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ORALITY AND LITERACY IN MIDDLE ENGLISH RELIGIOUS LITERATURE ON THE EXAMPLE OF MEDIEVAL LIVES OF CHRIST

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The concepts of orality and literacy have been subjects of heated discussions among linguists and historians of literature over the last forty years. With the publication of Walter J. Ong's 1982 classic *Orality and literacy. The technologizing of the word* the distinction, indeed opposition, or even dichotomy between the two became so pronounced and well defined that it seemed final. The oral and the literate cognitive processes, frames of mind, cultures, seemed separated by a great divide. While for an anthropologist or a cultural historian, even for a linguist, the "grand narrative" of the progress from the primacy of orality to the dominance of literacy offered an acceptable scenario marking separate phases of human development, the historian of literature could never be fully satisfied with it. Applied to literature by Albert B. Lord (1960), the great divide principle led to the definition of specialized criteria that defined what is and what is not an oral poem and claimed that a truly oral work can only be the product of a totally pre-literate society.[1] The literary historian deals with the written text, a coded, graphological representation of thought, which may or may not be an actual record of an oral, pre-literate or illiterate performance. Even if it is such a record he has no way of knowing how the encoding, the writing down, changed Homer's original hexametric verse or the Old English *scop's* alliterative lines. Those who wrote them down were literates. Are we then doomed to searching for mere vestiges or remnants of orality in the written texts at our disposal? Certainly not. We know very well that authors from various pe-

[1] For a discussion see Amodio (1994).

riods in the literate history of man use both modes successfully and, which is more important, purposefully. The literary historian prefers to see orality and literacy as two different modes that are interdependent on each other and that have, ever since the rebirth of literacy in the 11th and 12th century, combined to produce varieties of literary discourse. Such a theory of a working compromise between orality and literacy is approached by Brian Stock (1983: 522), who claims that the 12th century brought a "realignment of oral discourse within a cultural reference system based on the logical priorities of texts". Orality did not die with the rebirth of literacy. Only its functions were re-defined by the uses of literacy.

Middle English religious literature is an especially interesting area for studying the interdependencies between orality and literacy. On the one hand, the nascent literacy is still fresh and applies to a very small portion of the society, on the other, the primacy of the written word, the sacred text, is undeniable in a literature teaching the Christian religion. In such a context most written texts, especially of moral and educational nature, were composed to be read or recited to an audience, often a clearly defined type of audience. This vocal mode of delivery of medieval literature clearly influenced the author's use of orality and literacy in shaping his message. Zumthor (1987) proposes the term "vocality" for this category – it will be used here interchangeably with orality.

Various literary periods have been seen to use techniques and devices that even Albert B. Lord defines as strictly oral. Their use must certainly not be seen as a hangover from the distant pre-literate past that the mind still reverts to but rather as a conscious and a purposeful poetics. It is the aim of this paper to examine the "purposefulness" of orality and literacy in selected Middle English religious works in relation to the author's concept of the intended reader or the intended listener. The author's set of assumptions about the intended reader or listener is proposed as the main factor determining the use of the oral or the literate mode. Examples will be taken from several medieval lives of Christ: the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, *Cursor Mundi*, *Passion of Our Lord*, *Prose Life of Christ* (or *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*), the *Northern Passion*.

None of these works is a proper sermon, but their relation with pulpit instruction is discernible at first reading. They follow the tradition of typological scriptural exposition practised by Christian writers ever since Patristic times and gear their miscellaneous material, compiled both from authority and hearsay, to the needs of their listeners. Owst (1965: 275) believes that many of the metrical lives of saints and Gospel expositions were read by preachers to their congregations, and the belief is readily confirmed by their overall vocality, their use of patterned prosody such as rhyme and alliteration, their use of direct address and hortatory tone, their repetitiveness and homely explanations, as well as their *Temporale* design. The narratives combine events which the church traditionally

