

# Shrek and the Loathly Lady

Revisiting the Discourse of Monogamy

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## 1. Introduction

When the computer-animated film *Shrek* was released in theaters in May, 2001, it received largely positive reviews in the mainstream press. Roger Ebert, who gave the film a four-star rating, called it “jolly, wicked, filled with sly in-jokes and yet somehow possessing a heart” (par. 1). Elvis Mitchell, writing in *The New York Times*, called it “a giggly cocktail, though it’s more foam than drink” (par. 2). Paula Nechak of *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* wrote “be forewarned: this isn’t some Disney musical. And that’s part of the not-so-secret snicker that saturates ‘*Shrek*’ – it pokes gentle fun at the Magic Kingdom while forging new territory in the animation genre” (par. 1). As these quotes suggest, reviewers tended to acknowledge the film’s technical wizardry while pointing out that it also provided more valid fare for the average moviegoer: a mélange of pop culture references, crude humor (much of which was designed to fly just over the radar of younger audiences), and, perhaps most importantly, a morally redeeming story. Like its Disney-produced forebears, *Shrek* told a tale that was perceived both as worthy of impressionable young eyes and entertaining for adults; unlike previous animated movies, the film deliberately pushed boundaries of taste and referentiality.

Once *Shrek*’s newness wore off, however, concern over its cultural legacy became more apparent. *Time*’s James Poniewozik placed *Shrek* at the beginning of a disturbing trend in the parodying of fairy tales, in which the parody replaces the original that it is supposed to be poking fun at. According to this argument, there is nothing inherently wrong with *Shrek*’s meta-fictional riffing. Critics such as Mitchell pointed out that the film was merely updating a practice that started with the Bugs Bunny animated shorts of the 1940s and 50s, and Poniewozik himself noted that *Shrek* “captured…a long-simmering cultural trend” (par. 6). “But,” he added, “those parodies had a dominant fairy-tale tradition to rebel against. The strange side effect of today’s meta-stories is that kids get exposed to the parodies before, or instead of, the originals” (par. 7). In other words, we can enjoy *Shrek* and other films like it for their rebellion

against the cloying sweetness of Disney; and we are of course free to reject the lessons embodied in the tale itself. The danger, however, is that this constant parodying has become an end in itself, which inures us to the questions being asked about the inherent “truth” of the fairy tale.

This essay extends the argument suggested by critics such as Pozniwozik by examining the cultural narratives at work in *Shrek*. I argue that for all its apparent novelty, the film recasts and re-presents narrative motifs which draw on older, more established traditions, both within Hollywood films and literature in general. By scrutinizing these motifs, I hope to draw attention to their status as discourse. Specifically, I propose to look at the film as an example of a racially and sexually coded discourse which confronts issues of marriage and monogamy.

First, however, a word about the term discourse is in order. Mills observes that discourse is often defined imprecisely or, at best, negatively. Writers who use the term tend to characterize it according to what it is not, when they do so at all, thus leading to an accrual of meanings with little or no explicit acknowledgement of commonalities. The definition that I am assuming here is a twofold one which denotes, first, the language of the film, including the words spoken by the characters, the accent employed, the visual and aural environment in which those words are situated, and, more broadly, the film’s narrative structure; and second, the social norms which that language mediates. In this second sense, discourse refers to “a regulated practice which accounts for a certain number of statements” (Foucault 80). That is, in adopting a discursal approach to *Shrek*, I want to look not only at the statements the film seems to make about marriage and monogamy, but also the ways in which these statements circumscribe discussion of marriage and monogamy as a social practice.

## 2. *Shrek’s* Visual and Aural Dichotomies

One entry point into an analysis of film as discourse is suggested by Lippi-Green in her discussion of the use of various English dialects in Disney animated movies. As Lippi-Green points out, accent and dialog is a common though inconsistently used device in film which plays into social and linguistic stereotypes as a means of quickly establishing character and place. This is particularly relevant when characters are not human and place is not directly anchored to reality, as is the case with *Shrek*. Similar to many Disney animated films, *Shrek* has well-known actors voicing the major speaking roles. More notably, however, the non-human roles of the film tend to be voiced in comically non-standard accents. For example, *Shrek* and Donkey are played by Mike Myers and Eddie Murphy, two comedian-actors famous for their creation of memorable characters on film and television, and in fact both speak in accents that are instantly recognizable to many viewers. For the voice of *Shrek*, Mike Myers employs a Scottish

