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### **A Psychoanalytic Study of Sophocles' Antigone**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines, in a detailed and comprehensive fashion, the unconscious motivations of the main protagonists of Sophocles' Antigone and the play's general structure as a psychoanalytically coherent whole. This examination helps to foster an understanding of the conceptual place of Antigone within the Oedipus Trilogy, its relationship to Oedipus Rex, and the complementary character of these two tragedies.

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*Antigone* was first produced in the year 442 B.C., the first of the three plays of the Oedipus Trilogy. *Oedipus Rex* was produced between 430 and 425 B.C., and *Oedipus at Colonus* posthumously in 401 B.C. As we shall see, this sequence may be psychologically significant. Since the very beginning, *Antigone* has been the object of great interest: it immediately made Sophocles famous, and throughout the ages it has caused an outpouring of comments and hypotheses stimulated by the multiplicity of political, social, and philosophical issues the play seems to raise and by its enigmatic quality. Winnington-Ingram, in his 1980 book, *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, correctly states that "*Antigone* is a singularly difficult play to understand" (p. 117). Its sociopolitical aspects, on which all the commentators have invariably focused their attention (for instance, the degree of respect that should be given to established law, the relationship between the sexes, the duties toward the family versus the duty to society and others), represent, on one side, defensive screens which tend to conceal the unconscious contents of this tragedy; on another level, as we will see later, they reflect the contribution of the ego and of the superego to the intrapsychic conflicts of its main characters.

In this paper I propose to focus on the play's unconscious contents and to examine its essential features as a psychoanalytically coherent whole. The general framework of the story is as follows.

Antigone, the faithful and loving daughter of Oedipus, who followed and supported him throughout his exile until his death (which is described in *Oedipus at Colonus*), lives with her younger sister, Ismene, in the royal palace of Thebes. She is engaged to marry Haemon, son of Creon, who is Oedipus' maternal uncle and brother-in-law. After Oedipus had left Thebes, Creon had become Regent to the throne until Oedipus' sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, agreed to rule in alternate years. Eteocles was the first to rule, but when the time came for Polyneices to take over, Eteocles refused to step down. Polyneices raised support for his cause, and he and Eteocles perished by each other's hands under the walls of Thebes. Creon decreed that, while Eteocles' body was to be ritually buried, the body of Polyneices, whom he branded as a traitor to the town, should be left to the carrion eaters; anyone who tried to bury him would be stoned to death.

Antigone disobeyed this edict, was caught by the guards who were sent to watch over Polyneices' body, and was sentenced by Creon to be placed in a cave with just a little food to eat. Actually, in his fury Creon had decreed that Ismene be punished in like manner because she had "shared in the planning" of the burial (a statement for which he had no shred of evidence); however, at the last moment he relented in the case of Ismene, but remained immovable regarding Antigone, despite Haemon's passionate pleas. After the seer Teiresias, seconded by the Chorus, accused Creon of bringing a curse on the land and prophesied even greater ills to come, Creon anxiously decided to have Polyneices' body properly buried. He rushed to the cave to free Antigone but found that she had hanged herself. Haemon, furious, tried to kill Creon but was prevented from doing so and instead killed himself. This death in turn caused Eurydice, Creon's wife, to commit suicide. Creon remained alone, his life totally destroyed.

The high points of the play are its tragic denouement and especially the dramatic confrontation between Antigone and Creon, in which Antigone asserts that Creon's order is contrary to "the gods' unwritten and unfailling laws,"<sup>1</sup> while Creon stubbornly clings to the opinion that all decrees should be strictly obeyed. This can be viewed as a mere rationalization because the decree had been made ad hoc by him; it was he who had proclaimed Polyneices to be a traitor, in spite of the fact that Polyneices was clearly the wronged party in the conflict with Eteocles. But Antigone is also rationalizing, and through her rationalizations, her unconscious motivations are clearly revealed. At the very beginning of the play, after telling Ismene of Creon's edict, she says:

*Such orders they say the worthy Creon gives*

*to you and me—yes, yes, I say to me—*

She later adds,

*It's not for him to keep me from my own.*

She immediately decides to bury her brother, irrespective of the consequences. The thought of his body lacerated by the carrion eaters—"a rich sweet sight for the hungry birds' beholding"—is obviously what disturbs her most. She tries to get Ismene's help, but Ismene refuses and instead tries to dissuade Antigone by pointing out the terrible risk and the uselessness of the endeavor. Antigone decides to go ahead on her own.