chose for lay instruction and which were celebrated at Christmas, the Epiphany, in Lent and during the Holy Week. Their thematic framework, closely parallel to that Emile Male (1913: 179) noticed in French church sculpture and glass of the thirteenth century, shows the literary works to be part of a larger educational scheme. The fact that a majority of the narratives are in verse is also significant. While the *sermones rimanti* in Latin were rather rare and scoffed at by purists, the vernacular preacher would often make use of rhyme to impress the message on the memory of his congregation (Owst 1965: 273-274). Janet Coleman calls the tradition of teaching in verse rather disparagingly "a hangover from the period of oral and customary communication" (Coleman 1981: 186). But the number of versified accounts of the Life and Passion of Christ suggest something different. Poetry rather than prose is their prevalent mode exactly because their authors, almost always ecclesiastics and possibly sometimes even preachers, consciously destined them for pulpit use and oral delivery. As Owst suggests, by the fifteenth century the profusion of verse sermon and verse didactic literature "blotted out valid distinctions between treatise and poem and sermon proper" (Owst 1965: 277). What is important for the present discussion is that the growing popularity of verse sermons and verse Lives of Christ coincides in time with the post-Lateran educational scheme launched by the Roman Church to reach out to the simple and the unlettered. The educationists knew that the medium of poetry would be more suitable for the aural reception of their growing audiences and they had a clear idea of the kind of audiences they were addressing. As the author addresses a given type of audience he enters into a relationship with it defined by the aim he wants to achieve through his words. A few textual examples will clarify the point.

In his opening invocation to Christ the author of the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* pleads:

geue me grace sumwhat to say
To botene hem that ben to blynde
Here lyfe to rule in good array,
Thorwe lore that I in this boke fynde (Foster 1926, ll. 4-8)[2]

He clearly sees his role to be two-fold. He wants to be a moral instructor in the affairs of every-day life and to help people "Here lyfe to rule in good array." He also assumes the role of a spiritual guide ready "to botene hem that ben to blynde," which is not just a figure of speech but an evident allusion to the symbolic meaning of Christ's healing of the blind. The lore on which he proposes to base his teaching is to be found "in this boke", i.e. in the Life of Christ itself.

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[2] All quotations from the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* come from this edition.

Were it not for the longstanding and documented tradition associating the *Stanzaic Life* with the Benedictine Abbey of St. Werburgh in Chester (Muir 1970: 293), one would tend to read the lines as expressing the mendicant missionary zeal and especially the Franciscan idea of imitatio Christi. A grey friar would have also been most likely to respond to a popular demand for vernacular instruction as does the Chester author:

A worthy wyght wylned at me
Sertayn thyngus for to showe,
That in Latyn wrytun saw he,
In Englissh tonge, for to knowe

Of Ihesu Cristes Natiuite
And his werkus on a rowe,
To the whiche by good Auctorite
He myghte triste and fully knowe. (ll. 9-16)

The "worthy wyght" is certainly a lay person of some education – he read or saw the story of Christ written in Latin – who recognises the need for religious instruction in the "Englissh tonge" and encourages (sponsors?) the author to write the work for the benefit of the non-Latinate. From the introduction and other lines in the course of the narration it follows, however, that the author has two kinds of audience in mind. On the one hand, he painstakingly quotes his authorities not to be accused by clerks of writing fables and openly addresses the reader:

And myne Aucteres fully rehersynge,
On the whiche I founde my lessoun.

Ther-for that redeth here wyth-ynne,
Rewarde the mater of euery resoun,
And trewe wyttenesse, as haue I wynne,
Writen he shal fynde redy boun,

So that no fable, in good fay,
That fals ys, shal he fynde non,
But thyng that trewe ys and verray,
And wyttenesse names wryten there-on.

By-fore euery mater, and I may,
The Auctor shal, by my bone
That Clarkus shal not after say
These newe fables wrote a fone. (ll. 19-32)

The authority of the sacred text and biblical commentaries upon which the poem is founded is essential for him and the mention of the clerks places this

proem within a clearly literate tradition. On the other hand, having quoted his Bede in Latin "to sich as han vnderstondyng" (l. 5566) he promptly explains that "after the Latyn I wil declar In Englisch, lewide to haue likyng." (l. 5567-5568). At times the lines imply a mixed audience *listening* to the work being read:

Now speke sumquat I wil her
of Cristes circumcisioun,
qvi hit was don that ye moun her
that listen now to my lessoun. (ll. 1173-1176)

thenne was fulfillet the prophecy
that I in Latyn thenke to say,
for lettert men that sitten by
to conferme this in gode faye. (ll. 3465-3468)

In Latyn as I shal specify,
And after in Englisch more verray
for lewet men that her ben by. (ll. 7150-7152)

It is quite likely then that the author meant his work to be used by preachers in their preaching to lay congregations in towns, where one had to assume the presence of varied audiences. Possibly the author himself read parts of the *Life* in his own preaching to the people of Chester.