accent, which recalls characters that he has created and played on television and in other films. Similarly, the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) spoken by Eddie Murphy as Donkey evokes material from Murphy's stand-up comedy as well as his roles in movies such as *Beverly Hills Cop*. In contrast, the human characters, most prominently Fiona (Cameron Diaz) and Farquaad (John Lithgow), tend to speak a mainstream North American dialect of English (although there are a few exceptions to this, such as Monsieur Hood's French accent).

*Shrek's* and Donkey's accents, therefore, reinforce their status as marginalized figures, but they do so not only because of the accents themselves but also through their placement within a network of visual and aural cues. *Shrek's* Scottish English is associated with his lumbering oafishness, brute strength, and general love of dirtiness and vulgarity (as signalled most directly in the film's opening scenes). Donkey's AAVE, on the other hand, is associated with his crassness, his obnoxious insistence on confronting *Shrek* both emotionally and physically, and his tendency to point out and talk about bodily odors (again echoing Murphy's comedy routines). Moreover, the story of *Shrek* unfolds within a landscape that shifts between scenes of idyllic pastoralism and medieval barbarity. Contrast, for example, the fields and forests that *Shrek* and Donkey, and later Fiona, travel through as they complete their quest, with DuLoc's torture chambers and tournament grounds. The former are presented to us largely in undiluted form, while the latter come with anachronistic references to professional wrestling, theme parks, game shows, and canned laughter. The characters that inhabit this landscape are visually and aurally divided between the humans and the fairy-tale creatures. *Shrek*, Donkey, Gingerbread Man, the Big Bad Wolf, and so forth—each of these characters has not only its own set of magical powers, but also its own look and spoken accent. As a whole, they threaten the stage-managed perfection of Farquaad's domain through their overwhelming diversity. In contrast, the human characters are, in appearance as well as accent, more homogeneous, so much so that they resemble 3-dimensional mannequins more than human beings, leading one critic to observe that

No matter how realistically these characters move or blink or smile, there's always a coldness about them, particularly around the eyes, that makes them a little spooky. Fiona even has two little frecklelike beauty spots, one on her cheek and one on her upper chest. They're symbols of her human authenticity, but they also serve as a sort of factory trademark left by her creators: "You see, we've thought of every last detail." (Zacharek, par. 9)

Thus, *Shrek* presents us with a number of dichotomies (country vs. town, human vs. creature, sameness vs. difference), and much of the film's humor and narrative drive derives from the ways in which these dichotomies are playfully subverted. *Shrek* and Donkey are the most "human" characters in the film. They are the ones most confronted with (and eventually accepting of) their physical limitations and freakishness, the ones whose relationship develops most over the course of the story, the ones who are

allowed to be humanly funny (rather than just parodically so), and to overcome their outcast status at the resolution of the narrative. Fiona is “humanized” by revealing herself to be more and more like *Shrek*: able to fight and belch with the best of them, and in the end becoming a female version of the ogre himself. The human characters in the film, on the other hand, exhibit more monstrous qualities. In the film’s opening scenes, for example, they are torch-and-pitchfork carrying peasants who assist Lord Farquaad’s thinly disguised ethnic cleansing project by turning in fairy tale creatures for monetary reward (and then grumble because the reward is too small); or, they are armored castle guards who attempt to arrest *Shrek* but flee at the first sign of resistance. The embodiment of human monstrousness is the diminutive Lord Farquaad. As the film’s villain, Farquaad easily resorts to threats, physical force and torture to achieve his megalomaniacal aims, controls the mob through cue cards and violent contests, and is humorously self-serving in the way that he presents himself to his subjects. (See, for example, the tournament scene in which he describes the quest to rescue Fiona: “Some of you may die, but it is a sacrifice I am willing to make” ).

