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Critical Insights: The Hobbit (2016) edited by Stephen W. Potts

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Critical Insights: The Hobbit, edited by Stephen W. Potts. Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2016. xii, 245 pp. \$105.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781682171202.

Stephen W. Potts, the editor of this collection of essays on *The Hobbit*, has taught fantasy, science fiction, popular culture and children's literature at the University of California in San Diego for many years, and has published books on subjects as varied as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Joseph Heller and the Strugatski Brothers. This somewhat eclectic background well reflects the general approach of the 152 title-strong "Critical Insights" series to which the book belongs, which offers introductory approaches to literary works of all imaginable kinds. The introductory character of Potts's book is not overtly stated in the presentation, but we do learn that the idea is to provide *The Hobbit* with "some background on its creation, some context in Tolkien's life and times, and some critical approaches to its meaning and value" (ix). The question of who, more specifically, the book is addressed to is never made explicit; Potts refers vaguely to "new reader(s)" as the target and says that these may include people who are "familiar with *The Hobbit* only through the recent three-part movie version" (viii). New readers and movie-goers could be anyone, really, and Potts further hints that the collection is not primarily aimed at students of literature in the academia when he says that "Approaching Tolkien's seminal novel requires that one approach it with an open—even child-like—mind" (ix). This is all well and good—an open and child-like mind can and does yield fruitful results in many fields—but the implied lack of academic rigour would make for rather poor literary criticism and the statement is troubling in a book that purports to provide a "background," "tools" and "critical approaches" for situating Tolkien's work in "context." Potts leads us to expect the worst when he goes on to say that Tolkien's famous first line of *The Hobbit* "would lead to Tolkien's literary career," with all that this implies: "It is *The Hobbit*, after all, that first brought to life Tolkien's elves and dwarves [*sic*]" (xii). Thankfully, such unqualified statements are dispensed with in Potts's own first essay proper and many other chapters in the collection offer critically sound overviews of the various topics covered in this book, which leads me to conclude that it is meant as an introduction to Tolkien's work loosely aimed at undergraduate students—in spite of its ridiculously hefty \$105 price tag.

The first section, entitled "The Book and the Author," contains two chapters, both written by Potts himself. The first of these, "The Portal to Middle-earth," provides the reader with a sprawling general introduction to Tolkien's book. After dealing briefly with its genesis and the narrative voice, the author moves on to situate the book in what he feels is its proper literary context: children's literature based on the initiation quest. Potts believes that this genre was a response to recent quasi-scientific theories of anthropology, folklore and psychotherapy which, in the face of modernism's stress on

realistic interpretations of the world, would have legitimized fantasy by showing its inherent bearings on human reality (6). While acknowledging that Tolkien was against such reductionist interpretations of his works, Potts justifies the archetypal approach by saying that it is legitimate “as long as one also follows Tolkien’s advice and recognizes what is unique in the individual tale . . . what makes *The Hobbit* most worth studying on its own are Tolkien’s deviations from the archetypal hero’s journey, which bring in elements inherited in part from the golden age of children’s literature but, more importantly, from his own scholarly and personal concerns” (7-8). Unfortunately, we get very little of the promised scholarly context here—nothing, for instance, is said about the origins of the idea of the “dragon-sickness” which, according to Potts, prompts an atypical response on behalf of Bilbo that allegedly subverts the initiation quest—and most of the chapter is a rehearsal of previous applications of archetypal theory to Tolkien’s work (Crabbe, Green, Helms, Kocher, Mendlesohn, O’Neill and Petty are among those mentioned), interspersed with references to Tolkien’s particular ethos that modifies the traditional hero’s journey. Potts finally contends, with Flieger, that Tolkien “nurtured his main themes and made all his mistakes in *The Hobbit*, learned from them, set out new precepts for fantasy in ‘On Fairy-Stories,’ and invested these in the fully realized world of *The Lord of the Rings*. In other words, *The Hobbit* provided the inspiration for the greater story” (14). This statement—and indeed the author’s general stance, alluded to in the essay’s title—is unfortunate in an introductory chapter of a book that aims to highlight the intrinsic value of *The Hobbit*: by reducing it to the role of a portal to Middle-earth and to *The Lord of the Rings*, the author’s subsequent affirmation that *The Hobbit* is a “novel well worth reading in its own right” (15) rings rather hollow.