*Friend shall I lie with him, yes friend with friend,*

*when I have dared the crime of piety.*

And then:

*Now I go, to pile*

*the burial-mound for him, my dearest brother.*

In another passage she calls Polyneices "brother of my heart." This fantasy of lying down in death with her beloved brother is acted out in her suicide at the end of the tragedy and becomes a reality at the very end of the play after Haemon has stabbed himself.

*While he was conscious he embraced the maiden,*

*holding her gently. Last, he gasped out blood,*

*red blood on her white cheek.*

*Corpse on a corpse he lies. He found his marriage.*

*Its celebration in the halls of Hades.*

In the one passage the ritual burial of Polyneices, an act of love in itself, is equated with a sexual situation and with death. In the other passage a marital union with Haemon takes place, albeit in death. Nowhere does Antigone express any sorrow about the death of Eteocles, and when Creon points out to her that Eteocles was also her brother, she merely acknowledges it without further comment. When the guard of the body of Polyneices comes to announce that he has found the body covered with earth, Creon sends him back with the order to catch the culprit. Shortly afterward, he comes back bringing Antigone, and explains that upon his return, he had swept the earth from the body, had concealed himself, and had seen Antigone come back and perform the burial rite again. Antigone admits the deed and is called by Creon "insolent" and "wicked." He says that she should be "ashamed" and that she has been "boasting" of having defied his order. Responding to Haemon's pleas for clemency, Creon at first becomes very moralistic:

*There is no greater wrong than disobedience,*

*This ruins cities, this tears down our homes,*

and then:

*If men live decently it is because*

*discipline saves their very lives for them.*

As the carrying out of the sentence approaches, Antigone becomes more and more revelatory:

*You speak of my darkest thought, my pitiful father's*

*fame*

*spread through all the world, and the doom that*

*haunts our house,*

*the royal house of Thebes.*

*My mother's marriage-bed.*

*Destruction where she lay with her husband-son,*

*my father. These are my parents and I their child.*

In other words, Antigone cannot escape the destiny of her incestuous parents, and she is like them. In her final speech:

*Had I children or their father dead,*

*I'd let them moulder. I should not have chosen*

*in such a case to cross the state's decree.*

*What is the law that lies behind these words?*

*One husband gone, I might have found another,*

*or a child from a new man in first child's place,*

*but with my parents hid away in death,*

*no brother, ever, could spring up for me.*

That is, not even a husband or children could possibly ever substitute for her brother. These verses have impressed some commentators as being so very strange that they thought that the lines might have been added subsequently by somebody other than Sophocles.

Greenstadt (1990) has very aptly suggested that this passage, which emphasizes the loss of something that cannot ever be restored or replaced, also expresses Antigone's castration feelings. That coincides very well with her strong-willed, independent, somewhat masculine character and with the way in which,

in her final speech, she laments her loss:

*No marriage-bed, no marriage-song for me,*

*and since no wedding, so no child to rear.*

The material presented above cannot leave any doubt about the nature and depth of Antigone's feelings for Polyneices. Her emotional commitment to him has the character of totality and finality. Of course, I am in no way suggesting that Sophocles intended to portray an actual incestuous brother-sister relationship. It would be entirely out of character for the personality of Antigone as he described it. Indeed, in the play she emerges as an idealistic, highly moral, religious young woman who is sexually inhibited, extremely concerned about her duties, with an excessively strong superego and excellent object relations. Her attachment to Polyneices is unambivalent, entirely ego-syntonic, and openly acknowledged without any trace of the bitterness which she manifests toward the incestuous union of her parents.