In short, there is a lot happening on the surface of *Shrek* which seems novel, if not subversive. However, the film’s novelty masks narrative motifs which are more conventional. It has been argued, for example, that Donkey is essentially an updated version of the negro sidekick character, whose precedents can be found in Hollywood films as well as American literature more generally, the most obvious example being Mark Twain’s Jim (Mudede and Mudede). The sidekick appears when the main character, usually a white male, is at a moment of crisis. Possessed of worldly wisdom, the black assistant attempts to help the white man, but is at first ignored. Eventually, however, the white man sees the value of the sidekick’s knowledge, makes use of it, and is able to overcome the crisis and regain his position in the world. Whatever the specific circumstances, the salient features of sidekick characters are their lack of identity and history, and their inability to act on the knowledge that they possess. Whether literally or otherwise, they come from nowhere, and must transfer their knowledge to the white man in order for it to be translated into worldly power. “They have the raw materials for success, but don’t own the equipment or means of production to realize it” (par. 7).

When we consider the serious, dramatic elements of the story in this way, we find *Shrek* dealing with more established traditions and typified discourses. Although more could be said about Donkey as a sidekick and his relationship to the other characters, I want to focus in this essay on *Shrek* and Fiona, as it is their meeting and eventual union which underpins much of the narrative structure of the film, as well as the discursive statements that the film seems to be making about marriage and monogamy.

### 3. The Loathly Lady

The narrative motif in *Shrek* that is worth examining in this connection is the loathly lady, a figure with roots in medieval English and Celtic literature, as well as parallels in many European folktales. Jones outlines the loathly lady story as follows:

A young knight is somehow threatened with death, either his own or that of someone close. His salvation can only be gained from an ugly old woman who often demands some sexual favor, whether it be a kiss or marriage, in exchange for that which will save his life. He reluctantly agrees, and is rewarded not only with his life, but with the hag, who changes into a beautiful woman. (par. 3)

This basic formula is realized in a number of variations which invest the story with different kinds of symbolism. The older Celtic versions of the tale associate the lady with sovereignty over the land, so that the knight's ultimate reward is that he becomes king. Later English retellings relocate the notion of sovereignty to the institution of marriage, linking the tale to issues of gender roles and female sexuality. The most famous and most commented upon of these is Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." This version turns on the question of "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (905), which the knight must answer within a year and a day in order to avoid execution for raping a young woman— a challenge which, significantly, is put to him by the interceding queen. After travelling far and wide and hearing different answers from every woman he meets, the despairing knight happens upon the loathly lady ("A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" 999) who says she will tell him the answer if he promises to grant her one request. He agrees and they return to the court with the answer that satisfies the queen and saves the knight from death: women most desire dominance over their husbands. The old woman's request for saving the knight is that he marry her, to which he reluctantly agrees. On their wedding night, the old woman offers the downcast knight compensation in the form of a choice: he can have her in her ugly form and faithful, or beautiful and unfaithful. The knight gives the choice back to his wife, thus submitting to her will, and she rewards him by becoming both faithful and beautiful.

The "Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" are notable among *The Canterbury Tales* for the unusually well-developed portrait they provide of the teller. The prologue is over twice as long as the tale proper, and much longer than any other prologue in the *Tales* as a whole. In it, the wife Alisoun proclaims herself an authority on marriage, having been wed five times. Then, in a tone that is at times confessional and repentant, but more often boastful, gossipy, and defiant, she tells the company of how she established dominance over each of her husbands, ending with a detailed description of her tumultuous relationship with her most recent husband, Jankyn, the only one of the five who is named, and the only one for whom the wife expresses any affection (and, it should be noted, to whom she initially turns over all of her wealth and property).

The depth of Chaucer's portrait of the wife has led to speculation over the context

of the tale and the reasons for Chaucer's apparent interest in her. In any case, it seems clear that, given the importance of framing throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, the tale gestures beyond itself to contemporary issues that were relevant to Chaucer's audience. Alisoun is a transgressive figure— a woman who deploys her sexuality for her own pleasure and worldly gain. This makes her a negative example of traditional views on the appropriate behavior of women in marriage that were promulgated in Chaucer's time. Alisoun does all of the things a wife is not supposed to. For example, she lies to her husbands so as to manipulate them and cover up her own lack of faithfulness; even the fact of her having been married more than once itself defies conventional teaching. On the other hand, the vibrancy of her personality as she holds forth in the face of criticism from the other pilgrims allows her to resist these conventions by pointing out their contradictions (marriage vs. virginity) as well as their constructed nature, in particular their construction by males to satisfy male desires.<sup>1</sup> This is dramatized most directly in Alisoun's account of her confrontation with Jankyn over his insistence on reading aloud from his "book of wikked wyves" (685), which culminates in the physical violence that leaves Alisoun deaf in one ear and precipitates a reconciliation between them. In a prefiguring of the resolution of the tale that follows, Jankyn concedes sovereignty to Alisoun by returning control of her property, after which the two live peacefully, and faithfully, for the remainder of Jankyn's life.

