

RITUAL STRANGENESS: ELEMENTS OF NOH IN *THE ONLY JEALOUSY OF EMER*

by Melinda Morrow

In 1913 W.B. Yeats discovered the Japanese Noh theater at a time when he was seeking a new form for his drama. His plays were moving ever farther from realism toward pure poetry, and in the Noh Yeats believed he had found a form for poetic drama similar to what he hoped to create. He borrowed structural elements from what he knew of the Noh and combined them with his interest in mythology and folklore to write the “Plays for Dancers.”

The story of Yeats’s adoption of Noh elements has been traced in several scholarly works, as have the specific appearance of these elements within his plays. The most frequently discussed play is *At the Hawk’s Well* because it was the first of Yeats’s plays after his encounter with the Noh and because it explicitly uses elements such as dance, masks, and the supernatural. The second play in the group, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, also receives attention from critics discussing such issues, but seems to be a source of much more contention. While it uses many Noh elements, it also differs more from a Noh play than does *At the Hawk’s Well*. Furthermore, there seems to be considerable disagreement about interpretation of the play; no one agrees on what Emer’s only jealousy is. By examining why and how Yeats uses Noh elements in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, we can arrive at an interpretation that acknowledges the power and strangeness of this play. These elements are not peripheral; the dramatic form of the play is part of its meaning.

It is important to realize that Yeats had a limited knowledge of the Noh. Everything he knew was based on Ezra Pound’s work with Ernest Fenollosa’s translations of Noh plays and on what some amateur Japanese Noh singers and the dancer Michio Ito could tell him (Sekine 135). Thus, his new form was based on what Daniel Albright calls “certain exuberant fantasies bred [on] inconsiderable ignorance of the Noh theater” (34). It is not surprising, therefore, that there are some significant differences between the actuality of Noh performances and Yeats’s plays. Dwelling on these differences and Yeats’s lack of knowledge is not especially productive because Yeats conceived of his plays as a new form, not a copy of a Japanese form. As he remarked in his introduction to *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, Pound’s and Fenollosa’s translation of Noh plays, “I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way—an aristocratic form” (221). Yet despite the fact that this form is an invention, differing significantly from the Noh, it does draw heavily on theatrical elements that appear in the Noh. The role of these elements in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* is to create a ritual drama that is simultaneously strange and natural.

Noh theatre is a traditional Japanese form that originated in the fourteenth century.

It combined elements of court dances and religious ceremonies to produce performances featuring dance, recitation, and singing (Waley 16-17). The main character in Noh is called the *shite*, and is generally the supernatural entity in the play. This character usually wears a mask, sings, and dances. The *Waki* is a subsidiary character, unmasked, who sets up the action in some way. There may also be other players involved, but the focus is always on the *shite* (Ishibashi 189-90). The players are accompanied by musicians playing drums and bamboo flute and by a chorus of eight men who chant and sing but do not participate in the action (Ishibashi 190).

All of these elements are meant to create a feeling of strangeness while drawing on a transcendent naturalism. Hiro Ishibashi argues that “All the stage directions of the *Noh* are very subtly designed to make the intellect slumber without leaving an impression of artifice” (137). The slumbering of the intellect provides room for ritual and magic elements. Yeats was attracted to these ritual elements because he wanted his poetic drama to deeply affect his audience. Susan Gorsky explains this goal:

Poetic drama held an exalted position for him: it could (if properly approached by playwright and audience) recapture hidden or forgotten truths, reawaken its audience to the dignity and value of the past heroic world, remind its spectators of basic and unchanging values; that is, drama could—and should—renew a “faith” which man (especially his contemporary countrymen) had “lost.” (165)

Yeats was concerned, then, with creating a ritual that touched on the depths of human experience. In order to do so, he needed to remove his plays from the everyday without sacrificing their drama.

In *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, several production elements borrowed from the Noh theater contribute to the sense of ritual and strangeness. The first strange element was of course the choice of staging space. Yeats wanted the *Plays for Dancers* to be staged in small, intimate spaces such as drawing rooms. There was to be a minimum of scenery; he wrote (regarding the staging of the first play) that he wanted it kept simple “that its few properties can be packed up in a box or hung upon the wall where they will be fine ornaments” (222). The purpose of this simplified playing space was to create greater intimacy, a closer encounter with the language and the human body.

