

**EXPLORING GENDER ROLES IN THE 60s:
ANN JELlicOE'S *THE KNACK* AND HAROLD PINTER'S
*THE HOMECOMING***

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Postwar Britain was marked by the family, sexuality and gender roles increasingly becoming topics for public debate. This paper discusses Ann Jellicoe's *The Knack* (1961) and Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965) as interventions in this ongoing controversy. It highlights the centrality of male homosocial desire in both plays, and discusses the limits within which the single onstage female character in each may be considered to move from being reified by the male characters, from being an object in their traffic, to exploiting her "otherness" in order to take on an active subject role. The paper shows that while neither play provides alternative forms of subjectivity outside the parameters defined by the male homosocial circuit, yet by dramatizing the power relations that structure the family, sexuality and gender roles they do contribute to some extent to subvert contemporary assumptions about their "naturalness".

1. Family, Sexuality and Gender Roles in Postwar Britain

"The family", said one of a recent series of newspaper articles devoted to revisiting coronation year, 1953, "was the talisman of the Fifties". "The happy housewife", the article added, "beamed down from every billboard, exulting in her re-instated domesticity" (Glover 1993, 18). Such journalistic asseverations capture what analysts see as a crucial part of the cultural climate of postwar Britain: the propagation of an "ideology of domesticity" (Sinfield 1989, 205) and a "culture of femininity" (Lewis 1992, 99), presented as the cornerstones of social reconstruction in a wide variety of cultural products, from women's magazines and

the popular press, to the Freudian psychology of the time and the arguments of functionalist sociologists, according to which each part of the social organism is supposed to make a specialized contribution to the whole, a view which was used to legitimize the status quo by commending the male breadwinner family model. At the same time, sexually, the images of the potent, virile male and the responsive, passive female were increasingly promoted (Wandor 1987, 4).

According to Sinfield, such persistent ideological work sought to conceal uncertainty and contradiction (1989, 204-205). Indeed, his and other analyses point to forces that witness to the unstable state of the family and sexual and gender roles in the postwar period. Thus, the war had legitimized the idea of the “working mother” (Lewis 1992, 98), and the postwar boom continued to encourage women to take employment outside the home, so that the percentage of those who did so rose steadily through the 1950s and 60s (Wandor 1987, 3; Sinfield 1989, 206). The war had also disrupted marriages and conventional family life in other ways: the divorce rate rose dramatically following the war (Marwick 1990, 60), while the increasing limitation of family size, together with the postwar Welfare State legislation (*ibid.*, 45-60), also contributed to disturb the ideology of domesticity and the culture of femininity. Confusion and anxiety about sexual and gender roles reached men, too. The reinforcement of virile masculinity and of the male breadwinner function was accompanied by rumours of homosexuality, which was linked with communism and treachery against the West and remained a submerged but nagging presence throughout the period (Dollimore 1983, 61-62; Sinfield 1989, 76-79). Sinfield aptly sums up this whole panorama:

The boundaries of male and female roles became uncertain and disputable, problematizing marriage and the heterosexual relation in all aspects . . . The 1950s produced few feminists . . . but gender relations were by no means untroubled . . . (1989, 207-208)

As such anxiety and uncertainty gradually became publicly articulated,¹ the ground was laid for the new “permissive” legislation of the late

¹ The Kinsey Reports (1948; 1953), the Chatterley trial (1969) and the new possibilities for sexual activity derived from the use of the pill, among other factors, variously helped to open up a public debate on sexual practices and sexual morality. The

1960s (e.g., 1967 Abortion Act, 1967 Act partly decriminalizing homosexual practices, 1969 Divorce Reform Act, 1970 Equal Pay Act), as well as for sexual politics of the 1970s. In the meantime, playwrights in the 1960s, Jellicoe and Pinter among others, could hardly help being interpellated by the growing controversy on the family, sexuality and gender roles.