An introduction rather too long to be read to a "leued" audience opens the *Cursor Mundi*. In a long argument the Biblical historian explains the choice of his subject and the choice of language. He admits that:

Man yhernes rimes for to here
And romans red on maneres sere ... (Morris 1874, ll. 1-2)[3]

But, he claims, the tales of Alexander, Gawain, Charlemagne, Roland, Tristram, Isoude, and Ioneck are only about the phantoms of this world and therefore vain (ll. 3-23). He even ventures an interpretation of medieval reading habits in the manner of show me your library and I will tell you who you are (ll. 24-40):

Inglis, frankys, and latine,
to rede and here Ilkon is prest,
the thynges that tham likes best ... (ll. 24-26)

A similar reference to romance heroes can be found in the opening of the Jesus College Oxford MS 29 *Passion of Our Lord*:

[3] All quotations from the *Cursor Mundi* come from this edition.

Ihereth nv one lutele tale. that ich eu wille telle.
As we vyndeth hit iwrite. in the godspelle.
Nis hit nouht of karlemeyne ne of the Duzeper.
Ac of cristes thruwinge. thet he tholede her. (Morris 1872, ll. 1-4)

The author considers it necessary to make it clear that his tale is not a story of chivalric adventure. It can be assumed then that the audience he is turning to was likely to associate narration and story telling with lay subjects of popular romance. Being a shorter poem the Passion of Our Lord plunges directly into the story itself, but the *Cursor Mundi* develops the argument and says that the patience of the readers and the talent of the writers can be better spent on religious subjects, especially on the praise of the Virgin Mary, to whom the author dedicates his work (ll. 85-96). The idea must have been a common one for we see it reflected in a fourteenth century vernacular sermon (Woodburn 1960: 290):

men should leve fables and tryfuls and tell trewly Goddes lawe, as Crist hym-selfe byddes, for els we traveyl in the nyghte of dirknes ...

Instead of romance stories the author of the *Cursor Mundi* proposes to tell "gestes" from the Old and the New Testament:

I sal shew you verrament
shortly of aithur testament.
al this werlde or that I blyn
wit cristes help I sal ouer-ryn.
and tel sum gestes principale
for al may na mon haue in tale. (Fairfax MS, ll. 119-124)

His Mandeville-like promise to "al this werlde ouer-ryn" and his choice of the word "gestes", normally associated with stories of adventure and chivalry (Kuhn 1963: 91-92), suggest that his aim is not so much to directly change the tastes of the reading public, but rather to use them in his teaching of more worthy subjects. As "man yhernes rimes for to here", the choice of rhyme also seems to be one of the concessions to the popular tastes, not only in the *Cursor Mundi*, but in all those works where a more popular appeal is desired. All these poems share the basic qualities of vocality mentioned above.

The choice of prose in such works as the *Prose Life of Christ* and in the *Oon of Foure*[4] coincides with an almost total lack of hortatory direct address and the

[4] MS Harleian 1862, English version of Clement of Llanthony's *Unum ex Quattour*; see Salter (1974: 60 (manuscripts), 76-77 (discussion)); all quotations from Oon of Foure come from Salter (1974).

authors' refusal to incorporate any of the traditional and apocryphal stories, which could have easily effected a strong grip on popular imagination. Unlike the *Cursor Mundi*, the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* and the *Northern Passion*, all shaped to appeal not only to the reader's/listener's faith and intellect, but also to his curiosity and his literary, that is, listening habits, the two prose works were written as "textbooks" for the conscious student of the Bible, whose interest did not have to be specially lured to the subject. The English author/translator of the *Oon of Foure* recognises the tradition in which he is working by referring to "the olde grek doctour harmonyus [who] lefte o bok for foure gospelis to the uses of the chirche." Aware of the implications of literacy he invites the reader to compare the accounts of the Gospels "for not alle gospelleres seyn alle thingis, and tho thingis which thei seyn thei sayn not alle thingis bi kindeli ordre in her place" (Salter 1974: 76-77). As Salter (1974: 68) notes, such works were far from learned, but they cannot be classed as popular, even though they were widely circulated. A.I. Doyle[5] writes of the *Oon of Four*:

