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**Writing Historical Fiction:
Outlander within the Romantic
Tradition of *Waverley***

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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Writing Historical Fiction: *Outlander* within the Romantic Tradition of *Waverley*

Sir Walter Scott is considered a pioneer in historical fiction; he had set up a framework for a wide range of writers that would later deal with the problem of history. The first among his notable historical novels is *Waverley*, taken as a paradigm of the genre, in which one can trace the extent of Scott's influence. The paper juxtaposes *Waverley* with the first two novels of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* series, in which Gabaldon depicts the same topic, the Jacobite risings in 1740s Scotland, using similar literary vehicles. The dichotomy between the historical and the romantic, and the representation of history as a problem rather than a set of truths are presented as arguably the most important common aspects of their work. Consideration is given to their protagonists, the natural environment, and the moment in time. It is argued that in the depiction of eighteenth-century Scotland Gabaldon follows Scott's example, giving new life to the romanticized land and everyday life of the Highland clans. It is then suggested that, in their rendering of the irretrievable past, the two authors' position as historical writers equals that of a historian, since both the historiographic and the fictionalized texts have the possibility to be romanticized. Based on postmodernist perspectives, it is suggested that history and historiography can be viewed as types of fiction. It is argued that the writers focus on the feeling of history rather than historical facts, which are inherently irrevocable.

KEYWORDS

***Waverley*, *Outlander*, Scotland, history, romantic, fiction**

1. INTRODUCTION

Sir Walter Scott has long been regarded as a pioneer in the Western tradition of historical writing. The first in his series of novels about Scotland's legendary history, and arguably the first modern historical novel altogether, is *Waverley*. It follows Edward, a young Englishman, who rather accidentally becomes involved in the Jacobite risings of 1745. After being sent to the Bradwardine family, who are ardent supporters of the cause, Edward sets on a journey through the Scottish Highlands, where he becomes enthralled by the culture of their inhabitants. Under the influence of Fergus, the clan leader, and his fascinating sister Flora, Edward joins the Jacobite army, only to realize the inevitability of its failure. In the novel, Scott manages to depict a wide range of manners, feelings, customs, and the overall nature of human existence, all of which had an impact on significant historical events. By focusing on a single figure, tied to both political factions involved in the conflict, Scott succeeded in objectively delineating a crucial moment in the history of his nation.

The *Outlander* series by Diana Gabaldon is a story of time travel, Scotland, human relationships, history, and the nature of stories as such. The books are a blend of multiple genres, including historical fiction, romance, portal fantasy, and adventure. The series follows Claire Randall, a WWII nurse married to Frank Randall, an aspiring professor and historian with a specific interest in Scottish history. During their stay in the Scottish Highlands, Claire, in an unexplained way, finds herself transported to the same place in the year 1743. After a series of unfortunate events, she falls into the hands of the MacKenzie clan, whose ways she, at first, cannot fathom. She is brought to the clan chieftain and laird of Leoch Castle, Colum MacKenzie. During the mysterious travels with the clan, Claire is haunted by Black Jack Randall, the captain of the English Dragoons and a direct ancestor of her husband Frank. Jamie Fraser, the chief's nephew, faces danger by the same captain. In order to save both of them from falling into Randall's hands, it is agreed that Claire and Jamie are to marry. From then on, they go on living the life of eighteenth-century Jacobites, with all the mystery and romance that such a living holds for individuals bound by love and loyalty. The series offers a meticulous rendering of the eighteenth-century Highland culture, the doom that befalls it, as well as what comes afterwards; the first two books, *Outlander* and *Dragonfly in Amber*, deal with the rising of 1745, and the rest of the series with its aftermath. The narrative includes symbols and myths to deal with such subjects as history and the nature of a (literary) text. In the words of V. E. Frankel, "as well as offering romance and adventure, the series incorporates the myths of the ancient Celts into a world on the end of rationalism [...] Literature, myth, and symbolism permeate the series, connecting it with the history and culture of the period" (1). The characters

“encounter significant ceremonies, creatures, and symbolism from ancient myth as they struggle through love, trauma, and adventure” (3).