2. Conceptual Framework

The main conceptual framework that will be used in the following discussion of *The Knack* and *The Homecoming* is Sedgwick's notion of "male homosocial desire", defined as:

the whole spectrum of bonds between men, including friendship, mentorship, rivalry, institutional subordination, homosexual genitality, and economic exchange —within which the various forms of the traffic in women take place. (Sedgwick 1984, 227; see also Sedgwick 1985, 1-20)

Sedgwick's concept depends on the "exchange of women" anthropological paradigm put forward by Lévi-Strauss in his analysis of kinship systems, reinterpreted by Rubin as:

a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin. In this sense, the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves. (1975, 177)

In such a system, the traffic in women operates even in hostile relations between men, and since it is the women that are transacted, it is

controversy on women's work was fuelled by Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein (1956), who cautiously questioned the ideology of domesticity and the cult of motherhood (Lewis 1992, 98-105), while the frustrations of women in the home gained public attention in Betty Friedman (1963) and Hannah Gavron's sociological research of 1960-61 (Gavron 1966). The family itself came under fire in Ronald D. Laing's work (1965), who presented it as the source of mental illness.

the men that give and take them who are linked, with the woman being the passive conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it (Rubin 1975, 174). It is upon the partners that the exchange confers power of social linkage: women are unable to reap the benefits of their own circulation (loc. cit.).

In putting forward the concept of “male homosocial desire” with a view to the discussion of literary texts, Sedgwick enlarges the scope of Rubin’s model beyond kinship systems to encompass the whole range of social relations between men. This means that her model is applicable to both *The Homecoming*, which centres on family links, and *The Knack*, in which no formal kinship system is present. In addition, Sedgwick lessens the materiality of Rubin’s paradigm, in which women are literally transacted, albeit for symbolic purposes of social linkage and power, and emphasizes both their status as objects of symbolic exchange and also, potentially, as users of symbols and subjects in themselves (1984, 229).

In the discussion that follows, *The Knack* and *The Homecoming* are viewed as being centrally concerned with male homosocial links, that is, with the paths by which male characters attempt to reach satisfying relationships with one another via the (onstage and offstage) female characters in each play. The question will also be raised as to whether the onstage female characters may be considered to move from being reified by the male characters, from being objects in their traffic, to taking on active subject roles potentially disruptive of the male homosocial circuit. In attempting to answer this question, the concept of the “other” will also be used. Adapting Greenblatt’s definition (1980, 9, 177), the “other” will be understood as the alien, strange or hostile presence that must be neutralized, rather than destroyed, in order to secure the principle of difference necessary to fashion the male self.

3. Ann Jellicoe’s *The Knack*

The *Knack* is recognizably structured on the themes of the traffic in women and male homosocial desire. Thus, it begins by devoting considerable attention —most of Act I— to presenting the interests, anxieties and rivalries of the three male characters, Tolen, Colin and Tom. In contrast, the single female character, Nancy, is first seen in the background, as she walks past the window upstage while the men discuss how

to “make” women (45, 47).² Nancy, then, is (literally) the female outsider who eventually enters male territory, the house inhabited by the three men. The extent to which she may also be described as the “other”, a threatening presence to be neutralized by the male characters, depends, in the first place, on whether the latter may be said to form a unit held together by the bonds of their homosocial desire.

That such bonds exist is most obvious in the case of Tolen and Colin. It is precisely the “knack”, the male ability to seduce and master women, which binds them together: Tolen, the embodiment of the masterful, virile male, has the “knack” and flaunts it, while Colin wants to be taught by Tolen so as to be able to emulate him. Tolen, then, is the yardstick of male achievement against which Colin measures his own performance.

Tom’s role has been the least deeply dealt with in discussions of *The Knack* (Keyssar 1984, 47-49; Wandor 1987, 47-49), possibly because it is the most problematic and ambiguous one: to a large extent, the question as to how the audience is supposed to view the male aggressiveness and self-assertiveness embodied by Tolen, and therefore much of the play’s action, including Nancy’s later accusation of rape, depends on the way Tom is understood. Tom is ironic, imaginative and experimental rather than aggressive, self-assertive or anxious about his sexual performance. Rather than sharing Colin’s idolization of Tolen, his entire purpose seems to lie in seeking to undermine his macho discourse and behaviour. However, to leave it there is partly an evasion. Tom’s role is not as subversive as it may seem, since even he forms part of what may be described as the triangular male homosocial circuit in the play. In other words, even if negatively, Tom is still dependent on Tolen: most of his actions are triggered by the powerful bond of rivalry that links him to Tolen. In short, Tolen, the normative virile male, functions as the focal angle in the male homosocial triangle, with the other two looking to him in admiration or hostility.