The chapter is followed by a perfunctory overview of Tolkien’s life—essentially a six-page summary of Carpenter’s biography, which is indeed the only source cited—before we move on to the next section, “Critical Contexts,” hoping for more fruitful reading. At first sight, the scope of the first essay of this part, Kelly R. Orazi’s “J.R.R. Tolkien’s World: Literary, Cultural, and Historical Influences on Middle-earth’s Subcreator,” looks like an almost impossible undertaking for a fifteen-page chapter. However, Orazi deftly handles her material and conveys a succinct, well-selected summary of Tolkien’s literary sources, together with an overview of the impact of the Great War on his writing (although the connections to *The Hobbit*, in particular, are somewhat tenuous and most of Kelly’s conclusions here—“life is never the same after war, and at the end of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the hobbits’ return to the Shire is understandably not a simple one” (34)—are more applicable to the latter work). The last section of the essay deals with personal influences, such as Tolkien’s children and the Inklings (especially Lewis), as well as the literary context of modernism, in which Tolkien did not take part, according to Kelly. This contention relies overly on simplified and categorical statements by Carpenter and Garth concerning

Tolkien's distaste for modernism, and Tolkien's particular and selective use of modernist practices, as demonstrated in studies such as Margaret Hiley's *The Loss and the Silence: Aspects of Modernism in the Works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien & Charles Williams*¹ and Theresa Freda Nicolay's more recent *Tolkien and the Modernists*,² among others, should not be neglected if we want a balanced picture of his position in the literary context of the twentieth century.

The next essay, 'An Unexpected Success: *The Hobbit* and the Critics,' by Alicia Fox-Lenz, briefly outlines the origins and publication process of Tolkien's work before devoting five or six pages to a summary of Douglas A. Anderson's summary of the critical response, as presented in *The Annotated Hobbit*.³ On the last two pages, Fox-Lenz offers a very general survey of more recent critical responses not covered in Anderson's book, which is ridden with loose references to the work of Flieger, Sullivan and Rateliff, and even vaguer allusions to "other studies of the last four decades," not specified by Fox-Lenz, that "have traced the medieval and Anglo-Saxon elements . . . considered it from the standpoint of folklore and fairy tales, or re-evaluated it as a children's book" (47). Apart from the occasionally lax acknowledgement of the sources used, the chapter provides very little personal assessment—which is a shame, since it would have been particularly interesting to know more about Fox-Lenz's conclusions regarding "the shifting cultural reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in the United States in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks" (238), which, according to the notes on the contributors of the volume, is the focus of her current research.

In 'The Riddles and the Cup: Medieval Germanic Motifs in *The Hobbit*,' Jason Fisher looks at medieval sources related to Tolkien's work. This is a vast field of research that has produced a corresponding bulk of scholarly works (among which Fisher's own edited collection *Tolkien and the Study of his Sources*⁴ is worthy of note), which makes it all the more refreshing to learn that "it is not the purpose of this essay to rehearse the entire history of source criticism" but rather "to elucidate a particular group of medieval Germanic sources Tolkien drew on" (50). Centering on sounds, particular words and epic works of the past, Fisher first explains why the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon literary traditions are more congenial than others for Tolkien's project of restoring to England its lost legends, and then goes on to explore some of the motifs from these sources. The riddles, Fisher argues, "were original, but modeled in style and content on the earlier antecedents with which he was familiar through his academic work" (53), convincingly showing this to be the case with examples from the *Exeter Book*, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*

¹ Margaret Hiley, *The Loss and the Silence: Aspects of Modernism in the Works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien & Charles Williams* (2011).

² Theresa Freda Nicolay, *Tolkien and the Modernists: Literary Responses to the Dark New Days of the 20th century* (2014).

³ Douglas A. Anderson (ed.) *The Annotated Hobbit* (1988; revised and expanded edition 2002)

⁴ Jason Fisher (ed.), *Tolkien and the Study of his Sources: Critical Essays* (2011).