This paper aims to present how both narratives deal with the phenomenon of history, with special regard to the protagonists, the representation of Scotland in the eighteenth century, and their specific rendering of historical figures, processes, and events. Putting the focus on the notions of romantic representation, it is argued that, in those novels, history is presented as a problem rather than a set of truths.

2. THE ROLE OF THE PROTAGONIST IN THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

In general, historical novels center the (historical) plot on characters who are supposed to embody the overall human experience of a certain historical time. Historical novel “presents an image of the uniqueness of the age”; “It is a given, at least for Scott and his immediate successors, to present an image of the historical uniqueness of a time as well as to develop characters as representatives of this uniqueness” (Bernauer 298). Through their adventures, relationships, successes and failures the reader gets a vicarious sense of the past, its overall meaning, and significance for the present. The narratives provide

certain kinds of imaginative pleasures: the excitement of experiencing imaginatively the structures of past societies, the catharsis of seeing history fall into a comprehensible and conclusive pattern, the heightened self-awareness of knowing what it means to experience the past. In such novels, the protagonist [...] is central both in embodying the novel’s meaning and in providing the center of its structure (Shaw 154).

Of course, one can never take for granted the adequacy of a single character to hold within himself the whole of humanity. The characters’ experiences are necessarily idiosyncratic and unique. However, perhaps it is this uniqueness that makes them genuine, thus transforming them into universals. As Lukács would have it, the main point of the historical novel is “that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality” (42). This may be achieved by centering textual reality around “people like us, [who] find themselves in interesting stories” (Mazzoni 256). The focus is not on “supraindividual powers,” but on the “representative and universal value of the events being described” (Mazzoni 257). Thus, the universal is presented by the individual.

2.1. EDWARD WAVERLEY

Edward Waverley, as well as Claire, is what Shaw calls a "conjunctive hero" (Mazzoni 178); through his dealing with both the Jacobites and the Hanoverians, his love pursuits and misfortunes, the reader gets a glimpse of the culture(s) he lives in. Instead of Waverley's education, self-development and life as a young Englishman, in the forefront of the novel are the people, events, societies, and customs he encounters on his wanderings through 1740s Scotland and England (Mazzoni 182). In Shaw's words, Waverley serves as a kind of "historical tourist," allowing the reader to explore a whole spectrum of social forms and historical beliefs (Mazzoni 187). Being an Englishman in the Scottish Highlands, with both political sides present in his family and a connection with two profoundly different women, he is the point of convergence of all major forces in the novel, the predominant ones being the romantic/idealistic and historic/realistic. Through Waverley's life with the Bradwardines, the MacIvors, and his time spent first in the English and then the Jacobite army, the readers get to explore the ways of times and cultures otherwise unknown to them.

As mentioned previously, Edward embodies two different cultural, political, and social forces of eighteenth-century Britain. Valente claims Waverley is largely defined by his family being split along party lines. His aunt and uncle, who are in direct connection with the overtly Jacobite Lowland family of Bradwardine, support the cause, while his father supports the acting government. When staying with his aunt and uncle, Waverley is first introduced to the romantic notions of Jacobitism, honor, and certain traditions of the past, which are later made prominent during his stay in Scotland (252). The Highlands, with their peculiar social structures and deeply rooted idealism, represent Edward's and, consequently, the world's romantic side. The historical upheavals, the English military and Edward's eventual settling into the comfortable life of English nobility serve as the less idealistic counterpart or, in other words, the 'real' history. The same dichotomy is visible in his pursuits of two close, but entirely different women. Flora MacIvor, the sister of a Highland laird, is the epitome of the romantic notions. She is deeply connected to the Highland people and their way of life:

Her sentiments corresponded with the expression of her countenance. Early education had impressed upon her mind [...] the most devoted attachment to the exiled family of Stewart. She believed it the duty of her brother, of his clan, of every man in Britain, at whatever personal hazard, to contribute to that restoration [...] For this she was prepared to do all, to suffer all, to sacrifice all [...] Her love of her clan, an attachment which was almost hereditary in her bosom, was, like her loyalty, a more pure passion than that of her brother (Scott 139-40).