Noh also has simplified staging but to a different end. All Noh plays take place on a set stage that features a bridge and an unadorned main stage (Ishibashi 168). Though Ishibashi argues that this staging is not intended to create a sense of strangeness (“...instead the audience is invited to participate in the happenings on the stage” (146)), I would argue that the fixed, unchanging stage is ritual space and thus has the spiritual impact of a temple or shrine. Since Yeats did not have the luxury of staging his plays in temples, he relied on other ritual elements to balance the intimacy of the space with the unfamiliar.

The Only Jealousy of Emer begins with a ritual that Yeats created, the folding of the cloth. This ritual is described in *At the Hawk's Well*; it involves the musicians unfolding a black cloth as they move away from each other while singing the opening song, and then moving toward one another again and refolding the cloth (Miller 220). This served the practical purpose of covering up the playing space while the scene was set, and it also

began to create the atmosphere of ritual and strangeness that Yeats wanted. Steven Putzel, in a reception theory analysis of *Emer*, explains that “the folding ceremony creates gaps of indeterminacy requiring audience complicity...” (116). The audience cannot immediately make sense of the musicians’ actions, so audience members must actively create their own understanding.

In the ritualistic atmosphere the folding ceremony creates, and with the audience engaged in creative interpretation, the play’s poetry makes sense. The opening song, as the musicians unfold the cloth, is imagistic and a bit inscrutable. It is not immediately apparent what the song refers to as the first musician sings:

A woman’s beauty is like a white
Frail bird, like a white sea-bird alone
At daybreak after stormy night
Between two furrows upon the ploughed land:
A sudden storm, and it was thrown
Between dark furrows upon the ploughed land. (113)¹

In normal play-viewing circumstances, this poetic language would present a difficult puzzle that might confound and frustrate the audience. As accompaniment to the strange ritual of folding and unfolding the cloth, however, it works as ambiance. If the intellect is slumbering, the images suggest frailty, death, the twists of fate. Rational analysis could reach the same conclusions, but since these are the first lines of the play, Yeats seems to be relying on them for atmosphere rather than meaning. When the musician later begins the lines that explain the setting, the audience has been warmed up for the use of poetry; the explication, in comparison to the opening song, seems very straightforward:

I call before the eyes a roof
With cross-beams darkened by smoke;
A fisher’s net hangs from a beam,
A long oar lies against the wall. (114)

Even in this description, the poetry gives the setting a feeling of added import and mystery through its rhythm and evocative minimalism.

Yeats uses poetry to create ritual atmosphere at other points in the play as well. Susan Gorsky points out, “...the speeches between the ghost of Cuchulain and Fand, the Woman of the Sidhe, are in rhyme and are thus made remote and mystical as they are sharply separated from the rest of the play” (169). At that point in the play, Fand is luring Cuchulain away from the waking world and thus from Emer. The heightened mysticism of these lines creates an added tension as Emer tries to decide what she will do. Note the incantatory effect of Fand’s speech:

Time shall seem to stay his course;
When your mouth and my mouth meet
All my round shall be complete
Imagining all its circles run;

And there shall be oblivion
 Even to quench Cuchulain's drouth,
 Even to still that heart. (122)

The rhythm and rhyming couplets of Fand's lines suggest her mystical power over Cuchulain, which gives Emer's dilemma added credibility and tragic effect.

The audience thus accepts the truth of the drama not in spite of the stylization but because of it. Richard Allen Cave, who directed an experimental production of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, tells how his lead actress learned to handle the play's poetry:

By making the rhythmic charge of her speeches the principle governing her invention of each detail of movement, posture, and vocal inflexion, she will foster in performance the transformation of narrative into symbol. She will have achieved a consistent and organic rhythmic line and her finished performance will be like subtly extemporized variations in voice and body on a given motive. This, of course, is stylization, but it carries us directly to the inner reality of the characters without any loss of credibility. (138)

The poetry of the play is of course an artificial speech pattern. Yet, properly done, it can magnify the characterizations and drama.