The way in which these two narratives— that of the "Jankyn section" of the prologue and that of the tale— resolve themselves suggests the striking of an uneasy balance between the male assertion of separate but interrelated forms of domination (economic and sexual) and female resistance to that domination. If the wife is a transgressive portrait of how not to act in marriage, the men that she describes are no more exemplary in their conduct. Jankyn, for example, is hardly a model husband. He attempts to control not just Alisoun's property but also her freewheeling behavior, provokes her by reading accounts of evil women, and finally strikes her when she physically resists. Moreover, as noted earlier, the knight of the tale sets out on his quest in order to absolve himself of the crime of rape. Both of these characters thus represent male domination taken to its ugliest extremes, and, paradoxically, both must redeem themselves and regain their sovereignty by first giving it up. The tale's fantastical ending, in which the loathsome lady transforms into a fair and faithful young woman, is framed by the fictional but more realistic and earthy drama of Alisoun and Jankyn, in which Jankyn cedes control of Alisoun's estate, giving her, as Carruthers suggests, the economic independence that allows her to love him genuinely.

In this manner, Chaucer's version of the loathly lady story places a well-known tale in the context of contemporary discussions of gender roles in marriage through its novel and somewhat subversive framing of the story by the wife's confession. While *Alisoun's* views on marriage would no doubt have struck contemporary readers as unorthodox bordering on heretical, her character is a sympathetic one whose comic features serve to humanize

her. This is particularly pertinent to *Shrek*, where the loathly lady motif is embedded within a story that combines elements of other fairy tales and “human” comedy with more overtly parodic references to contemporary culture, not to mention the computer-generated graphics that critics lauded as innovative and “cutting-edge.” As such, it is relevant to ask what sorts of statements the film presumes to make about the questions and issues that had accrued to the loathly lady story by the time of Chaucer.

#### 4. The Loathly Lady in *Shrek*

*Shrek*'s use of the loathly lady motif is also the central example of the film's playful subversion of convention. Princess Fiona is the victim of a curse which makes her ugly after sundown, and which can only be broken by “true love's first kiss.” This will allow her to take on her “true form” (which we naturally assume to be the beautiful Fiona). The element of subversion, and the film's primary divergence from the traditional loathly lady tale, is that Fiona is first encountered in her beautiful form, and when she finally does receive the kiss (from *Shrek*) at the film's climax, her true form turns out to be the ugly nighttime version.

This revelation forms the point at which several lines of plot and character development converge around the humanization of the main characters. For Fiona, humanization is a process of removal from the fairy-tale narrative that surrounds her, and which she herself has helped to construct. (Note *Shrek*'s remark during the rescue scene: “You've had a lot of time to prepare for this, haven't you?”). From Fiona's initial appearance, her insistence on maintaining the outward trappings of medieval romance clashes with circumstance, often in comic ways, as for example when she offers *Shrek* her handkerchief as a gift only to have him wipe his dirty forehead with it. Eventually, however, this clash between how the romance is supposed to unfold and how it actually does (“But I have to be rescued by my true love; not by some ogre and his pet”) forms the basis of both Fiona's plight and the dramatic tension which will eventually bring her and *Shrek* together. In order to keep her curse a secret, she refuses to travel after dark, thus extending the journey back to DuLoc by two nights, providing space within the narrative for her to demonstrate her less princess-like traits (fighting off bandits, matching *Shrek* belch for belch) and for the more realistic love story between her and *Shrek* to develop. Consistent with parody, the “real” version of the story disrupts and undercuts the fantasy version, rather than framing it as in Chaucer. This enacts the film's opening scene, in which *Shrek* sarcastically cuts off his reading of the storybook (“Like *that's* ever going to happen!”), tearing out to use as toilet paper the page which explains how the curse is broken. As with Fiona's handkerchief, the fairy tale version of the story is literally smeared with filth.