All these considerations indicate that Sophocles certainly did not intend to allude to actual incest. What is indicated, rather, as Kanzer (1950) stated, is a displacement of loyalty and deep affection from her father to her brother. Actually, this process went even further: Antigone was engaged to marry Haemon, her cousin. We have here the usual process whereby, in the course of development, the oedipal strivings become progressively displaced onto libidinal objects more and more remote from the original one.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, in spite of all the handicaps created by her superego, Antigone keeps on striving desperately for adult sexuality. Her attachment to Polyneices assumes a particularly intense character: since she cannot accept the reality of his death and the necessity of separating from him, she develops the fantasy of remaining close to him forever, even in death.

*Friend shall I lie with him, yes friend with friend,*

*when I have dared the crime of piety.*

This is clearly a compromise fantasy; her mystic union with her brother can take place only in death.

As Jones (1911) pointed out, the most obvious motive for the wish to die together is "a belief in a world beyond, a region where all hopes that are denied in this life will come true" (p. 9). He quotes Sadger's (1910, pp. 60-61) conclusions that "the wish to die together is the wish to sleep and lie together." Antigone, being religious, chose this road toward finally having Polyneices totally and forever as her companion.

This is the core fantasy which is the key to understanding Antigone's actions. It leads to the realization that burying her brother's corpse and being arrested were the means by which, in her unconscious, she intended to fulfill this fantasy and bring about the hoped-for reunion. In fact, all of her actions—the decision to defy the edict, her failure to save her life by telling a lie, her open defiance of Creon—were caused by this need.

In this way Antigone was not only satisfying her wish to be her brother's bride in Hades, but was also able to satisfy her need to punish herself for her incestuous yearnings; twice, once with her father and once with her brother, she had mentally contravened the incest taboo. As she herself stated, "These are my parents and I their child." She, too, was a member of the royal house of Thebes and, like Oedipus, with whom she identified, she had to punish herself.

The fantasy of marriage with Polyneices in Hades also represents Antigone's way of coping with her loss. With its help, she defends against the pain of mourning and, to some extent, against depression. Only toward the end does she allow herself a shred of self-pity:

*Unwept, no wedding-song, unfriended, now I go*

*the road laid down for me.*

*No longer shall I see this holy light of the sun.*

*No friend to bewail my fate.*

Even so, she can console herself with the hope of making up in her tomb for her losses:

*Still when I get there I may hope to find  
I come as a dear friend to my dear father,  
to you, my mother, and my brother too.<sup>3</sup>*

The role of the other main protagonist of this drama is far less obvious. Creon has been described as an obtuse, despotic, pasteboard tyrant, an intellectually and emotionally limited man, a man of coarse fiber, commonplace mind, and narrow sympathies, a politician seduced by vulgar power. However, we would be more interested in the fact that he is also extremely insecure behind a veneer of macho attitudes toward proving his power, decisiveness, and all-around maleness. He is very possessive of both men and women, devious in the attainment of his goals, and, at best, a paranoid character. He suspects that there are plots against him, is suspicious of the integrity and motives of others, and feels that he may be robbed of what he believes is his proper due. He suspects unfaithfulness on the part of Ismene, the guard, Teiresias, and, of course, Antigone and Haemon. He is querulous and has an enormous degree of hostility which he constantly rationalizes. His character structure is highly narcissistic. He is grandiose about himself and totally intolerant of contradiction. To mention some particularly demonstrative instances of his functioning: When the guard comes to announce that he has found the body ritually buried, Creon accuses him of having done it for money, presumably in the service of

*some men in town*

*who took the edict hard, and growled against me,*

*who hid the fact that they were rearing back,*

*not rightly in the yoke, no way my friends.*

He then goes into a long, overblown, moralistic tirade. When Teiresias, whom he has known and respected for a long time and who in the past has been very helpful to him, rebukes him sternly, he accuses him, too, of being corrupt and of having been bribed with "Lydian silver-gold, pure gold of India." After the guard and Antigone herself say that she has acted alone, he sends for Ismene and says,

*You, lurking like a viper in the house,*

*who sucked me dry. I looked the other way*

*while twin destruction planned against the throne.*

He is sure that Ismene has sided with Antigone and that this conspiracy is directed specifically against himself. His male pride is hurt by what he conceives to be an act of defiance, which brings out a number of statements that show his contempt for women. The most significant of his paranoid manifestations is his feeling of jealousy regarding both Haemon and Antigone. He explains to Haemon that he, as a son, should stick to his father and not let Antigone interfere with their relationship:

