

# Philip Matricardi

## Matricardi Research & Development

(415) 787-2971

P.O. Box 62

Crockett, CA 94525

Concerning The Disclosure of Sources in The Writing of  
Heroic Fantasy

A Comparison Among These Works:

Merlin's Mirror by André Norton  
The Crystal Cave by Mary Stewart  
Four Branches of the Mabinogion by  
Evangeline Walton  
Merlin's Ring by H. Warner Munn

Imagine with me, if you will, that what we've been taught to call Mythology is History told in stories, without the benefit of the academic phenomenon called Historiography. Strip a History text of footnotes and bibliographical material -- what's left should pass for a novel. Picaresque novel, perhaps, or a collection of short stories developing a central notion -- nonetheless a work of good storytelling literature.

That few, if any, college or high school history texts stand up as good storytelling literature gives rise to my desire to replace what has been called History with what has been called Myth. Some may choose to argue that my preference would severely limit <sup>what</sup> Myth/History would be available. You might think we'd be left with Ancient History -- nothing more recent than Helen of Troy. Grail Myth would take us a bit further, into the Christian Era. Including folklore with Mythology (I think that's a fine idea) will, in fact, bring us up to date. The folklore of today (tomorrow's mythology) can be garnered from the oral tradition-in-the-making circulating streets and taverns and racetrack shedrows (to name but a few). Years before you read such stuff in print, decades before you see it in a respectable book or periodical, you can hear about Walt Disney frozen (in suspended Animation) out in the Arizona desert, or how Telly's Pop really won all those races (coming swiftly from the rear along the outside in the homestretch), or how Aristotle Onassis ordered Jack Kennedy's death, or even Albert Einstein's confirmation that light travels slower through such places as the Oregon Vortex and the Bermuda Triangle. That much of what you hear this way may never reach print doesn't limit its validity. Keep this in mind -- if it sounds good, it may be true. Let me borrow from Poets. Fact ever seeks to obscure Fancy, yet Beauty continues to be Truth; Truth, Beauty.

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The probability that most Facts distort Truth(at best)increases when you consider what "objectivity" and "the scientific method" do. As methods of editing perception, they filter, they act as blinders. The tools used to discover or create Facts father more sins of omission than they shed any light. Being objective, one must leave out more than one leaves in. A writer of good story leaves out dross. A historian leaves that in, and discards all else. The historian as scientist(historiographer) believes the reverse of the Poetic injunction, at least he behaves as though he did.

Let Curiosity guide you rather than Objectivity. Curiosity guides me to bookcovers with illustrated circles of standing stones. Words in booktitles attracting my curious eye include Arthur, Sword, Ring, Stone, Cave, Mirror, Moor, Song, Atlantis, Seal, Merlin. Imagine what History must have been like before the Nineteenth Century arrived with Division of Labor puffing out of the Ultimate Smokestack. Just as few drew clear lines between Chemistry and Alchemy two hundred years ago; so few bothered to distinguish Realism from Romance, Poetry from History. Those who did, the boorish pedants happy in their heaven to find me writing an essay, unconcerned with the substance of language, the soul of speech -- merrily fretted their lives away tying down the metaphysic of the Word with limitations of form.

Three hundred years ago, King James of England caused certain already ancient Greek and Hebrew texts to be translated into English, the English of Elizabeth the previous monarch and Shakespeare her Bard. How much of the King James Version of the Bible is History, how much Poetry, and how much Myth or Fantasy? James' translators applied what they considered to be scientific accuracy to their task, albeit setting the whole in verse would hardly make their royal patron wonder as much as certain modern Scholars of Historiography might take exception were they to discover James Schlesinger writing in rimed iambic pentameter. Might not the stuff printed in the nineteen fifties that passed itself off as "American History" have been better written in Verse? The fabrications and imaginations of Anti-Communist apologists might prove more palatable today had they been entertaining rather than merely mythological.