The image of the triangle also captures another pattern in the action: Tolen and Tom struggle to win Colin over to their side, just as they compete for control over the house that he rents and the three share. They are bound together by this very struggle, with Colin, alternately drawn to

² References to *The Knack* are to the page of the edition listed at the end of the paper.

one or the other, closing the male homosocial circuit. In this respect, "otherness" is conferred on Nancy by virtue of her marginal existence in relation to the central male homosocial unit formed by Tolen, Tom and Colin.

As soon as Nancy comes into the men's territory, the traffic-in-women pattern is made even more obvious as Tom and Tolen, and eventually Colin too, use her in their male homosocial tug-of-war. The female character is defined only in relation to the men as she, unwittingly at first, catalyzes the tensions between them. It is probably the events of Act III which most graphically illustrate the point. The act starts with Tolen putting his proposal to Colin, one that makes the traffic-in-women motif more explicit than anywhere else in the play: in exchange for ousting Tom and renting his room to one of Tolen's womanizing friends, Rory McBride, Tolen offers Colin participation in a literal male circuit of traffic in women. Women, then, undoubtedly become mere conduits of male relationships, be they based on friendship (Tolen, Rory and possibly Colin) or rivalry (Tom vs. Tolen and possibly Colin). This is confirmed onstage when Nancy and Tom come back. While Colin's energies are bent on practising the macho strut Tolen has taught him, Tom's turn immediately to challenging such practices so as to disrupt the emerging alliance between Colin and Tolen (80-81). The point to be grasped here is that the three men clearly ignore Nancy, immersed as they are in testing their male selves within the homosocial circuit.

It is in this context that Nancy makes her (unfounded) accusation of rape, which has been interpreted positively as indicating that she has grasped a source of power over the men and that, at this point, the play moves from male domination to female control (Keyssar 1984, 48). In my view, however, Nancy's behaviour is fraught with ambiguities and contradictions that limit the degree to which she may be considered to change from a passive object in the men's traffic into an active subject able to reap the benefits of her own circulation.

Thus, on the one hand, in so far as it may be interpreted as Nancy's taking the (sexual) initiative, her accusation seems to turn her "otherness" from a mostly inarticulate marginality to a loudly articulate presence that begins to be perceived by the three men as a potential threat to their homosocial circuit. In particular, she disrupts Tolen's, the

normative male's, sense of self by putting him in a position where he has to choose between allowing Nancy to tell everyone he raped her, or being forced to rape her in order to satisfy what he himself describes as her fantasy (84-85). Either way, power lies with Nancy; impotence with Tolen. In threatening Tolen in that way, it may be claimed, Nancy's accusation momentarily obtrudes into the male homosocial triangle which centres on him.

However, the effect is an illusion. In attempting to provide herself with a subject position through rape, Nancy is defining herself in relation to the aggressive, violent concept of male sexuality that lies at the core of the homosocial circuit formed by Tolen, Colin and Tom rather than suggesting alternative forms of sexual and gender identity. As she vacillates in her identification of the rapist between Tolen (85) and the "new", forceful Colin (93), it becomes clear that she perceives her status as subject to depend on the "virility" of her attacker. It also becomes obvious that Nancy's stratagem does not actually disrupt the male homosocial circuit. On the contrary, as soon as she emerges as the potentially threatening "other", the strength of the bonds between Tolen, Colin and Tom only grows: the three men confer with each other on how to deal with the situation (86, 89-90), with the stage direction indicating that they have forgotten Nancy (86).

It may be worth considering Tom's attitude in more detail. On the one hand, he suggests negotiation, as opposed to Tolen's force, in order to "deal" with Nancy (90). Similarly, the stage direction indicates that he is enjoying "the humour of the situation" (90). Arguably, however, this does not make him less of a fully-fledged participant in the male homosocial circuit, since it may be claimed that he exploits the whole incident so as to further his homosocial confrontation with Tolen. Perhaps most significantly, it is Tom who suggests that Tolen should really rape Nancy (86). Besides putting Tolen on the spot, which in itself witnesses to its homosocial motivation, Tom's suggestion reinforces male bonding in an even more obvious way, since it comes hand in hand with his agreement with Tolen's view that Nancy's insistence that she has been raped means that she would really like to be raped (86). Finally, Tom's proposal, if carried out, would effectively neutralize the female "other": she would still be there, but rather than threaten, would confirm in her physical submission the centrality of the virile male self.