> ... its popularity is allied to the multiplicity of uses it could serve – the occasional profit to those who none the less could and did read Latin scriptures and commentaries, and the continual nourishment to those who could study and meditate more comfortably and intimately in the vernacular though able to read Latin, as well as those readers, whether clergy or laity, whose acquaintance with Latin was restricted to formal and public circumstances.

The class of readers described by Doyle, even though wide and varied, clearly excludes the "leued" who we saw addressed in the metrical works. In his discussion of the late medieval reading public Blake (1972: 437-455) contrasts the lay courtly clientele of Caxton with the mostly religious audience of Wynkyn de Worde. The latter was found to supply books to monastic houses and to some chosen devout patrons.[6] Incidentally, his printing house lived primarily of religious prose, though of more devotional and meditative nature than the narratives discussed in this chapter. The documented case of Wynkyn de Worde may suggest the existence of a similarly limited audience for religious prose even before his time.

The treatment of the biblical material in the various lives of Christ is also symptomatic of the orality/literacy distinction. A closer examination of the various treatments of the Crucifixion scene from the Passion sequence should help to understand the distinction. The *Prose Life of Christ* (MS Pepysian 2498) does

[5] A.I. Doyle, unpublished research quoted by Salter (1974: 69).
[6] E.g., Hilton's *Scale of Perfection* was printed for Lady Margaret Beaufort, King Henry VII's mother (Blake 1974: 442).

not feature an actual scene of Christ being nailed to the cross. The reader is informed in a purely factual manner that:

> ... whan hij comen vpon the mount of Caluarie,
> than strepten hij Jesu, and maden hym al naked,
> and duden hym vpon the croice. (Goates 1922: 98, ll. 1-3)[7]

This passage clearly reflects the Gospellers' reticence in describing the event. Matthew deals with it in one retrospective time clause (XXVII. 35). Mark adds the hour of the event, but also passes over the crucifixion without any narrative or descriptive details (XV. 25). Neither Luke nor John expound the details. The author of the Harmony is then truly canonical in his decision not to expand in his work this most celebrated scene of many Passion narratives. The treatment of the events that follow shows a similar reverence for the word of the Scriptures, for there is not a single detail omitted or added by the author. He skilfully weaves together the four accounts, painstakingly reconciling differences between them and sewing together the various details of the individual narratives. An example of this reverential treatment of the four texts is the Harmony's combination of Matthew's "dabant ei bibere myrrhatum vinum" (XXVII. 34) and Mark's "dederunt ei vinum bibere cum felle mistum" (XV. 23) in "hij gouen him to drink wyne meddled with mirre & galle" (p. 98, ll. 5-6). All the motifs that appear in only one of the original accounts are collected here: Jesus asks God to forgive his offenders (only in Luke XXIII. 34), Jesus addresses his mother from the cross (only in John XIX. 25-27), and grants salvation to the good thief (only in Luke XXIII. 40-43).