The next element of ritualized strangeness is the use of masks. The stage directions specify that the ghost of Cuchulain, the figure of Cuchulain, and the Woman of the Sidhe should all be wearing masks, and the remaining characters—the three musicians, Emer, and Eithne Inguba—should be “masked, or their faces made up to resemble masks” (113). Yeats wanted the players masked for two reasons. First, masks could be made to look always a certain way (beautiful or distorted); he commented in *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*:

A mask will enable me to substitute for the face of some commonplace player, or for that face repainted to suit his own vulgar fancy, the fine invention of a sculptor.... A mask never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you go is yet a work of art.... (226)

The masks, then, replaced the individual faces of the actors with a fixed image created by an artist. This is similar to the use of masks in Noh, in which masks are expected to be beautiful in and of themselves in order to contribute to the aesthetic unity of the play. This aesthetic strives for *yugen*, a transcendent beauty characterized by calm (Ishibashi 131). While Yeats was not striving for that sort of unified beauty, he wanted control over all the elements of the play which contributed to the quality of strangeness.

Defamiliarization is the second function that masks serve in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. The audience cannot look to the expression on the actor's face for clues about emotion. They must instead concentrate fully on the poetry and movement occurring on stage. This concentration heightens the impact of the characters, elevating them from humanity into a more archetypal, primal force. The stage directions tell us that the Woman of the Sidhe, for example, is supposed to look “more like an idol than a human being” (121). She represents the implacable supernatural forces in the play, and her specific mask heightens

her contrast to Emer, our human heroine. The masks, then, create not only strangeness, but also an intensified contact with the deeply human. Susan Gorsky points out the archetypal quality of masked characters in her study of ritual in the dance plays:

The musicians, who in all the plays are made up to appear as if masked, surely approach the archetypal through their role as minstrels, the itinerant myth-makers and story-tellers of all ancient lands. The masks used by the other characters similarly serve both to distance them from the ordinary world and to intensify that in them which is essentially and typically human. (170)

The masks add to the power of the performance by giving the characters a superhuman presence.

Dance and movement serve a similar defamiliarizing function in the play. In *Certain Noble Plays*, Yeats suggested that the movement in the *Plays for Dancers* should be like “those movements of the body copied from the marionette shows of the fourteenth century” (226). As Wayne Chapman points out, Yeats’s ideas about movement were influenced by Edward Gordon Craig, a designer he admired and worked with for the Abbey Theatre production of *The Hour-Glass*. Craig’s “emphasis of the artificiality of drama, furthermore, attracted Yeats to mime and puppet theater,” and, in particular, Craig’s idea of the actor as “Ueber-Marionette” clearly influenced Yeats’s directions for movement in his several *Plays for Dancers* (50).² While this marionette-like direction may suggest to us a jerky, unnatural movement, it was actually based on an ideal of symmetry (Albright 39). This type of movement was supposed to be strange yet also intensely human. Its origins only partially derive from the Noh. Ishibashi comments on movement in the Noh and in Yeats that “The [Noh] is an imitation of life, while [Yeats’s movement] comes from idealised expression in the human body itself” (141). Yet the movement suggested by Yeats for *The Only Jealousy of Emer* is similar to that in Noh insofar as the movement creates beautiful but meaningful images by using the whole body.

The use of unnatural movement, like the use of masks, contributes to the archetypal significance of the characters. They lose their individual traits. In her critique of gender in the dance plays, Amy Koritz suggests that “[Yeats’s] insistence on masks, on stylized movement and non-illusionistic conventions suggests that while this drama is dependent on dance, and thus on the body, for its effect...it rejects the individuality of the bodies it uses” (389). Indeed, this rejection of individuality seems to be one of the goals of Yeats’s play. He cannot create universal ritual by focusing on individual idiosyncrasies, so he relies on the defamiliarizing techniques he has borrowed in part from the Noh.