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Consider with me four writers, three women and a man. One of them a Best-Selling author. The others less so, although their audiences fiercely enthusiastic. You might even call H. Warner Munn obscure. Most of my science fiction reading friends and I delighted in André Norton as children and never gave her up. We've had thirty years to come across Evangeline Walton in print. Following the New York Times Best Seller List you should have encountered Mary Stewart. The Crystal Cave graced the List for nearly a year. These books I will refer to, by these writers, have a few things in common. Every one of them ~~####~~ mentions Merlin by name. If not in the title, then in the text. Each of them draw material from stories that existed before the authors were born. Actually, most of the source material spawning these books predates the English language as we now know it, conjugate it, grammar it, syntax it. The question I would have you consider is, would you know that, if all you held in your hand was one of these books? Could you guess the source of what you read? Would a sense of History accompany your sense of Wonder (these are all wonderfully written and entertaining books)? Would you find the Walls between Illusion and your Everyday Reality melting, or thinning a little? Would what you read for Story become as significant for you as Front Page News or a televised Bicentennial Minute? And, if you happen to be of Northern European descent, would these stories awaken your Racial Memory? Perhaps the way the stories of Chinua Achebe arouse some Afro-American memories. Will these stories, any of them, influence your concept of Magic? After reading them will you be bothered that Scientific American rarely publishes articles on that subject?

Let's look into one of the two books naming Merlin in the title: Merlin's Ring by H. Warner Munn. Munn began writing in 1925 when Wierd Tales published "The Werewolf of Ponkert", a werewolf tale told from the werewolf's point of view, an idea Munn obtained from H.P. Lovecraft, according to Lin Carter. Now what did I do in the previous sentence? I begin with the name of one writer, Munn, indicate something he wrote, a short story, imply a source for the story, Lovecraft, and attribute evidence for the implication by naming yet another writer, Carter. That's how I wrote that. But what actually happened? You might say, what's the history behind my remark? You should be able to figure it out from the sentence itself. Enough clues there. I read what Carter says in his Introduction to Merlin's Ring. I rearranged the information, without distortion (I trust), and thereby wrote my own sentence. Same content, same History, but my own style, a sentence of my own crafting.

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Suppose I were to do something that Science Fiction writers have taught the Rand Corporation to do -- Extrapolate. Interpolate. Use my imagination. Fabricate. What you will. \* Ahem. ...H. P. Lovecraft discovered that he'd suffered an injury; when he surprised a friend in the dark, the other night, the friend gave him a little nip. Nothing serious, <sup>he</sup> thinks at the time, although the bite drew blood. When, a few weeks later, the moon begins to ripen, he realizes he suffered the bite on the night of the moon's previous fullness. A fact or two about his friend, plus a few missing facts, things he doesn't know about the guy but he'd sure like to know now, sets Lovecraft's already active imagination awirr. Lovecraft contacts H. Warner Munn, another acquaintance who's down in the Providence area from Massachusetts (or Lovecraft runs into him in Boston and goes out to Munn's home -- making this up as we go along, you know). He tells Munn to lock him up in his basement (his attic) and not to let him out until after moon set. Munn goes along with his friend, humoring him a little, but also quite curious. So he puts Lovecraft in a room locked from the outside with a peephole so he can observe what goes on. Munn has always admired Lovecraft, he has certain aspirations to write himself. Lovecraft tells him that in return for his kindness Munn can use whatever he observes that night as material for a story. So after Munn observes Lovecraft through the peephole that night, sees the fellow grow hair on his forehead and on the palms of his hands, he realizes that this is his big break. Now he has a vivid image of what this werewolf business is all about. Certain that he can write a convincing werewolf story, he takes Lovecraft's advice and goes one better. He writes as if he had been in Lovecraft's shoes, skin, fur. The werewolf's story from the werewolf's point of view.

Now what have I done? Fleshed out the first sentence I wrote based on Lin Carter's Introduction to H. Warner Munn. Thrown in a bit of my own wierd. Yet still, an essence of the original remains. Hopefully, I'm still faithful to what I perceive to be the "truth" of the matter -- that H. Warner Munn and H. P. Lovecraft were friends. After all, what are friends for? All Carter actually says is that they correspond and visit each other over the years they're both writing for Wierd Tales. But he never forbids the possibility that ~~these~~ the things they wrote, the story ideas they gave each other had something to do with experiences in their lives, things either or both of them had endured and survived.