and the *Elder Edda*. Some specific words and names are shown to adhere to the same combination of originality and inspiration; while almost all the names of the dwarves in *The Hobbit* are direct borrowings, a few of them were intriguing enough to trigger original stories in Tolkien's mind, for instance "Althjóf" ("all-thief"), which may have prompted the unlikely presence of Bilbo in this group. After a brief discussion of Tolkien's use of runes in *The Hobbit*, in which Fisher highlights the resemblance to their Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian counterparts, a more thorough discussion follows of the etymological origins of some of the supernatural creatures that appear in the book (Trolls, Giants, Elves, Orcs and Wargs). After finishing this section with an intriguing account of the sources for Beorn that aptly shows how Tolkien's philological mind worked to unearth hidden stories based on words and legends from the past, Fisher neatly rounds off the essay with a pertinent link to *Beowulf* and the cup-stealing episode of the essay's title, and some concluding remarks concerning the similarities between Tolkien's Smaug and the dragon of the earlier work. While these ideas are not strictly new, the limited scope Fisher has chosen for his assessment of previous findings makes his chapter more rigorous and detailed than previous chapters and the carefully selected motifs invite even seasoned philologists to learn more about the subject at hand. A bonus is that Fisher's style of writing is at once scholarly and accessible, which sits well with the overall purpose of the book.

In the essay that concludes this section, "Bilbo Baggins, Harry Potter, and the Fate of Enchantment," John Rosegrant compares both works from the point of view of the Tolkienian concept of enchantment, as articulated in "On Fairy-stories." Given the focus of the chapter, the early and unqualified statement that Tolkien's "wizards, dwarves, trolls, elves, goblins, wargs, werebears, giant spiders, and a dragon" are "magical creatures" (68) is both surprising and problematic, as Tolkien's ideas concerning "magic" were rather more nuanced than merely equating it with unrealistic or supernatural elements. In "On Fairy-stories" (as Rosegrant himself acknowledges later in the chapter), Tolkien explicitly establishes the difference between the two concepts, stating that magic "is not an art but a technique; its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things and wills," while enchantment "seeks shared enrichment, partners in making and delight, not slaves."⁵ In Rosegrant's reading, *The Hobbit* begins with a strong dose of the latter, which is deflated by the Master of Laketown who directs the readers' attention towards more mundane and trivial concerns. This disenchanting perspective continues when Bilbo—contrary to the expectations of readers lured by the style of the opening chapters into thinking that *The Hobbit* is a standard fairy tale—does not kill the dragon himself, instead stealing the Arkenstone and betraying Thorin. The movement from "lighthearted enchantment to complex political and moral questions" (70-71) reaches its peak in the Battle of the Five

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories* (2008), 64.

Armies, only to return to the style and mood of the opening chapters towards the end of the tale. The analysis is interrupted with lengthy references to analogous developments found in the *Harry Potter* books, the conclusion being that both *The Hobbit* and Rowling's novels explore "the interplay between enchantment and disenchantment that is part of modern psychological development" (79). This is not discussed further and brief invocations of Winnicott's theories of "transitional objects" and references to Curry's pleas for the need to re-enchant the world do not help to make us see why *Harry Potter* would add anything to our understanding of Tolkien's work.

Unclear, too, is the way in which the following section, "Critical Readings," differs from the previous in its approach to Tolkien's book, offering as it does more "background and framework" of the same kind. Hannah Parry, in "'Of Gold and an Alloy': Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, and the Northern Heroic Spirit," provides just this kind of context for one of the central ideas not only in *The Hobbit* but in Tolkien's entire *oeuvre*. After briefly mentioning the views of one scholar (out of a vast array) concerning the blend of pagan and Christian motifs in Tolkien's works, Parry sets out to analyse this balance in *The Hobbit*. In an echo of Fisher's chapter, she highlights the connections between Beorn and Beowulf, Smaug and Fáfñir, and then unconvincingly identifies the desire for the treasure on behalf of the Elvenking, the people of Dale and Thorin as an expression of "northern courage" on the grounds that they are analogous to a desire for "hoarded gold," the need for "recompense that can easily become revenge" (89), and "personal honour placed before the safety of their kingdoms" (90), respectively. Such considerations could obviously stem from any age or culture, and the fact that scenes from *Hrolf Kráki* and *The Hobbit* both feature warriors in the shape of bears is likewise insufficient as support for any specific connection to the idea of "northern courage". More to the point is Parry's view (although derived from Christensen) that Thorin's death exemplifies both a resistance to the forces of darkness and a Christian repentance of previous avarice. The subsequent analysis of Bilbo contrasts the modernity of the character and the older epic ideals of courage, arguing that he blends both and develops "a heroic code of his own" (95), founded on that of the trickster hero. The Christian connection, Parry argues, resides in the pity and mercy (rather than implacable revenge) he shows to Gollum, and the idea that the intentions rather than the deed are what really count also removes his stance from the epic works of the past. A concluding remark such as "the world of *The Hobbit* is one in which epic is held in perspective by children's literature" (99) is puzzling, as no such comparison in broader terms has been established previously.