Some critics have pointed out the apparent contradiction between the desire for human depth and universality and the artificiality of the play’s form. Daniel Albright discusses this paradoxical relationship as it intersects with Yeats’s ideas about movement:

In Yeats’ essay on the Noh we find what seems to be a contradiction in his praise of the Japanese theater: He celebrates it at once for being completely unmechanical, the art of sheer body, and for being a kind of glorified marionette-show. (37)

Albright goes on to explain how this apparent paradox is resolved, however. The “glorified

marionette-show” calls to mind a mysterious mechanical art. Such arts were often associated with the orient, as in Hans Christian Anderson’s tale of the emperor and the nightingale in which the mechanical bird is a gift from the east (37). But while the orient is on one hand associated with mechanical arts, it also has connotations of the very physical. As Albright points out, “...the Noh is the place where the whole body emotes” (38). The whole body must emote if the face is covered with a mask and the language is obscure and poetic. These two apparently opposed ideas—the mechanical versus the human body—are resolved because “Yeats seem[s] to feel that in the deepest part of nature there is something unnatural, uncanny” (39). The mechanical elements, the marionette movements, express that deep strangeness which is within each person.

Yeats himself was of course aware of the paradoxical relationship between the strange and the true, the unnatural and the natural, distance and intimacy. In discussing the dances of Michio Ito, who performed the part of the guardian of the well in *At the Hawk’s Well*, Yeats said: “One realised anew, at every separating strangeness, that the measure of all arts’ greatness can be but in their intimacy” (224). Strangeness can create intimacy, as the masks allow the actors to appear very strange to audience members who are only a few feet away in a drawing room.

Likewise, the artificiality of the drama’s form can emphasize that which is truly human. Richard Allen Cave had this to say about the interaction of masks and movement in his production of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*:

As those masked figures moved about the largely static Emer, they took on immediate symbolic connotations; the startling transitions of mood that accompany the arrival of each new person in the drama now marked less the stages of a sequential narrative than an ever-deeper probing into the recesses of Emer’s psyche. (141)

By exploiting the tensions of strangeness and intimacy, the play can reflect archetypes of heroism and tragedy.

Since Yeats was attempting to create a ritual drama, it is especially important that the play have the universality of archetypes. Cave decides, after producing the play, that “the central tragic dilemma has a timeless appeal quite distinct from its specific Celtic reference and it has too an audacious theatricality not only in such obvious particulars as its use of mask, music, ritual, and dance but also in its rapid transitions of mood” (140). The play’s theatricality must be balanced by a timeless story that the audience believes in; otherwise it is merely strange rather than powerful and mysterious.

I believe that the story of this play does manage to strike a balance between the human and the supernatural, the strange and the familiar. The production elements (mask, dance, music) try to arrive at a sense of true nature through uncanniness, and the plot of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* likewise uses strange, spiritual elements to arrive at a true human drama.

This use of the strange is more clearly understood in contrast to Yeats’s Noh sources. The plots of Noh plays generally contain very little action in the western sense of action. They are often concerned with communication with spirits and Buddhist themes of peace. Albright comments that in Noh, “The dramatic action, then, is only a movement towards enlightenment” (141). This movement can be seen in the Noh play that is believed to be

one source for *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. *Emer's* plot is from a well-known Irish legend, but the play is believed to be based also on the Noh play *Aoinouye* (Sekine 140-1), which appeared in Pound and Fenollosa's volume of Noh plays. In *Aoinouye*, the principle character (the *shite*, in Noh) is dying Lady Aoi's jealous spirit, which possesses the spirit of her rival, Lady Rokujo. The jealous spirit is driven out of the apparition of Lady Rokujo and appears in its true form as a horned demon. The demon is finally vanquished by an exorcism (Pound 113-121). The dramatic action, then, is in the spirit's movement from restlessness (caused by a desire for vengeance) to enlightened peace (by eliminating the desire). The chorus says of Lady Aoi at the end of the play that "Pity has melted her heart; and she has gone into Buddha"(121).

In *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, Yeats was also concerned with this issue of a movement toward enlightenment, but the play contains more conflict. Albright and various other critics point out that Yeats's plays of this period all contain more dramatic action than one might find in a Noh play. Albright comments, "Almost every Noh play in Pound's collection ends benignly, the spirits happily manifest, the priest fortunate to behold; but in Yeats' plays there is a quality of urgency, of desperation quite foreign to the mysterious calm of the original" (44). He seems to be overstating the issue somewhat, since there is a conflict in Pound's version of *Aoinouye* between the demon of jealousy and the exorcising priest. But he is correct in pointing out that there is very little sense of desperation. There is little dramatic tension; one never suspects that the priest will fail to exorcise the spirit. Likewise, there is no sense that something is at stake. The spirit is a projection of the dying Lady Aoi's jealousy, so ultimately it can harm no one but herself.