What did I do? I crafted a paragraph of myth, feeling reasonably free to do so, since nothing I'd heard about either Munn or Lovecraft prevented me from so doing. You see, Myth, it rarely, if ever, contradicts History. I see Myth as fleshing out the bare bones of Historical Record. Legend the whole story of which History be merely an outline. Many stories can be told from a single outline. Many outlines written from a single story. Cuts both ways. Before we go on, any objections out

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there? Do you wish Extrapolation and Interpolation handled as distinct functions? Do you want to accuse me of juggling words, perhaps clumsily, perhaps with a certain deftness? If Futurists can extrapolate tomorrow, I'd enjoy interpolating yesterday, re-member, re-associate, re-integrate my thoughts and past experiences. And if that means extrapolating from today's printed word to flesh out or interpolate yesterday's, by all means. I give myself permission.

Certain students of Myth argue somewhat the reverse of my case. Say, someone does something or becomes something. Something of note, significant enough to go down to future generations in song or writing. The bard versifies the incident so it may be memorized and transmitted through a ritualized oral tradition, or the thing is written in the codified system of symbols called language so that he or she knowing that code, fluent with the language, may read the words, retell the tale. In that transmission, written or oral, the deed grows, becomes myth; the ordinarily significant becomes extraordinary or legendary.

A large man named Bran impresses people enough to follow him, into battle, into new lands, into new ways. Even before the bard enlarges him and his deeds in verse, Bran already tends to feel confined indoors, spends most of his time outside. His story grows. He becomes a King. In his own life or in the literature that survives him. In the literature(verse, poem, song, story)his significance grows further. Not just a King, but High King, a king over kings. And not just High King, but a good ~~is~~ High King, so good he is Blessed, becoming Bran the Blessed High King over the Island of the Mighty. And on he grows. So large in physique that no house can hold him, no boat carry his weight. Suppose Bran as a historical character, whether as a tribal chieftain, or High King of Britain, did visit Ireland -- an historical incident, whether to give battle or pay tribute, marry off his sister, win her back from kidnap or any other possible motive. Oceanographers and geologists agree that many places on Earth where once there was land, now swims a sea, and where once existed a sea now burns a desert. One can research and obtain authorities(even without consulting Velikovsky)that affirm that even as Britain once joined Brittany by land, even so Ireland and Wales were connected by a bridge of land. If in the transition from land to sea that space sank slowly washed away over the years, then at low tide the sand bar might be above water and at high tide below it during a certain period of history -- say, when Bran went to Ireland, why not? Mont ~~St.~~ Michel today

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**Philip Matricardi****Matricardi Research & Development**

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is an island at high tide and connected to Europe as a peninsula at low. So Bran the tribal chieftain, the High King, crosses this land bridge to Ireland at low tide rather than by boating a different route through deeper waters. The storyteller relating the incident might color the incident. Maybe the first bard does not, but his son or grandson does. The land bridge sinks a little deeper with each telling, Bran must grow taller as well to keep his head above water. Finally, by the time of the Mabinogion, the Welsh Epic that chronicles this History, Bran has grown to be a mountain of a man and the Channel between Ireland and Wales almost as deep as it is today. No house can hold him. The roof of the house built for him by the Irish King in the Tale is held up by a hundred of the tallest and oldest trees in all Ireland.

Evangeline Walton accounts for this legendary growth, the growth of Bran through legend, trims him down a bit. He's quite big, she says, but just bigger than any other man, that's all. He still wades out to cross over to Ireland, and no boat yet built can hold him, but she lets us feel the personality of Bran as a human being -- we gain closeness with him as I've never felt close to any Faery Tale Giant. A giant of a man, but no Giant. His sister Branwen can lift his severed head as she must later on in the story. There's magic to Evangeline Walton's telling of this story, but no absurdity.