*Shrek*'s journey of humanization, which in a sense parallels that of Fiona, begins from a diametrically opposed point. The initial scenes of the film establish *Shrek* as

the comic embodiment of ugliness. We see him “uglifying” himself by bathing in mud, brushing his teeth with insect innards, and checking himself in the mirror, which appropriately breaks. As well, we see him delighting in physical vulgarity: killing fish by farting in the pond, lighting a fire by belching across a lighted match, using his own earwax for a candle. *Shrek* is not so much a fearsome monster as the exact opposite of politeness and good manners, a fact which makes him likeable because he breaks the rules and is funny in the process, and which sets the stage for his human qualities to emerge, just as Fiona’s “ogre-ish” qualities do so later. In predictable fashion, we notice that *Shrek* has a sense of humor, as for example in his and Donkey’s jabs at Lord Farquaad’s physical stature, that he is not just physically strong but also resourceful, and, most importantly, that he has complex feelings, as suggested by the trite onion metaphor: like onions, ogres have layers. *Shrek* fights with humans and dragons but does not want to kill them, and he wants to keep his privacy in the swamp not so much because he enjoys it as that he is otherwise a social outcast. This makes him resist Donkey’s overtures of friendship at first, and again provides dramatic tension as we see him struggle to accept and profess his own feelings (friendship with Donkey; love for Fiona), and to overcome his lack of self-confidence. While Fiona shows herself to be less and less the princess in the ivory tower, *Shrek* demonstrates that he is not the “big, stupid, ugly ogre” that everyone, including *Shrek* himself, presumes him to be.

This recognizably contemporary story of *Shrek*, Donkey, and Fiona, which turns on themes of self-awareness, self-actualization, and the overcoming of appearances, is framed by a quest narrative whose basic elements might have been more familiar to *Chaucer*’s audience. While the ultimate aim of the quest is to rescue Fiona and unite her with her “true love,” it begins with the primary purpose of legitimizing claims to title and property. *Shrek* wants to recover his land in the swamp from the fairy-tale creatures who have been forced into “resettlement” there (presumably because *Shrek* himself cannot be captured and sent elsewhere). Farquaad, on the other hand, wants to marry a princess so that he can become king, and his domain a kingdom. So, when *Shrek* appears at DuLoc and makes it clear that he will not be easily disposed of, Farquaad offers *Shrek* his land back in exchange for bringing Fiona to DuLoc. Fiona, on the other hand, wants to be free of the curse, with “true love’s first kiss” implying that she must marry in order to do so.

As the contemporary elements of the story become more prominent, these fantastic and overtly “medieval” ones are increasingly adapted to the demands of the modern comedy. For example, early references in the film to concentration camps and ethnic cleansing are further tied to themes of property development and gentrification—recall, for example, that DuLoc is basically a theme park and that Farquaad wants to create a “perfect world.” Tellingly, the curse itself, which has been hinted at earlier, is finally disclosed to the viewer once the relationship between *Shrek* and Fiona has begun to develop,



and at the same time that the precise nature of Fiona's ugliness is first presented.

"This is not how a princess is supposed to look," she laments to Donkey on the second night of the journey back to DuLoc. The irony, however, is that Fiona is not the "horrible ugly beast" that she calls herself, but a female counterpart to *Shrek*. She has *Shrek*'s green skin and protruding ears, but the physical attributes (bosom, long hair, dress) that appropriately designate her as feminine. Also like *Shrek*, the loathsome Fiona has the blunt nose and broad teeth, the round face and roly-poly figure, that signify plain homeliness rather than ugliness, especially in contrast to her slender, more conventionally attractive daytime form. The "ugly" Fiona and *Shrek* are essentially two of a kind.