Her knowledge of the traditional tales and poems, her connection to nature, her utter devotion to the Stuart cause, as well as her own family, draws Edward deep into the culture of the rebels. Seeing her in the lush green glens of the 'romantic' Highland landscapes, of which she seems to be the human counterpart, enchants him:

The sun, now stooping in the west, gave a rich and varied tinge to all the objects which surrounded Waverley, and [...] exalted the richness and purity of [Flora's] complexion [...] The wild beauty of the retreat, bursting upon him as if by magic, augmented the mingled feeling of delight and awe with which he approached her (Scott 147).

She is enigmatic, passionate, unbridled, and above all, incredibly fascinating to Edward, as if she embodied the Highland culture in its entirety. Her brother Fergus, the leader of the MacIvor clan, is another version of the same romantic ideals of honor and personal sacrifice, thus equally fascinating. Edward's other romantic interest, Rose Bradwardine, is a representative of the tame, civilized part of his nature. A daughter of a baron, she resides in cultured, domesticated surroundings, somewhat sheltered from the roughness of everyday life. She is timid, compassionate, sensible, and in love with Edward, which in those times makes her an ideal spouse.

Edward never chooses a side. The two forces he is engulfed in clash within him, but he refuses to make a choice of either of them. He is a kind of 'inadequate hero,' governed more by events than his own volition. Fergus and other Highlanders celebrate Waverley as a hero, even though his actions never reach their extent of dedication and personal sacrifice. Without consciously choosing one over the other, Edward eventually ends up with Rose, settling to a life of calm domesticity. He sees the fall of the Highland Jacobites as inevitable, and, even though he mourns his friends, he comes to accept his place in the society as that of a respectable English gentleman, and goes on to start a family. The romantic side of him is not consciously subdued; he does not deliberately put Rose over Flora; he does not come to the conclusion that he would rather share his life with her family. His eventual settling into the life of a gentleman is not a personal choice, but a result of a series of historical events that spelled the end of the Highland culture.

2.2. CLAIRE RANDALL/FRASER

In *Waverley*, the otherness of the Highland culture is explained by Edward coming from a different place – he is an Englishman wandering through Scotland. In *Outlander*, the dress, customs, and manners of the

Scotts are presented to the reader as foreign through Claire coming from an entirely different moment in history: "Claire is the one who is thrown into the Highland culture and the cultural clash between her and everyone around her helps with the distinctiveness in the representation of Scottishness" (Greiff 23). When she first finds herself in eighteenth-century Scottish Highlands, after living in the modern world of post-war Europe, Claire is flabbergasted. She is mysteriously plucked out of her known world and left to negotiate her way through the unknown culture as best she can. When people around her speak Gaelic, she feels like an intruder, an 'outlander'; she is fascinated by some of their formal traditions, and equally appalled by others; her conduct as an emancipated woman brings misfortunes and repercussions from a completely patriarchal society; she finds it difficult to reconcile her modern understanding of the world with the Highlanders' notions of honor and justice.

Edward Waverley and Claire Randall are both sophisticated Englishmen wandering through rural Scotland. However, while Edward has nothing whatsoever to guide him through the misty moors of the Highlands and the peculiarities of their people, Claire is not completely at a loss. With her uncle being an archaeologist and her husband Frank a historian, one especially interested in the history of Scotland, throughout her life Claire learns a good deal about what happened in this part of the world. She knows some of the localities, the names of the more important public figures, and finds some customs familiar, albeit somewhat unusual. Most importantly, she knows the fate of Prince Charles' cause, and what it means for the Scottish people. To her, the thorough destruction of the clan culture does not come as a shock, but rather as an inevitable outcome of historical events.

Another thing that differentiates Claire from Waverley is the fact that she becomes much more entangled in the world she finds herself in. After all her misfortunes, including the kidnapping, the life in the castle, Randall's constant pursuit, as well as learning Jamie Fraser's history with the Captain, Claire marries Jamie. Even though she is initially reluctant to marry him, due to being loyal to her husband Frank, Claire eventually warms up to Jamie, soon falling completely in love with him. She embraces his Scottish family, reconciles with his position as an outlaw, follows him in his military pursuits and even plots with him against Prince Charles. She learns to love the roughness and the simplicity of the Highland way of life, although she tries to improve it with her knowledge of history and modern medicine. While Edward stands completely apart from the Highlanders, Claire virtually becomes one of them, with her English accent being one of the few remnants of her past life. Edward refuses to make a choice, thus escaping the consequences of making a wrong one, and settles for familiarity. Claire does not settle for the known, comfortable, domestic