Extrapolating or interpolating, extending a story or trimming it down some, those are things most of us do as we read. These are some of the fine tuning devices by which the fineness of a story emerges. A literal translation of an ancient work from a non-surviving culture, again consider the Welsh Mabinogi, would be full of white noise to a modern audience, hundreds, perhaps thousands of years after the work appeared under the writer's craft. The white noise, misunderstandings, cultural differences beyond the capacity of footnoting, not so easily explained outside the text, can be eliminated and the story emerge; the signal communicate clear and comprehensible across the centuries. A writer, a word craftperson can do this fine tuning. Scholars, historians often fail to do so. Some can tune in on the story so well that the radio disappears, the signal emerges into our minds whole cloth, a seamless garment. Such is the skill of André Norton. Such is the nature of her style.

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André Norton never shows us the sewing of the garment, the construction rarely comes to light. Rather, we witness the color, the texture of the fabric, the way the garment feels when we wear it, as we read the story. It shows no wear. Fresh from her mind comes this clothing and we readily snatch it up and costume ourselves in wonder.

H. Warner Munn is a similar craftsman, a tailor of word fabric. His garment, Merlin's Ring, has no label sewn to it but his own. Yet this garment's wonder washes questions out of mind. Where did it come from? Many sources. But finally, the mind of man, the mind of a god, the Muse told him what to write, he was there and is merely re-remembering for us -- all these remain possible. But when you wear his costume, or Madame Norton's, do you care? I did not. I reflected on Merlin's Mirror and Merlin's Ring many times, especially when I associated names and incidents with names and deeds recorded elsewhere. But at the time of the reading, my sense of wonder carried me beyond such considerations. I wore the garments on my mind and delighted in them.

Munn maps the world of his tale, and in many respects his map would be familiar to today's students of geography. Taking liberties like naming a certain body of water Ocean of Atlantis might well slip past the unastute or those whose eyes glazed, gleamed with bewitchment, the glamour of his tale. And couldn't you or I put together what we've heard as Facts in classrooms; things like -- Christopher Columbus discovered America for Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492; Leif Ericson had discovered it for himself and his kin a few hundred years before. We might have. So when H. Warner Munn puts those Facts together for us, we nod agreement, we accept, our sense of the historical ain't contradicted. Then we sit up startled as we realize with Munn that this connection, possible in History, points to the probability that Columbus knew where he was sailing all along. The clever Italian just sold the Spanish monarchs on financing his ships by letting him discover what he knew gradually, bit by bit, and after a voyage or two. He showed them rather than told them what he knew. That seems more than likely to me. Nothing breeds confidence like experience, and Columbus sounded confident to the Iberian King and Queen. That he sold them a spice route to India doesn't really matter. He packaged the New Land in the best way he knew to insure the sale.

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Of course, there's considerably more to Munn's Merlin's Ring. He ties in the historicity of Jeanne D'Arc with The Crusades and Far Eastern warfare and culture of a thousand years ago. He plays with that dry land to ocean business I mentioned earlier when the Gobi Desert becomes the Gobi Ocean for a while as we travel in time with our Hero Gwalchmai, Merlin's godson and the bearer of his ring; Munn hints that Atlantean warfare beyond the powers of nuclear weaponry turned this inland sea to desert. Munn weaves several story threads together and uses this fabric to produce a fine fitting garment indeed from recycled yarn scraps. The magic of Merlin sews it all together by the good offices of His Ring and the story hardly ends but passes on to the reader's own life when the ring disappears under the deeds of history.

André Norton writes a yarn called Merlin's Mirror with emblems and fabric designs found in a much earlier work by an equally imaginative writer by the name of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Mary Stewart points out that to serious historians Geoffrey's name is mud. I suggest that you define "serious historian" as one of those learned gentlemen who write history as though a tax agent intended to inspect his work and penalize him every time he entertained his readership. Such people naturally feel jealousy, and any entertainer's name would be mud to them. I cannot claim historical accuracy for Geoffrey's History of the Kings of Britain. Yet I can cite him and his work as inspiration for at least two excellent works of fanciful fiction, both of which I discuss here and now.