In the event, the “other” is neutralized in an equally efficient, if less sexually explicit, way.³ By acting the normatively forceful male role, Colin shifts Nancy’s accusation onto himself and soon discovers the “benefits” of fully embracing his newly-found “manly” self. Such “benefits” include female submission—in the shape of Nancy’s flattery—and, most importantly, a new ascendancy within the male homosocial circuit. It is significant, in this respect, that the play should close on a male homosocial set piece. As Tolen and Colin argue over their respective virility—that is, their capacity to rape a woman—Nancy is (literally and symbolically) exchanged between them until Colin threatens to kill Tolen, who releases Nancy and exits through the window after another woman. Nancy’s circulation stops here, but not before the three men have used her variously to define and redefine their positions within the male homosocial triangle.

4. Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*

Like *The Knack*, *The Homecoming* concentrates on gender roles and is built around the themes of the exchange of women and male homosocial desire. However, Pinter’s play complicates issues in at least three ways. Firstly, it extends its focus in order to encompass the complex interaction between gender and class. Secondly, it does so in the context of a family structure. And finally, it centrally relies on a non-referential understanding of language. This means that what matters is not the truth value of the characters’ statements—as in other Pinter plays, there are no unquestionable facts against which it may be tested—but the way in which those statements construct their referents depending on the requirements of the power struggle between the characters.⁴

According to Sinfield, the recurrent presence of what he calls the “revisiting fable” in postwar literature witnesses to a contemporary cultural conflict:

³ *The Knack*, like *The Homecoming*, came out before the abolition of stage censorship in 1968.

⁴ As Elam points out, “The dialogic exchange . . . directly constitutes [the dramatic action]” (1980, 157), a property of dramatic dialogue that is foregrounded in much of Pinter’s drama.

The impetus to “better” yourself by moving away was a major component in working-class culture, but it existed in uncertain juxtaposition with a suspicion that the aspirant might be “getting above” himself (it was usually himself). The most sensitive moment was his return, and it figures repeatedly in representations. . . . The revisitor often seeks personal ratification. . . . But usually the occasion is laden with class anxiety. (1989, 266-67)

Although *The Homecoming* is not among Sinfield’s examples, it fits the pattern in an almost emblematic manner. Additionally, however, the play maps class anxiety onto the themes of the traffic in women and male homosocial desire, so that class “betterment” is paid for by the upwardly mobile male, Teddy, now a university professor of philosophy in the States, with the transfer of his wife, Ruth, to his all-male working-class London family. The female character, then, becomes the conduit through which class resentment between the male characters is mitigated; once more, she is exchanged for the sake of the preservation of the male homosocial circuit.

Yet, obviously, all is not entirely well with the above account of the action of *The Homecoming*. Its neatness is disturbed, above all, by Ruth, whose role is not simply that of passive conduit. The question needs to be asked, therefore, as to the extent to which she may be said to challenge, or even subvert, the traffic-in-women pattern that the male homosocial circle seeks to impose on her. The picture is further complicated because of the three potential sources of “otherness” in the play: family, class and gender. Both Teddy and Ruth are first introduced as outsiders: upon arrival in Teddy’s old home, they stand at the threshold, their elegant summer clothes functioning as eloquent class indices (35).⁵ Yet “otherness”, the capacity to disrupt the status quo of the London family, is variously attributed to and/or exploited by husband and wife in relation to the family, class and gender axes.