life. Despite being forced to go back to her own time on several occasions, she chooses the past, the romantic, over the familiar. She leaves Frank in the present and embraces Jamie and his Highlanders as her family. She knows the perils of staying in the rural, underdeveloped, dangerous place of wartime Scotland, but nevertheless, she decides to stay. "Even knowing their doom, Claire and Jamie defy history and predestination, as the power to choose is one of the most vital in the series" (Frankel 8). Despite being aware of the inevitable course of history, the imminent destruction of Jamie's entire way of life, Claire chooses him.

2.3. CHARLES STUART

Another figure crucial for the plot of both works is Prince Charles Edward Stuart. Of all the romantic aspects of the two narratives, Charles is potentially the most prominent one. Both stories treat him as an idealistic young hero of noble pursuits, but utterly ignorant of their inevitable repercussions, as well as everything else that was not of direct importance to his cause. The Prince is fallible: "He was rude and overbearing to his most loyal followers, ignored those who might be of help to him, insulted whom he should not, talked wildly" (Gabaldon, *Dragonfly* 541). His stubborn, foolish conviction that he is predestined to unite the rugged Highland clans in the pursuit of restoring his father on the English throne gives the people something to aspire to, something to get them going, but is eventually the direct cause of their doom.

Both Edward Waverley and Jamie Fraser become entangled in Charles' military net, and rather reluctantly join his forces, but while Edward does not in truth share the Prince's conviction, Jamie fights for his people. He is exasperated by the Prince, seeing his faults all the more prominent because of Claire's predictions. Claire and Jamie do everything in their power to stop him, but the Prince continues his doomed fight:

The death of Charles Stuart would not end the matter of the Rising; things had gone much too far for that... the Highland army was in tatters; without the figurehead of Charles to rally to, it would dissipate like smoke ... It was Charles who had chosen to fight at Culloden, Charles whose stubborn, shortsighted autocracy had defied the advice of his own generals and gone to invade England... there was no support from the South ...forced against his will to retreat, Charles had chosen this last stubborn stand, to place ill-armed, exhausted, starving men in a battle line on a rain-soaked moor, to face the wrath of Cumberland's cannon fire. If Charles Stuart were dead, the battle of Culloden might not take place (Gabaldon, *Dragonfly* 874-75).

Precisely this intransigency is what eventually costs the Scotts half their

culture. After the final battle of Culloden, these pretensions of the "gallant young prince," as Scott calls him, prove to be fatal, leading his men to death, prosecution, starvation, and destruction. After the final battle, all that remains of Charles Stuart and his followers is the notion of glory they had fought for, but never managed to find (Gabaldon, *Dragonfly* 907). In other words, the violent history consumes the ideals of the romance.

3. REPRESENTATION OF HISTORIC SCOTLAND

Sir Walter Scott has left a substantial mark in the tradition of epic depictions of the Scottish culture. His approach to the land and its people set the course for his literary successors, paving the way for authors such as Gabaldon and their understanding of the country's significance. What is so interesting about Scott is his way of giving life to the land. His meticulous descriptions of the place, garb, customs, manners, and the overall condition of the people inhabiting the Scottish Highlands were a pioneer attempt at bringing the past to life in the mind of the reader.

Along with the descriptions of the lush, fairy-like, romantic scenery (Valente 253), where Scott particularly excels is in the rendering of the Scottish clans. Their feudal ruling system, their dress, their dialect and manner of speaking, as well as their utter unpreparedness for the battles with the Hanoverians, are presented to the reader in such a way that he can hardly fail in conjuring up a vivid image of the doomed, tartan-clad warriors. A detailed description of them is given when they march through Edinburgh:

Finer and hardier men could not have been selected out of any army in Christendom; while the free and independent habits which each possessed, and which each was yet so well taught to subject to the command of his chief, and the peculiar mode of discipline adopted in Highland warfare, rendered them equally formidable by their individual courage and high spirit, and from their rational conviction of the necessity of acting in unison, and of giving their national mode of attack the fullest opportunity of success. But, in a lower rank to these, there were found individuals of an inferior description, the common peasantry of the Highland country... half naked, stunted in growth, and miserable in aspect (Scott 328).