Moving from Munn's Merlin's Ring back to Walton's retelling of the four branches of the Mabinogion, the question of Christian and pagan confluences arises. Merlin, appropriately or not, focuses this matter in his person. That he practises magic, all agree. That he derived his learning or powers from similar sources as the Celtic Druids, some agree. (Norton suggests that his power was extraterrestrial in origin.) That he lived in a time when the Celtic gods were fading and Christianity gaining adherents in Britain, all agree. Only Munn goes so far as to convert Merlin to Christianity, however. The Pagan, therefore, might relish the reading of Merlin's Ring a bit less than the writings of the three women considered here. I think this distinction of attitudes significant. The chief difference between the beliefs of Ancient Celt and Modern Christian might well be the gender assigned to the Diety. The Motherhood of God appears to be a solid notion among the Old Tribes of Keltia. The Fatherhood of God, the canon of most Christians. That masculine ascendancy in society and civilization goes hand in hand with the rise of Male Gods in the World can be effectively argued.

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The twentieth century Melanisiens lived more peacefully than those of us with firmly entrenched notions of Fatherhood. Evidence exists that the Melanisiens might have been typical of people in the early stages of civilized development, when child-bearing women had the greatest motivation in creating order and community for the sake of their children and so created property; and that property passed through the maternal line, so that even when men became kings they inherited from the previous king through his sister, so that the king's nephew -- not his son -- was his heir. This all transpiring in a society that does not recognize (or know) that the Queen's son is the King's son. The king loves the lad as the child of his lover, his woman -- that woman not his property and she bedded only by her own will, her own choice. You may read Bertrand Russell's Marriage and Morals and Evangeline Walton's Mabinogion tetralogy to further illuminate this matter for yourself.

So the women writers realize that Merlin would be faithful to the power of the womb as the basis of magic. The man writing can't quite give up the fathering notions of Christianity. The separate viewpoints color the stories in different hues. Norton agrees with her sister ~~and~~ writers only so far as Merlin's lack of enthusiasm for Christianity goes. He gathers power in his Cave through the training of the Mirror left behind by Extraterrestrials. How many genders those Beings possess lies beyond the scope of Norton's story. Munn's account comes after Merlin. The Mabinogi predates the magician by several generations. He occurs historically at the point when the Christ, son of God the Father, gained the upper hand in Britain. The Old Testament denunciation of the "Whore of Babylon" results eventually in her public disgrace and banishment of her worship. Christians bring Fire from the East and those daring to worship the Mother taste that Fire. Maryology complicates things a bit; chalk it up as another case where Roman Catholicism absorbs what it cannot annihilate.

Stewart gives us Geoffrey's version of the Legend of Merlin after the text of the Crystal Cave. Then she explains the Place-Name problem, or what to do when writing in an Historical Period when each location bore simultaneously a local (Welsh, Breton, Pictish) name and a Roman name. For her audience, who might appreciate the story more when they realize the action takes place in London or Cornwall, she's thrown in several modern names and arbitrarily leaves out others that don't fit the feel of the story (like Newcastle or Manchester.)

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Evangeline Walton uses many names for the same location in her version of the four branches of the Mabinogion. Instead of excerpting her source at the end and tacking on an apology, she stitches her source references boldly through the very cloth of her narrative. The story fits just as well, looks just as good in the mirror. For instance, in the chapter "The Wind of Death" (page 189 of the Children of Llyr, the Second Branch of the Mabinogion) she handles an apparent discrepancy from the original Welsh version in a stylish manner, before our very eyes, true to the magic of her craft:

The Mabinogi says that Pendaran Dyved was there, as a young page. But that seems strange, for Pendaran Dyved must have been an old man then. He cannot have been young twenty years before, when, as Pwyll's chief druid, he named Pryderi from that first cry Rhiannon gave when she knew that her longed-for little son was safe. "Now I am relieved of my anxiety (pryderi)." Most likely his druid sight had warned him of danger (between Dyved's princes and the Children of Llyr the bonds were always close), and he had left his own body behind in Dyved and come to borrow the page's for awhile. The lad's own spirit must have gone where sleeping folk go.