The dramatic tensions of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* contrast not only with the relative predictability of *Aoinouye*, but also with Yeats's other source, Lady Gregory's telling of "The Only Jealousy of Emer." In Lady Gregory's version, Cuchulain freely meets with Fand, and Emer confronts him with a knife and fifty armed women behind her. Fand and Emer argue about who should give up Cuchulain, and Fand ultimately renounces her claim because "it is [Fand] that will be given up in the end, and it is [Fand] that [has] been in danger of it all this time"(220). Emer later drinks "a drink of forgetfulness...that she might forget her jealousy" (222).

Yeats's *The Only Jealousy of Emer* reworks both the move to enlightenment found in *Aoinouye* and the active pursuit of resolution found in Lady Gregory's story. In contrast to *Aoinouye*, the play's climax is not merely concerned with one supernatural entity, but rather with a human, a woman, who must make a choice that affects herself, her husband, and his lover. A great deal is at stake. In this, and all of his Plays for Dancers, Yeats is concerned with "...the tense, all too human dilemma which is the narrative focus of each work" (Cave 136) rather than Buddhist spirituality. As Susan Gorsky points out, rather than enlightenment, "At the center of each play is a moment of supreme choice, a climatic, impassioned and sometimes heroic moment of timeless passions and universal conflicts" (166). In contrast to Lady Gregory's story, Yeats's Emer can only make that tragic choice; no one else is involved, and she can not attempt to win Cuchulain back by her own power.

Based on everything that we know about the elements in the play, how do we interpret the conflicts in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*? Various theories have been proposed regarding what exactly Emer's only jealousy is and why she chooses to renounce her hope for a future with Cuchulain. Masaru Sekine argued that Fand, the Woman of the Sidhe,

“...causes uncontrollable jealousy in Emer, and she gives up her hope of living with Cuchulain in his old age by renouncing his love” (142). While this is the obvious interpretation of the events, I believe it fails to take into account the supernatural Noh elements which Yeats included in the play. Jealousy of Fand cannot explain why anything that precedes Fand’s appearance takes place.

One way of understanding the dramatic action of the play is to consider it in terms of a controlling metaphor. Yeats thought that Noh plays achieved their unity through a central metaphor. In *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* he comments, “I wonder if I am fanciful in discovering in the plays themselves...a playing upon a single metaphor, as deliberate as the echoing rhythm of line in Chinese and Japanese painting” (233-4). He goes on to say by ignoring characterization and focusing on the central idea of images, the plays “...made possible a hundred lovely intricacies.” (235) Whether or not Yeats was correct in his assumptions about central metaphors in Noh, it is clear that he admired the use of such devices to achieve unity.

One interpretation of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, then, relies on discovering a central metaphor. Sister Aloyse Scanlon proposed that the controlling metaphor of the play is the sea, which is equivalent to death. The play takes place, as the musicians tell us, in a fisher’s hut by the sea, and “Beyond the open door the bitter sea,/The shining bitter sea, is crying out.” (115) The sea is bitter because it is the cause of Cuchulain’s deathly condition. As Emer explains to Eithne, after unknowingly killing his son, Cuchulain began to fight the sea:

And being mad with sorrow, he ran out;
And after, to his middle in the foam,
With shield before him and with sword in hand.
He fought the deathless sea....
.....he waded out
Until the water had swept over him;
but the waves washed his senseless image up
And laid it at this door. (115-116)

The sea is not only deathless, it *is* death. When Emer encourages Eithne to call out to Cuchulain, she tells Eithne: “We’re but two women struggling with the sea” (117).