This image of the Highland army, along with the unjustified optimism of the Bonnie Prince, explains to the reader why they had to fall. They looked formidable, but in a sorry state of disrepair:

Here was a pole-axe, there a sword without a scabbard; here a gun without a lock, there a scythe set straight upon a pole; and some had only their

dirks, and bludgeons or stakes pulled out of hedges. The grim, uncombed, and wild appearance of these men, most of whom gazed with all the admiration of ignorance upon the most ordinary productions of domestic art, created surprise in the Lowlands, but it also created terror (Scott 330).

Unprepared for the English battle tactics and severely underarmed, the clans have no chance of victory. They are guided by honor, justice, and a sense of duty, but instead of being rewarded for it, they are led to death by the one who they consider their military and spiritual leader. Scott's writing does not leave the reader awestruck after the battle of Culloden, but, much like *Waverley* himself, resigned to the fate of those whose romantic ideals prove to be too much for them; the defeat is only a part of historical development.

In her coloring of the eighteenth-century Scottish landscape, Diana Gabaldon is not far behind – it could be said she even outdoes Scott in certain aspects. Her works give much more space to the pagan traditions, festivities and myths specific for the region. The fairy hill of Craigh na Dun, near Inverness, is the very portal through which Claire is transported to the past. The beliefs and superstitions that the nation holds are presented as an integral and deeply rooted part of their everyday life and as the governing force of their conduct. Thus, at some point Claire is taken to a spring, told to drink from it, and asked a question, the sincerity of which is judged upon the fact the spring is believed to be a magical revealer of truth. This is only one example of the author giving the readers a sense of remoteness of the culture they are presented with.

The clan culture is as good as reenacted. The reader is drawn into the whole system of chiefs, lairds, tenants, rents, and other aspects of the feudal society, and can experience them along with Claire. The whole spectrum of traditions and activities is explicated and made alive by Claire's experience of it. These include Dougal MacKenzie surreptitiously gathering money for the Prince's rebellion, the collecting of rents, the feasts in the castle, the healings and the witch hunts. The most vivid are the colors of Highland life:

Banners and tartans hung on the walls between the windows, plaids and heraldry of all descriptions splotching the stones with color. By contrast, most of the people gathered below for dinner were dressed in serviceable shades of grey and brown, or in the soft brown and green plaid of hunting kilts, muted tones suited for hiding in the heather (Gabaldon, *Outlander* 103).

The ubiquitous tartan and men wrapped in plaid are a part of the scenery as much as the misty moors and emerald glens. One is synonymous with the other, existing in unison. The people are a part of nature, and, through

their mutually dependent life, nature is a part of the people. Their very way of existence is based on their natural surroundings.

Writing in the same fashion as Scott, Gabaldon manages to stay on his track, but also finds the space for her own explorations. The tradition is the same – Scotland and its people are represented as a lively rural setting, romantic in aspect and tragic in outcome. However, each of the two narratives focuses on different aspects of the same culture, which makes them both worthwhile.

4. WRITING HISTORICAL FICTION

Both Scott and Gabaldon took historical artifacts and localities as the basis for their story, imagining the life of eighteenth-century Scotland on already imaginative renderings of the past. Stephenie McGucken claims that fictionalized accounts of history, such as *Waverley* and *Outlander*, want to familiarize the readers with the past through the universal themes of human existence, making them see the similarities with the present world (12). Since it cannot pertain to, or be held as reconstructing, absolute knowledge, historical fiction cannot be judged as truthful or misleading. *Waverley* and *Outlander* fit well within the paradigm.

Historical fictions are (sometimes) heavily romanticized accounts of what is generally considered objective reality; the writers are usually held as those who make romance out of history (hence the name *historical romance*). At the end of *Dragonfly in Amber*, when talking to Roger about her experience at Culloden, Claire even overtly blames them for falsifying the truth. Roger puts fault on the historians, but Claire disagrees:

Not the historians. No, not them. Their greatest crime is that they presume to know what happened [...] No, the fault lies with the artists," Claire went on. "The writers, the singers, the tellers of tales. It's them that take the past and re-create it to their liking. Them that could take a fool and give you back a hero, take a sot and make him a king." [They are liars or sorcerers who] see the bones in the dust of the earth, see the essence of a thing that was, and clothe it in new flesh, so the plodding beast reemerges as a fabulous monster (Gabaldon, *Dragonfly* 907).

