be looking at in McClary's book: the "relationship between male and female as they are present in the music system and as they are present in other representational systems", the "degree to which McClary successfully avoids essentialism", and the "necessity and utility of her connections between representation and sexuality" (1991:407, 410).

Solie goes further in her own review of McClary's book, in the *Journal of Modern History*, noticing that although McClary says about the constructions of the codes, it is never shown how codes are learned so, Solie doesn't see any theory at all. Additionally there are no examples. Furthermore, Solie is not convinced by McClary's denial of essentialism since in her reading of the feminist composer Janika Vandervelde is totally representationally celebrated. But it is not the only thing that it is essentialized in her work, it's the sexual intercourse too. Solie also claims that 'sexuality' is over-used as the ultimate ground of every human expression. She writes: "pace Sigmund Freud, life is not all about sex" (576-577). According to Jeff Schwartz, judging from the response of Solie to van der Toorn, Solie is more grounded in recent feminist literary and cultural theory than McClary, who takes only what she needs for any theorist and she doesn't worry at all for any incoherence of her position.

Paula Higgins appears much harsher than it is. She is a feminist musicologist with a solid literary theory background. She has some important reservations about McClary's reduction of all bodily experience to sex. "It seems needlessly arbitrary to reduce music to only one of the multivalent sensory pathways by which it can act on our physical bodies..." and "...by seeming to advocate the reduction of the musical narrative strategies of 300 years to

uniform reenactments of the sex act, McClary invites accusations of fetishism." (1993:184). According to Higgins, the analysis of music is for McClary the highest and probably the only true purpose of the discipline of musicology. She also claims that the research of the lives and works of performers and composers, editions etc., is not at all part of the musicological concern but more a concern of the discipline of history. This derives from the traditional musicology focusing on formal analysis and deliberately avoiding the social and the historical. Probably this is the reason that McClary ignores the work of the other feminists before her since their work focuses on the recovery of past women composers. Higgins is aware of that McClary acknowledges her predecessors and that she act in a framework outlined of feminist literary criticism used by Annette Kolodny and Elaine Showalter. This model this model consists of three phases: the critique of representations of women in canonical works, the recovery and promotion of works by women along with the literary theories that can be drawn from these works, and the analysis of relations between gender and representation and their construction in works by women and men. Higgins claims that McClary devalues the second, and she writes: "Where are the women in this "feminist" criticism of music?" (1993:187).

According to Jeff Schwartz Elaine Barkin's in "either/other" in *Perspectives in New Music* "Barkin's essay is more of a rant than a formal argument. Basically, she considers the implications of McClary's work fascist. She sees her limiting the ways in which she is allowed to listen to and compose music and disrespecting the experimental tradition she comes from. McClary sees the world only in terms of gender, and Barkin claims that there are other vectors of oppression. This is not entirely fair to McClary, since she is highly conscious of issues of race and colonialism, especially in her readings of Carmen, but Barkin is after something broader".

### **Connections with other disciplines (interdisciplinarity;)**

The feminism criticism in literal studies began in 1960s and early 1970s with what is know known as "image of women" criticism, focusing on the work of male writers and the negative stereotypes and misogyny of their texts. A second phase, dubbed "gynocriticism" by Showalter, expanded throughout the 1970s in a variety of new directions that focused on women writers and their literary production, rather than what men have thought and said about them in the past. A third phase, in the 1980s and called "gender" studies, rather than "women's" studies, marked a departure from criticism centered on women's writing to

renewed interest in the male cannot be beyond the earlier “images of women” criticism phase. This criticism concentrated on “construction of gender” by both of male and female writers and introduced the category of sexuality as an important gendered difference in the writing of both sexes.<sup>12</sup> The path to feminist criticism in music seems to have worked differently, beginning with historical reconstructions of the lives and ignored women composers and musicians, but often without the feminist theoretical apparatus typical of gynocriticism.<sup>13</sup> McClary’s work seems grounded in all three phases of feminism criticism as outlined for literature: (1) “images of women” criticism (the discussion of *Carmen* and of “Madwomen”), (2) “gynocriticism” (the discussion of Vandervelde, Laurie Anderson and Madonna) and (3) “gender” criticism (the discussions of Monteverdi and Beethoven). Her discussion of Tchaikovsky represents one of the first musical attempts at gay criticism.

McClary’s background is very important here. Without the study of Adorno – the major cultural theorist of the century whose medium was music, as opposed to literature, film or painting – wouldn’t have had way of getting beyond formalism. She goes further to the areas of human experience that Adorno overlooks, such as pleasure and the body where music very often has to do, itself, with the arousal and channeling of desire, creating powerfully intimate feelings and “participates actively in the social organization of sexuality” (1991:9). This power of sexuality in the social formation and its functioning as an analytics of power has a strong connection with Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. Moreover, such apparent universals as sexuality, the body, the self, madness and knowledge all are strongly connected with institutional power.

*Feminine Endings* involves not so much the particular arguments it advances, but rather the fact that it granted North American scholars license to discuss meaning and to exchange interpretations. It has encouraged the development of cultural studies in

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<sup>12</sup> For concise summaries of the history of feminism criticism in literature, see Showalter, “The Feminist Critical Revolution”, and “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, in *The New Feminist Criticism*, p.3-17 and 243-71, Kolodny, “Dancing Through the Minefield”, p.144-67 and Showalter “Introduction: The rise of Gender”, in *Speaking of Gender* (New York, 1989), p. 1-13.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion and extensive bibliography of feminist scholarship in musicology prior to 1989, see M. Bowers, “Feminist Scholarship and the Field of Musicology: I”, *College Music Symposium* 29 (1989), 81-92; “Feminist Scholarship and the Field of Musicology: II”, *College Music Symposium* 30 (1990), 1-13; and Susan C. Cook, “Women, Women’s Studies, Music and Musicology: Issues of Pedagogy and Scholarship”, *College Music Symposium* 29 (1989), 93-100.

musicology, and it has made music accessible to the research of people working in disciplines far outside of music.



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