*Son, do not let your lust mislead your mind,*

*all for a woman's sake, for well you know*

*how cold the thing he takes into his arms*

*who has a wicked woman for his wife,*

*What deeper wounding than a friend no friend?*

*Oh spit her forth forever, as your foe.*

*Let the girl marry somebody in Hades.*

When Ismene reminds him that Antigone is engaged to Haemon, he replies:

*Oh, there are other furrows for his plough.*

His wish to separate Haemon from Antigone is made entirely clear when Ismene asks him,

*You will take away his bride from your own son?*

His answer:

*Yes. Death will help me break this marriage off.*

Breaking off his son's marriage, in other words, is his primary intent. And to Haemon, "You shall not marry her while she's alive." At this point Creon appears to be intent upon pursuing a double goal: on one side he is trying to detach Haemon from Antigone in order not to lose Haemon's love, and when he realizes that he has alienated him totally, he becomes furious to the point of threatening to have Antigone killed immediately, right in Haemon's presence:

*Bring out the hateful creature; she shall die*

*full in his sight, close at her bridegroom's side.*

On the other hand, at an unconscious level, he is trying to keep Antigone from Haemon out of jealousy because he wants to keep her for himself. At this level, Haemon is his rival and becomes equated with Polyneices, the other man whom Antigone loves. In both cases, when he has to face the closeness of the emotional ties between Antigone and another man, he is seized by an overwhelming blind fury. This well explains the depth of Creon's unreasonable hatred toward Polyneices.

Creon's tendency to separate female relatives from their loved ones—Oedipus from Creon's sister Jocasta first, and from Antigone later—has been aptly noted by Kanzer (1948). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Antigone and the aged Oedipus reach Athens where they obtain the protection of Theseus, Athens' benevolent king. They are soon joined by Ismene, coming from Thebes, who announces Creon's intention to come to see Oedipus in order to invite him to settle near the land of Thebes: the oracles have stated that Oedipus' grave would have great beneficial powers and that he would be much solicited by the people for their welfare. However, to avoid the curse attached to a parricide's grave, he must not cross the border. When Creon arrives, his suggestion is indignantly rejected, and a violent quarrel ensues, in which Creon manhandles Oedipus and has his guards abduct Antigone by force.

*Your two daughters: one of them I have just now*

*Had seized and carried off, and I'll take this one!*

When the Chorus asks, "What are you doing, stranger?," he answers:

*I will not touch this man; only her who is mine.*

And then,

*I take what belongs to me!*

Eventually, Antigone and Ismene are brought back by Theseus' soldiers and Creon is chased away. Creon's claim to the ownership of Antigone and Ismene, which is compounded of both powerful libidinal and narcissistic motives, is certainly reminiscent of *Totem and Taboo's* despotic and brutal primal father who monopolizes all the women and destroys any possible rivals (Freud, 1913). Kanzer (1950), in fact, described Creon as the "banisher and destroyer of infants" (p. 566).

Yet, even Creon's character is not entirely monolithic, and despite his determination to have Antigone fully punished, there are also some subtle hints of unconscious attachment to her and of superego

distress: while he rages and is obdurate about having his sentence carried out, he appears ambivalent about really doing it. The original decree prescribed stoning to death. When he becomes aware that the culprit is Antigone, he first of all gives her a chance to deny that she was aware of the edict, even though there could have been no doubt that she had known about it. When she says that she was perfectly aware of his order, the sentence is softened somewhat.