The author's refusal to use more elaborate rhetoric and his rather scanty and irregular use of alliteration are also helpful hints in our search for the implied reader/listener. We remember that alliteration and patterned rhetoric feature prominently among generally accepted signs of orality (Ong 1982: 34; Brewer 1988: 85-107). Additionally, at least by the beginning of the fifteenth century alliteration may have been seen by some as a marker of the lower or the quaint style. The scribe of the Ellesmere manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* clearly reduces the amount of alliteration found in earlier versions of Chaucer (Blake 1977: 24). The simple rhetoric and the lack of consistent alliteration in the *Harmony* may then be seen as a marker of the intentional literacy of the work, written for the individual reader and not for oral delivery. The concept of literacy used in the present paper does not necessarily assume a greater sophistication of style, but rather an exclusion of the formulaic principles of composition, rooted in the mnemonics of genuinely oral literature, and serving the needs of aural reception of recited texts. Nor is there any sophisticated elaboration in the diction, or choice of words, of the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*. The nouns and verbs building the narrative are direct and precise, which they must be in order to drive their meaning home without additional explanation, repetition or periphrasis. Directness and precision must have been at the back of mind of someone who aimed at a harmony, which says no more and no less than the four Gospels. Precision, it should be noted, is for Brewer (1988: 111-112) also a marker of literacy. The work's faithfulness to the Bible, its simple, direct, unindulgent narrative style, its unsophisticated but clear diction, all become part of an intentional design of the author who writes a harmony for the private devotion of an individual reader, probably non-Latinate, but already initiated to meditation. The simplicity and transparency of language is a means by which the author wants to impart the Biblical story with possibly no intervention or change resulting from the connotative qualities of words, or manipulative effects of rhetoric. The authorial aim and the type of the intended reader determine the literate mode of the work.

[7] All quotations from the *Prose Life of Christ* come from this edition.

The most apparent difference between the prose, predominantly literate, *Harmony* and the predominantly oral verse narratives of the Crucifixion is that the latter are practically never canonically pure. They all incorporate some apocryphal or traditional material and expound descriptive details far beyond the implications of the Biblical word. In that they show much less of the literate reverence for the sacred text.

The author of the *Northern Passion* devotes as many as sixty lines to the narration of the nailing to the cross, that is almost one fourth of the entire crucifixion fragment from the nailing to Christ's death. Step by step he tells the reader how Christ was spread on the cross, how his arms failed to match the bored holes "a foot and mare" (l. 2770), how:

> ... gret rapes gan thai take;
> thai did a rape at ayther hand,
> the blode brast out at the band;
> On ayther side gan thai draw,
> Vn-tyll thai myght the bores knaw.
> The syns brast that was no wonder,
> And lyth fro lyth all raue in sonder,
> Sonder went both syns and vayne,
> To fele that was a ferly payne. (Foster 1916, ll. 2776-2784)[8]

[8] All quotations from the *Northern Passion* come from this edition.

In a close-up of physical detail the sinews, the veins and the joints are seen to break at the pulling of the ropes.[9] In this way every step of the Crucifixion is exposed and, as if, held up for the reader's inspection.

The use of accentual stress and alliteration contributes to this expository effect. The alliterating words are often nouns denoting Christ's body and verbs of torture. This prosodic technique results in a foregrounding of the violent destructive process as the images of breaking bones and blasting veins are paralleled by consonantal "explosion" and "blast" of alliterating sounds (*blode-brast-bla, sonder-syn-skyn*). The power of this combination of prosody and diction lies in the listener's realisation that it is the body of Christ that explodes. In this way alliteration helps to focus the reader's/listener's attention on physical suffering and pain and corroborates the realistic appeal of the detail. The vocal, prosodic qualities of language are put to ample use by the author.

> The blode brast out at the band. (l. 2778)

> Two gret nayles thai toke that tyde,
> And thurgh his handes thai gert tham glyde. (ll. 2785-2786)

Alliteration may also be understood here as a mnemonic device. By its rhythmical punctuation of the cruel acts alliteration brings them out and, without reducing their realism, offers them to the reader/listener as icons to retain in his memory for devotion and meditation.

Of course, none of the poems discussed above is an oral poem in the sense of having been composed and spread by word of mouth. Still, many of their qualities show that they are indebted to the oral mode of communication and that they were designed to be read aloud or recited. The more purely narrative poems exhibit fewer of these characteristics, while those with the more homiletic bent many more.

The structured divisions and extended analysis of the meanings hidden in every detail of the crucifixion in the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* require the use of structured language, based primarily on the rhetorical devices of parallel, antithesis, repetition and variation, which produce an impression of opulent eloquence. Brevity is certainly not the soul of the author's wit. Eloquence, although one of a different type, is also a result of the heightened rhetoric of the affective

[9] The use of ropes, which probably originated with the visions of St. Bridget, does not appear in any other English narrative poem except the *Northern Passion* and the *Middle English Evangelie* (Campbell 1915). Through the influence of the *Northern Passion* it found its way into the dramatic representation of the scene in the York cycle of mystery plays and from drama most probably into the only such English visual version in the stained glass window of All Saints' Church in York; see: Davidson – O'Connor (1978: 76, fig. 21).

laments and addresses, where amplification often leads to repetition and redundancy, both recognised as markers of orality.