Talking about Prince Charles, Claire condemns all authors who took it upon themselves to write about past events, unjustifiably making heroes out of figures who did not deserve the status. However, McGucken further argues that

constructed authenticity and fictionalized history are not to be dismissed. As we have seen, they bring history to life for an audience in ways that are otherwise impossible. They are not meant to be historical reenactments, but a backdrop for a fictionalized story based on history [...] A by-product of this imaginative recreation is the mental recreation of history in its physical context (18).

It is a way of "mak[ing] history popular and accessible, to spark interest that was until then nonexistent" (Weber). Both Scott and Gabaldon evoke history in the mind of the reader, giving it another life in the present. They present the past as a feeling, giving the reader space and opportunity for interpretation. Valente claims history in *Waverley* is posed as a problem relating to the interpretation of human experience, and not a given entity (251). The narrative, instead of claiming to be recounting the past, deals with the process of making sense out of it; nothing is ever presented as complete. The same could be said for *Outlander*. Neither of the narratives pertains to all-encompassing knowledge. The course of events is questioned, the necessity of action provoked, the right to make a choice shunned. The authors focus on "the sense of the past as a phenomenon, a sensation, a feeling and a passion," making history aestheticized through their writing, rather than giving it as an absolute (Shaw 152). In their artistic rendition of historical reality, they portray "the typically human terms in which great historical trends become tangible" (Lukács 35). They do not claim they know the answers, but merely pose the questions.

What Claire essentially criticizes is romanticizing the past as a verifiable phenomenon but, today, the idea of history being unquestionable does not stand (Hutcheon 95). In the words of Hayden White,

history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and [...], with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought (113).

As it cannot be empirically verifiable, not even history can pertain to objective truth. Shaw even goes so far as to claim that all histories are, in fact, historical romances (271). According to him, it is not only in the medieval legends that the two become one, but also in every story about the irrevocable past. He states that, for history to be free of romance, it would have to deal with immediate reality (Shaw 268). Since the past is irretrievable, the question whether all, some, or none of the stories about it are romances remains unanswered, but one should acknowledge their inherent *possibility* to be romanticized; Valente claims distance and irrevocability are the factors that heighten the possibility of romanticizing (267). As postmodernist theory has shown, all stories about the past have

the potential to be romanticized. However, in the context of literature, that does not make them faulty, or "false". In Todorov's words, "literature is not a discourse that can or must be false ... it is a discourse that, precisely, cannot be subjected to the test of truth; it is neither true nor false [...]: this is what defines its very status as fiction" (qtd. in Hutcheon 109).

Linda Hutcheon positions both history and historical fiction as types of discourse, narratives that deal with the past in equal manner (93). They both deal with signification, rather than validation of particular events (Hutcheon 96), shaping our experience of time through structures of plot (100). Thus, the position of a writer of historical fiction is equally faulty, or equally perceptive, as that of a common historian. Since they can only know the past through its discursive rendition (Hutcheon 97), for those who live in the present it is rather difficult to come to all-encompassing knowledge about the intricate web that is the past. Accordingly, the respective narratives of Scott and Gabaldon do not hold to an erroneous belief that they can emulate the past in its objective reality, but rather weave the feeling of it into well-structured literary plots. Their historical authenticity lies in the moral and other inner aspects of an age (Lukács 50), out of which grows the overall "atmosphere of historical necessity" (Lukács 59). Both authors focus on the "historical atmosphere" (Lukács 48) of the time; with their characters being pulled between the romantic and the realistic forces, as well as the meticulous descriptions of the last throes of a culture, they problematize the phenomenon of history and what it means for the present. For them, it is not about the facts, but rather about the ambience.

END NOTES

- 1 For a detailed analysis of chivalry as a socio-political issue and a feudal remnant in the late eighteenth century in "Christabel," see Fulford 55-57.

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