The sea is also metaphorically the supernatural forces of the Sidhe in this play. These beings are said to live beneath the waves. Emer thinks that separating Cuchulain from the sea might save him; she says, “I’ll cover up his face to hide the sea” as she and Eithne attempt to revive him. When Fand appears, she is described with a related metaphor, as a fisher:

She has hurried from the Country-under-Wave
And dreamed herself into that shape that he
May glitter in her basket; for the Sidhe
Are dextrous fishers and they fish for men
With dreams upon the hook. (120)

The sea, then, means death for Cuchulain. When he revives, Eithne claims that she “...won him back from the sea” (124). Given this central metaphor, Scanlon concludes that “...the

sole threat to the mighty Cuchulain; the sea, [is] the only jealousy of Emer” (276). This interpretation leads to the conclusion that Emer is jealous of death’s (the sea’s and the Sidhe’s) power to take Cuchulain away from her. While this view has some merit, it still does not offer a full explanation for all the dramatic events that take place during the course of the play.

The most complete interpretation I can find revolves around an understanding of the supernatural and psychological elements in the play. Cave suggests that Emer’s jealousy was her clinging to the hope for future togetherness. Bricriu is a projection of her fear of letting go of this jealously guarded hope; when Emer renounces her love and her hope, she and Cuchulain are freed from the spiritual forces of the Sidhe. As Cave describes it,

It is, as we now see, Emer’s own jealousy that has created the figure of discord (Bricriu) which rises terrifyingly from her marriage-bed; not understanding Cuchulain, Emer has travestied him in her imagination; now her sight is cleansed and the actor playing Bricriu changes his mask and stance and rises with Cuchulain’s heroic proportions from the bed. (141)

I think this interpretation works for several reasons. First, it’s compatible with the Noh source, *Aoinouye*. Pound speculated that the figure of Princess Rokujo that appears on the stage “is a phantom or image of Awoi no Uye’s own jealousy” (114). The dying Lady Aoi has, through the extremity of her emotions, created an external manifestation of her feelings. This manifestation and the subsequent exorcism reflect the influence of Shamanistic elements in Japanese religion on the Noh theater (Chiba 95). Since Yeats also believed in many Shamanistic practices and tenets (Chiba 94-95), it is reasonable to suppose that the Sidhe in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* can be understood as manifestations of Emer’s jealous hope that she and Cuchulain will end their lives together. The tensions of the situation make this manifestation possible and, indeed, inevitable. Shamanism suggests that spiritual manifestations and possessions are the result of traffic between two worlds, and the setting and action of this play bring worlds into contact. The play takes place after the intersection of Cuchulain’s heroism and madness, on the border between the land and the sea, in the zone between the waking and the spirit world.

This intersection between the real and the spirit worlds is taking place not just within the play, but within the performance of it. The defamiliarizing masks, dance, and poetic language create a sense of mystery and ritual in the intimate space of a drawing room. A familiar Irish folk-tale is made strange and thus gains significance. Emer’s dilemma becomes universal: her most cherished, jealously guarded thing is hope, yet it is the one thing she must renounce in order save her love. By renouncing it, Emer becomes a tragic heroine and an archetypal figure who sacrifices herself to save another. If we understand the play this way, Yeats succeeds in creating a ritual drama. *The Only Jealousy of Emer* literally involves communication with the spirit world and exorcism of a demon. This contact with the supernatural reaffirms our tragic plight as humans facing death while attempting to hold onto love and our faith in heroism.

The Only Jealousy of Emer succeeds not just by the virtue of its dialogue or the inherent drama of its story. The staging elements borrowed from Noh are crucial to its success because they work together with the text to create an uncanny atmosphere that allows ritual to occur. Cave, discussing his production of the play, comments somewhat ruefully that

“We had begun by taking outrageous liberties with Yeats’s directions for *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and ended by proving the necessity of observing every one of them” (143). The masks, staging, dance, and poetry are integral to the success of the play. Yeats said of his dance plays: “I hope to have attained the distance from life which can made credible strange events, elaborate words” (*Certain Noble Plays* 221). *The Only Jealousy of Emer* demonstrates that he not only makes strange events credible; he makes them powerful as well.

NOTES

1. All references to the text of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* are from Jeffares’ edition of *Eleven Plays of William Butler Yeats*.
2. Chapman’s article gives a complete account of the influence of Craig’s theories and the English Masque tradition on Yeats’s staging.

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