The frequent direct address to the listener may also be read as a sign of orality. In the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* lines in which the author establishes and retains contact with his audience are especially frequent: "as I shal you say" (l. 5706"), "leue wel this" (l. 5979), "as ye knowen alle" (l. 6007), "leue ye me" (l. 6168), "as ye schun se" (l. 6172), "as ye schun her" (l. 6240) , "as ye rede moun" (l. 6552), etc. Sometimes the author informs his listeners of what is still to be discussed in this part (today's reading?) of his exposition:

> I shal declare ow er I wende. (l. 6092)

> As I shal, and I may have grace,
> say more clerele er I go. (ll. 6387-6388)

> as I wol tel er I go away. (l. 6430)

The apparent function of these lines is to keep the listener involved in the discourse, a strategy that any good orator would always use. These lines, and half-lines, are similar to those listed by Oakden (1968: 381-391) as tags, the use of which he considers an elementary quality of the style of medieval poetry. Some tags from the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, no longer turned directly to the listener but still meant to secure communication between the text and the audience, are identical as those found in Oakden: "soth to say" (l. 5415), "as rede I" (l. 6146), "in good fay" (l. 6337), "good is to hede" (l.6379), "as a tale ys" (l. 6860), "as clerkes sayn" (l. 7037), etc. Brewer (1988: 90-91) uses the term formula to denote such tags and indeed their other function is clearly formulaic. They fill in the metrical and rhyming gaps in the rhythm of the quatrain stanzas. Yet as Sabine Volk (1988: 157) shows, the same formulas are used not only in poetry, where the prosodic restraints may force the author to resort to ready formulas, but also in medieval sermons, a genre meant primarily for oral delivery. Volk writes of the formulaic tags in sermons:

> It is a well known fact ... that the appearance of formulas in a text does not prove its orality, but on the other hand, if set expressions and phrases occur in a genre which reached the ears rather than the eyes of its recipient, they certainly contribute to a sense of déjà-vu, they affirm the genre, they give the listeners a feeling of familiarity with what they hear.

All the formulas, the antithetical rhetoric, the hortatory tone, the direct address, can be said to "affirm the genre" and help to identify many of the poetic narrative renditions of the Life of Christ and the Crucifixion as belonging to the huge tradition of oral religious education triggered by the Fourth Lateran Council and carried out by means of mendicant preaching in the streets, priestly ex-

hortations from the church pulpit and lengthy expositions resounding in the refectories of religious houses. Their treatment of the Crucifixion scene, in terms of their overall narrative design and their language (rhetoric, diction, tone) are influenced by the educational purpose for which they are written and the listening audience to which they are addressed.

Of course, none of the poems discussed above is an oral poem in the sense of having been composed and spread by word of mouth. Still, many of their qualities show that they are indebted to the oral mode of communication and that they were designed to be read aloud or recited. The more purely narrative poems exhibit fewer of these characteristics, while those with the more homiletic bent many more. Examples from the medieval lives of Christ chosen for the present paper show that the Middle English authors of the lives of Christ use the modes of orality and literacy depending on the type of audience that is being addressed. They also show that the authors have a clear understanding of the intended reader or listener. It would be a simplification to reduce the conclusion to the claim that an unlettered audience is addressed through an overtly oral mode while the more sophisticated one through the literate one, but such a tendency can be noticed. The genre offers an interplay between orality and literacy where the two modes are combined and used interchangeably.

The co-existence of the two modes in the context of religious literature can be explained by a classic quotation from Ong (1982: 74-75):

> In most religions the spoken word functions integrally in ceremonial and devotional life. Eventually in the larger world religions sacred texts develop, too, in which the sense of the sacral is attached also to the written word. Still, a textually supported religious tradition can continue to authenticate the primacy of the oral in many ways. In Christianity, for example, the Bible is read aloud at liturgical services. For God is thought of always as 'speaking' to human beings, not as writing to them.

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