As was the case in *The Knack*, *The Homecoming* privileges male homosocial bonds by beginning with the presentation of the London family circle. Admittedly, as was also the case in *The Knack*, it is not an untroubled male homosocial circuit that is being depicted, but one held together by powerful bonds of rivalry. Arguably, this results in a

⁵ References to *The Homecoming* are to the page of the edition mentioned in the list of works cited.

problematization of family bonds, lending support to the claim that *The Homecoming* is a play where “family” is a contested, variable term (Quigley 1975, 175-76). But perhaps it is worth specifying further, since it is clearly the patriarchal family model that is being problematized. Thus Max, the patriarchal father figure, finds his gender role reversed in being confined to purely domestic functions. Such reversal endangers his position within the male homosocial circle, since it is perceived to lie at the root of his impotence both by himself and by the other three members of the household, Lenny, Sam and Joey, who, in contrast to Max, wear street clothes, have jobs and walk in and out of the house freely, thus conforming to the male breadwinner role. Max’s attempts to reassert his patriarchal authority take various shapes, including his nostalgic evocation of his father (35) and his appropriating the power to give birth (“I gave birth to three grown men!” (56); “... don’t talk to me about the pain of childbirth—I suffered the pain, I’ve still got the pangs” (63)), thus banishing the mother figure from the scene in the ultimate male homosocial fantasy in which males beget males.⁶

Interestingly enough, it soon becomes clear that the kind of personal ratification Teddy seeks is in his role as the younger patriarch, which only an older patriarch may provide. Thus, he first comes onstage immediately after the blackout that follows Max’s elegiac evocation of his father (35). He also shares Max’s picture of the male homosocial family circle where the mother is a perfectly disposable figure: “I mean, it’s a fine room, don’t you think? Actually there was a wall, across there...with a door. We knocked it down...years ago...to make an open living area. The structure wasn’t affected, you see. My mother was dead”, he tells Ruth (37).⁷ Not surprisingly, the reunion of the two patriarchs is founded on mutual male homosocial recognition. “We’ve got three boys, you know”, Teddy tells Max. “All boys? Isn’t that funny, eh? You’ve got three, I’ve got three”, is the reply (66).

However, the kind of ratification Teddy has come home in search for is unlikely to materialize. As already mentioned, Max’s patriarchal authority within the London family circle is under pressure from Sam, Joey and, above all, Lenny, so that soon after his arrival, Teddy learns that in place of straightforward patriarchal ratification, he will have to

⁶ A similar point is made by J. Goldberg in connection with *Macbeth* (1987, 259).

⁷ In Pinter’s text, three dots without the customary single space at both ends are his own. They do not indicate an omission on my part.

negotiate with Lenny for some sort of male homosocial recognition from his old family circle. It is Lenny, not Max, whom Teddy first meets and talks to. In the course of the conversation, it emerges that Teddy's having married Ruth and kept it a secret for six years is perceived by Lenny as an offence against both family and male homosocial bonding that he will later deftly exploit to win the Londoners' support in his bid to oust Teddy. It also becomes clear that Teddy is ready to acquiesce in his brother's valuation of his marriage, since he is willing to verbally suppress Ruth—he does not mention her—in exchange for the renewal of his former male homosocial family bonds, a move that arguably anticipates his attitude at the end of the play. At this point, then, both Lenny and Teddy cast Ruth in the role of "other" along both the gender and family axes: she is the alien being menacing the cohesion of the male homosocial family circuit.

In addition, however, the encounter between the two brothers also shows Lenny casting Teddy as the social or class "other". As the elder brother who has "got on", Teddy is viewed by Lenny as a threat to his current hegemony within the London family, and his subsequent behaviour is largely motivated by such male homosocial resentment. Thus, his first face-to-face encounter with Ruth, following that between the two brothers, witnesses to the conflation of the class hostility motif with the traffic-in-women one. Lenny's aim here is to challenge Teddy's social and professional standing via Ruth, on whom he attempts to impose the role of conduit of the homosocial rivalry linking him to his brother. In particular, because Teddy has kept his marriage from his London kin, Lenny tries to humiliate his wife, as well as neutralize her potential capacity to disturb the male homosocial family circle, by means of his two stories of violence inflicted on women (46-49).

The problem for Lenny, and indeed for the entire male family group, is that Ruth resists the role of passive conduit of its highly-strung cross-currents. Far from showing any sympathy for her husband's male homosocial, familial motivation, she immediately begins to labour towards an active subject position by securing for herself the key to the house and leaving Teddy without (40). She is clearly intent on providing herself with access to Teddy's all-male family on her own terms: what those terms are, and the extent to which they may really be described as "her own", must now be considered. In other words, attention must be

paid to the way Ruth draws on her “otherness” and the sense in which she may be said to be ultimately neutralized.