*There shall I hide her in a hollowed cave*

*living, and leave her just so much to eat*

*as clears the city from the guilt of death.*

*There, if she prays to Death, the only god*

*of her respect, she may manage not to die.*

In this somewhat equivocal passage, besides his feelings of guilt, Creon seems to indicate that Antigone may also be fed subsequently. This impression is confirmed by a later passage:

*Take her away at once, and open up*

*the tomb I spoke of. Leave her there alone.*

*There let her choose: death, or a buried life.*

*No stain of guilt upon us in this case,*

*but she is exiled from our life on earth.*

Immediately after Antigone ends her very moving farewell speech, in which she laments having to die unmarried, without children, without a friend, struck down by fate, Creon threatens to punish her guards for moving too slowly in taking her away. It is as if he wanted to get her out of his sight as quickly as possible to defend himself against some strong emotions. Also, after Teiresias' speech, he changes his mind very quickly and springs into action to save Antigone. Her death and that of Haemon and Eurydice plunge him into an abyss of pain and guilt.<sup>4</sup>

From the examination of this material, it seems justified to conclude that in Creon, Sophocles has portrayed an example of the kind of competitive jealousy Freud (1922) described in "Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality." This is the jealousy that is compounded of the fear of losing the love object, the narcissistic wound incurred, and the feeling of enmity against the rival. In Creon's case, this so-called normal competitive jealousy is bisexually experienced and therefore, having multiple roots, is enormously magnified by his overwhelming narcissism, the intensity of his aggression, and his paranoid disposition. When he is threatened with loss of love, his self-esteem is deeply shaken, so that he mobilizes his aggression and tries desperately to re-establish it in any way

possible. Thus, normal competitive jealousy can take a much more serious pathological course.

In *Antigone* Sophocles has presented us with a very delicately nuanced plot which shows all the essential earmarks of a tripartite, unconscious incestuous domestic situation involving at least a brother, a sister, and a paranoid, jealous father who feels personally betrayed and thirsts for revenge. In Creon's eyes, the crime of which Antigone ought to be "ashamed," the burial of her beloved brother's corpse, her terrible and unpardonable deed, clearly is equated with a forbidden sexual act: it involves spying, as well as "disobedience" to paternal orders and the lack of discipline that permits men to "live decently" and "saves their very lives." An accessory character is a younger sister who is innocent of the deed but who nevertheless falls under suspicion that she might have followed in her sister's footsteps. We may also tentatively wonder whether the deadly struggle in which both brothers lost their lives at each other's hands may not be an allusion to the existence of another triangle and a long-standing hatred and rivalry between the two brothers for Antigone's favor. Thus we may conclude that *Oedipus Rex* is indeed the indispensable complement to *Antigone* and that in these two tragedies, Sophocles has successively explored in depth the most common aspects of the libidinal and aggressive stresses operating within a family.

It seems timely, at this point, to examine some significant ego and superego aspects of this material.

Antigone's burying of Polyneices' body does not merely represent an incestuous fantasy which has been defended against and displaced; it is also the result of a sublimatory process, an act of piety which had, for her, a deep religious significance, leading to a punishment which would expunge forever her guilt. Creon's stubborn clinging to his rigid view that laws must be observed at all times and under all circumstances is a defense against his own libidinal and aggressive urges. They represent his disapproval of these urges, which found its outward expression, as indicated previously, when the magnitude of the tragedy he had created became manifest to him. In both cases, powerful ego and superego forces are obviously at work. They lead Antigone to try to find a solution to her conflicts in a heroic act of religious observance and self-immolation and Creon to affirm desperately the ideal of a society totally controlled by the power of its laws.

Religion for one and law for the other thus represented the way of counteracting their objectionable instinctual impulses. Sophocles' genius, in this play, intuitively discovered the connection between the origins of religion and law and the need for repression of libidinal and aggressive urges, which Freud brought to our attention in *Totem and Taboo*.

The interplay between drives and defenses and between derivatives of different levels of psychic structure is at the root of the interest and the mystery which has surrounded this play for two and a half millennia. In *Oedipus at Colonus* (the city where Sophocles was born, a fact that Kanzer [1948] has pointed out) the old and tired Oedipus finally found his peace. This was Sophocles' last tragedy, written at the age of eighty-nine when he, too, must have been looking forward to his final rest. Letters (1953) wrote that "Sophocles was not only one of Athens' 'lofty great tragedians.' He was an active citizen, man about town, lover of food, wine and company, musician, conversationalist, wit, homosexual [we may say bisexual; he had had two wives], actor, literary dictator, juror, admiral, priest, and copious writer of Rabelaisian farces ..." (p. 2). But, of course, we know nothing of the origin of the deep