In this sense, the revelation in the film's final scene, that Fiona's true form is her loathsome *Shrek*-like one, comes as more of a comfortable resolution than a subversive twist. In a recapitulation of many of the motifs that run throughout the film, the fairy-tale narrative is again disrupted, and finally completely overturned, by the ordinary human emotions of the principle characters, as well as their less palatable and even loathsome motivations. First, *Shrek* barges in on the wedding-in-progress between Fiona and Farquaad and, unable to initially state his feelings for Fiona, reveals Farquaad's ulterior motives. Farquaad in turn uncovers *Shrek*'s love for Fiona, followed by the mocking laughter that allies fairy-tale convention with his racial intolerance, more specifically an implied fear of miscegenation: ogres cannot marry princesses. At this point, Fiona, who is clearly not marrying Farquaad for love and is likely aware of his own interest in the match, finally allows her "loathsome" form to be revealed (the sun is about to set anyway). This leads to the full exposure of Farquaad's villainy as he sets his armored guards on Fiona and *Shrek*, proclaims himself king ("This marriage is binding!"), and threatens to imprison Fiona indefinitely so that she cannot mar the orderly perfection of his kingdom. The dragon enters as a kind of *deus ex machina* to get rid of Farquaad and his dictatorial influence over the townspeople, and allow *Shrek* and Fiona to finally declare their love and exchange the magic kiss. The climax which resolves the conflicts between *Shrek*, Fiona, and Farquaad is followed by one of the few moments in the film of unparodied fairy-tale magic, as Fiona is lifted off the ground to a swelling musical climax, beams of light shooting first from *Shrek*'s hand towards her and then outward from her hands and feet and finally her face (the locus of beauty), and then is transformed in a miniature atom-bomb explosion of light and energy. The conclusion, however, which is all but inevitable at this point, is that Fiona is not really transformed. Rather, she remains the same green-skinned, homely self that *Shrek* kissed moments earlier. *Shrek*'s and Fiona's final lines once again echo the fairy tale vs. reality dichotomy, with reality given the last word:

Fiona: But I don't understand. I'm supposed to be beautiful.

*Shrek*: But you *are* beautiful.

## 5. Conclusion

In the end, therefore, despite its apparent puncturing of fairy tale conventions, *Shrek* offers a relatively safe, conventionalized outcome. The film's pop culture referentiality provides lighthearted diversion and occasional commentary on the experiences of the characters, but otherwise does not go so far as to satirize or question. This is something of a reversal of the pattern of Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale," in which the tale is related straightforwardly, while the prologue is a provocative commentary on accepted norms regarding monogamy and woman's place in marriage. In *Shrek*, fairy-tale motifs are parodied but ultimately sublimated to the decidedly uncomplicated story of two people who overcome appearances and stereotypes in order to realize their feelings for one another. Questions of position and title have been brushed aside (though presumably, as the husband of a princess, *Shrek* is now in line to become king<sup>2)</sup> in favor of the current sanctioned version of monogamy, to wit: *Shrek* and Fiona, despite their differences in social standing, are perfect for one another because they are each other's "true love," and because they are physically and racially compatible with one another. The film shows us that people of vastly different backgrounds can come together, but stops short of pairing the green-skinned ogre with the svelte, light-skinned princess. Instead, Fiona is brought down to *Shrek*'s physical "level" – rescued, as it were, from the castle tower in which she has been imprisoned – so as to make her a more suitable mate for him. In this sense, what the film has done is to re-translate the simple message of the fairy tale into modern terms.

I do not mean to suggest that *Shrek* is a diatribe against interracial marriage, nor that the film is necessarily promulgating an idealized view of romantic love. Rather, the film is an instance of how regulated social practices are mediated by discourse – in this case, that of marriage and monogamy. The way in which this mediation occurs can be understood via the linguistic concept of markedness, which distinguishes linguistic choices based on unmarked and marked forms (for example, masculine/feminine pairs such as "waiter" and "waitress," where the former is the more natural, unmarked, default form). The ending of *Shrek* is conventional because it ultimately presents us with the unmarked, naturalized version of events. This of course does not proscribe the imagination of alternative, marked versions, but it does indicate that there is a clearly defined zone of assumed naturalness that circumscribes the ways in which we talk and think about romance, marriage, and prospective partners. Stepping out of this zone requires a more open and explicit engagement with the unconventional and the unorthodox than the film itself would seem to provide.

## Notes

1. For further discussion of these points, see Carruthers.
2. This issue is dealt with later in the *Shrek* series, particularly *Shrek* the Third.

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