It has been claimed that Ruth’s subversiveness lies in her capacity to expose the constructed nature of language as used by the male characters in the play and consequently the arbitrariness of the gender roles inscribed in it (Sarbin 1989). Thus, she challenges Lenny’s story about the diseased prostitute whom he battered almost to death by asking him “How did you know she was diseased?” (47), a question that forces him to acknowledge the constructedness of the whole story: “I decided she was” (47). However, both the potentiality and the limitations of Ruth’s disruptive role become most obvious if compared with Jessie, Max’s dead wife. Jessie is no more than an offstage, inarticulate figure, made to play the role of the “recipient” female as Max verbally constructs and reconstructs her along the traditional mother/whore dichotomy to suit the shifting requirements of his struggle to recover the patriarchal position within the current all-male family arrangement. His incongruous juxtapositions do reveal the arbitrariness of the mother/whore dualism, but they are far from allowing Jessie to escape representation (Sarbin 1989, 34-36). Rather, they emblematically witness to the exchange-of-women paradigm, with the female figure being literally unable, because dead, to disrupt the male homosocial traffic she is made a mere conduit to. In contrast, Ruth can and does attempt to actively undermine male categorizations of her. Thus, she subverts the growing patriarchal alliance between Max and Teddy, based on jointly constructing her as the supportive mother and wife, by stating that “I was...different...when I met Teddy...first” (66).

However, Ruth is shown to be ultimately trapped in precisely the same disabling dualism as Jessie: in rejecting the “mother” pole of the dichotomy, she is driven towards the other end.⁸ Indeed, Lenny, Max and Joey construct the role of whore for her by literally “naming” her one (“Dolores”, “Spanish Jacky”, “Cynthia” or “Gillian” are suggested as adequate names [90]), and she agrees to stay on with them earning her keep as a prostitute. As is the case with Nancy, this may be viewed as

⁸ Similarly, in relation to *The White Devil*, Dollimore states: “Not only does the language of the dominant actually confer identity on the subordinate, but the latter can only resist this process in terms of the same language. . . . And yet, because of [their] different position in relation to power, [their] appropriation of that language can only go so far. . .” (1989, 235).

Ruth's finally assuming control: she imposes her conditions on the deal (Osherow 1974, 423) and her open treatment of prostitution in economic terms certainly disrupts Lenny's, Max's and Teddy's euphemistic formulations (Sarbin 1989, 40). However, in being bounded by the patriarchal mother/whore dichotomy, Ruth remains an object in the men's homosocial traffic: in this respect, the inverse parallelism between the cheese-roll Teddy takes from Lenny and Ruth herself requires little comment. Teddy surrenders Ruth—he puts the family's proposal to her (91)—in exchange for his social advancement and in order to preserve his position within his male homosocial family—that of the phlegmatic, distant university professor. Although at the end of the play Ruth sits in the centre, with Max and Joey kneeling and Lenny standing by her side, it is a position that continues to facilitate rather than subvert the operation of male homosocial desire.

5. Conclusions

The Knack and *The Homecoming* clearly belong in the postwar debate about the family, sexuality and gender roles. Equally clearly, they are plays written before feminism became a public, radical presence in the late 1960s. Neither play may be described as feminist in its valuations, since they both ultimately sanction male homosocial domination by stopping short of the presentation of alternative forms of subjectivity outside its parameters. As regards the female characters in particular, Sedgwick's point about Adam Bede's Hetty and Henry Esmond's Beatrix is equally relevant to Nancy and Ruth:

[they] enter into sexuality . . . as the only avenue to power. . . . For each woman, the sexual narrative occurs with the overtaking of an active search for power of which she is the *subject*, by an already-constituted symbolic power exchange between men of which her very misconstruction, her sense of purposefulness, proves her to have been the designated *object*. (1985, 159)

However, both plays bring to the surface the power relations that structure the family, sexuality and gender roles, demystifying the snug picture of domesticity and the assumptions about the "naturalness" of the

models being propagated in the postwar period. Similarly, they point to the instability of male homosocial desire, which seemingly necessitates the (neutralized) presence of the female "other" for its fully effective operation.⁹

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