unconscious stresses which called for the catharsis of *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*. We can only hypothesize that in the course of the slow, inexorable process of emerging from the unconscious, the contents of *Antigone* appeared first as they concerned events relatively more recent in time and that only after a long (twelve to seventeen years!) painful, heroic struggle, the older, more repressed, and difficult problems alluded to in *Oedipus Rex* were finally able to come to the surface.<sup>5</sup> If this is so, the Trilogy represents Sophocles' great confession and his last testament. It expresses his wish that his work would never perish and the hope that from it, as from Oedipus' grave, mysterious powers would spring forth which would benefit the people. This latter hope, however, remained largely unfulfilled until some twenty-four hundred years later when a third hero, this time a man from Vienna, solved the riddle of these plays and made the hope come true.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The quotations from *Antigone* are from the translation by Elizabeth Wyckoff; those from *Oedipus at Colonus* are from Robert Fitzgerald's translation (see Grene and Lattimore, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Antigone's strong attachment to her brother has been noted by other authors, including nonpsychoanalytic writers and classical scholars. In most cases, this attachment is mentioned in a rather cursory, off-handed way, without the author's presenting the necessary evidence or integrating it into the broader framework of the play. Thus, Agard (1937) wrote about Antigone's "passionate love" for Polyneices, Wilson (1930) spoke of a "brother fixation," and Bowra (1944) of "intense love for her brother." At times, even among psychoanalytic writers, one meets with contradictory statements: Seidenberg and Papathomopoulos (1962) stated that Antigone's behavior represented "the tragic outcome of incestuous wishes. More than that however, it represents an act of abandonment of the feminine role, perhaps as a defense against these wishes" (p. 103). In a 1974 paper the same authors stated, "To write Antigone off as an obvious case of brother-fixation is to succumb to clinical phantasmagoria," and, further down, "there is no evidence that she loved them [the father and the brother] in a libidinal way, as brother-fixation would indicate" (p. 104). Discussing these two contributions, Werman (1979) wrote: "Their speculation (also made by other writers) of her incestuous yearnings for Polyneices cannot be faulted. But much more prominent is the special role of women, in ancient societies, of attending to the sacred burial rites" (pp. 459-460). These contradictions and partial denials may well be the result of the high emotional charge attached to the subject of sexual attraction between brothers and sisters.

<sup>3</sup> As Greenstadt (1990) has noted, Antigone possesses a much stronger superego and is far less narcissistic than Electra, who, while bemoaning the loss of her father, bitterly complains of the loss of all the material advantages that it had brought upon her. Antigone's feelings of guilt and her self-punishing needs are firmly grounded in her family history and situation. In her father she had an outstanding example of how an uncompromising superego should deal with incest, even if unintentionally committed. Oedipus was not only her father but also her half brother. Moreover, Antigone was in a special situation with Creon, her maternal uncle and the successor to her father's throne: this may be hinted at in her engagement to Haemon, Creon's son. These considerations have been brought to my attention by Dr. Stephen Bauer.

<sup>4</sup> Bauer (1990) has noted, in this connection, that Antigone, being the daughter of Creon's sister, must

have had a special position in Creon's psychic life, which is further reinforced by her being engaged to Creon's son. This, and the fact that Oedipus was not only Antigone's father but also her half brother, is part of the incestuous theme which pervades this tragedy.

<sup>5</sup> Greenstadt (1990) has suggested that one motivation for this exploration of the female oedipus complex may have been Sophocles' need to settle the issues involved in his homosexuality.

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### SUMMARY

*Antigone*, a puzzling and hard to understand tragedy, has been the object of much attention from the literati, sociologists, and philosophers who have read into it a number of social, political, and philosophical meanings, none of which, however, can account fully and satisfactorily for all the aspects of this play.

A psychoanalytic approach has revealed the presence of a well-defined unconscious content which is familiar to all students of psychoanalysis, a strong emotional sister-brother relationship which is extremely resented by a jealous, paranoid father. The libidinal and defensive aspects of this triangular situation, as well as the role of the ego and the superego, were examined.

Finally, an attempt was made to fathom the significance of this tragedy in Sophocles' unconscious life and the conceptual relationship of *Antigone* to the unconscious aspects of *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

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