Now she manges this stitchery, sewing in old fabric with new, without interrupting the narrative flow. I found a particular pleasure in her method. Others may prefer the Stewart fashion, sewing the particulars on origin and cloth content into the back of the garment. Often the reader needn't know any of this stuff, and Norton and Munn understand that situation and handle it well. I do enjoy the boldness of Walton's construction, though.

Mary Stewart and André Norton tell pretty much the same History in The Crystal Cave and Merlin's Mirroré. But their stories are quite distinct, one from the other. Take this matter that Geoffrey of Monmouth advances of one Merlin Ambrosius, the son of no man, standing up to High King Vortigern and his wizards who would slake the foundations of a building with his young, apparently fatherless, blood; Merlin announces that Vortigern will find water under the hill where he'd have the building stand and that water's the cause of the weak foundation; sure enough there's water there. Then Merlin enables everyone present to see a Red Dragon conquer a White Dragon.

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Geoffrey tells us that after this Merlin moves stones to Stonehenge for King Ambrosius; that this becomes a monument for Ambrosius when he dies; that Uther, the King's brother, becomes king and rules under the Red Dragon and that Uther's lust for Ygraine, wife to Gorlois of Cornwall, results in the birth of Arthur (but only through Merlin's ingenuity and/or magic.) Uther does not raise Arthur, does not acknowledge him as his heir. On all these points Norton, Stewart, and Geoffrey of Monmouth agree. The single outline of "History", however, can and does produce several stories.

Stewart's Merlin is bastard son of King Ambrosius, rather than "son of no man" in fact. Norton's Merlin is fathered by a space probe on Halloween. Stewart's Merlin knows there's water under Vortigern's hill because he entered the hill as a child after a vision in the Crystal Cave and the flight of a merlin lead him there. He knew what he'd find and his knowledge gave him the confidence to stand up to his executioners. Norton's Star-begotten Merlin had never been to Vortigern's hill before, but his Extraterrestrial friends had trained him over the years with the Mirror in the Cave. He could see the water under the hill with something not unlike Superman's X-ray vision. Norton's Merlin learns how to levitate the great stones at Stonehenge by vibration chanting and tapping them rhythmically with a sword forged of star metal. Bringing the stone from Ireland that becomes Ambrosius' monument presents him with little difficulty. Stewart's Merlin, on the other hand, is skilled in engineering more than magic (though she allows that his methods are not easily explained) and he manages to do what Tremorinus, the greatest engineer of that day, could not do. Again the great stone is moved from Ireland to Stonehenge.

Geoffrey had the whole Giants Dance moved from Ireland to Stonehenge and cites this incident as the origin of the stones. The Mabinogi says that the stones came from Preseli in Wales. Walton relates that they moved from thence many generations before Merlin, although Merlin-esque Engineering Magic accomplished the feat. The Stones moved. History acknowledges that. The question of their origin gives us many stories.

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Both Mary Stewart and André Norton name Merlin Myrddin, reinforcing his Welsh origins. Only Stewart choses to play further on the possibilities of that other of his names, Ambrosius, using the name to link him to Ambrosius the King from Geoffrey's narrative, as well as the Chronicles of the Venerable Bede.

The possibility exists that André Norton's source for the History in Merlin's Mirror was not the disputable Geoffrey, whose name is mud in some circles, but Mary Stewart, whose name is popular in some circles (like the New York Times Best Seller List where the Crystal Cave appeared well before the 1974 publication of Merlin's Mirror.) Nevertheless, the story's the thing; Madame Norton does not chose to reveal the source in her imaginative and original treatment of Merlin's legend.

Neither does H. Warner Munn disclose any source for Merlin's Ring. He shows us a map he drew which no doubt help him keep track of his tale as it wandered the face of the planet. Lin Carter implies that Munn's source would be his earlier work ("King of the World's Edge" in which Varro, a centurian under King Arthur, comes to Alata guided by Merlin. Alata on Munn's map bears resemblance to North America.)

The Source of all this writing can be argued to be the authors' minds. Or some Collective Source that writers everywhen and where can turn to for inspiration. This lecture originated on a Hermes Rocket. A fine vehicle for mystic history, wouldn't you agree?

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