The contribution of veteran Tolkien scholar Jared Lobdell, "'Witness Those Rings and Roundelays': *The Hobbit* as Fairy-Story," begins with a rather overwhelming and slightly confusing two-and-a-half page presentation of Lobdell's aims, moving from the distinction between fairy tale and fairy story—the latter being "written or at least invented by a specific author in

historical times” (102)—to the revisions of *The Hobbit*, which allegedly bring about a shift from a less familiar “morality of the Indo-European” to a “much more familiar—i.e. Catholic—morality” (102). Nursery rhymes, Lobdell argues, occupy an intermediate position, and we learn that J.O. Halliwell’s *Nursery Rhymes of England* was an acknowledged source for the riddles in *The Hobbit*, and that the 17th-century Bishop of Oxford and poet Richard Corbet (who expressed the view that Fairies were Catholics and disappeared from England with the Reformation) had connections to the Inklings. Lobdell, however, does not elaborate further on this, instead going on to present a complicated argument, mixing Tolkien’s own definition of fairy-stories with opinions of Coleridge and C. S. Lewis, and bringing in some research on the antiquity of the fairy-tale genre to show that Catholicism—ancient, too—is inextricably associated with Fairie and that “both would appear to be true” (108). Lobdell further holds that *The Hobbit* “began as fairy-tale (in the pre-lecture common sense), was written as a children’s story, and might thus already be called a fairy-story, but as it went on, it incorporated more and more ancient motifs and simultaneously became more and more Catholic and more and more the precursor to that great Edwardian adventure story, *The Lord of the Rings*” (112), but he never quite manages to stitch the various strands of his argument together and concludes somewhat reluctantly, having perhaps realized that the scope of his chapter was more ambitious than the page limit would allow for, that the realization for wonder, present in ancient folk tales, is at the heart of fairy tales and thus of Tolkien’s own project. The essay reads as the contents of a complete book compressed into thirteen pages and hopefully Lobdell will find more space elsewhere to develop this admittedly compelling argument—partly presented in previous books and chapters by the same author—at greater length.

Kris Swank’s chapter, “Fairy-Stories That Fueled *The Hobbit*,” deals more directly with specific fairy-tale (and fairy-story) influences. The review covers a series of likely predecessors, read by Tolkien both on his own and to his children, rehearsing the most salient analogies. Of these, the fairy-tales of the Grimm Brothers, Andrew Lang’s collections (especially Lang’s retelling of the Sigurd story in *The Red Fairy Book*), George Macdonald’s Princess-stories, Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*, Kipling’s collections of stories and illustrations, and Wyke-Smith’s *Marvellous Land of Snergs* are singled out as particularly important. In keeping with Tolkien’s own ideas on the subject, Swank is careful to point out that Tolkien “transformed and elevated his source ingredients” (125-126).

Josh Brown’s “The Poems of *The Hobbit*” begins, for reasons unknown to this reviewer, with a short list of writers that Tolkien disliked. This is followed by statements concerning his engagement with *Beowulf* and the influence of the *Poetic Edda*, none of which have any real bearings on the subsequent analysis in this chapter, which takes off in earnest with a summary of Tolkien’s own early poetry. Brown devotes a section to a cursory structural and thematic reading of the dwarves’ songs, boldly contending that “it is safe

to assume that J.R.R. Tolkien . . . would have no doubt studied and been influenced by FitzGerald's *The Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám" (134), because of similarities found in form and meter. If this could be further justified one feels it would open up a whole new field of research, but as of yet it is a rather frivolous claim given that no connections between Tolkien and FitzGerald have been established beyond such superficial similarities. The remaining sections center on the songs of elves, goblins and Bilbo. Here and there, Brown inserts didactic explanations of schoolbook terms such as "iambic feet" or "trochaic tetrameter" and mostly one feels that the presentation of the formal make-up does little more than fill up space. On other occasions, however, the analysis of the formal features proves more fruitful and enhances our understanding of Tolkien's purpose with the songs (for instance in the discussion of the elves' song about the wine-barrels, where Brown feels that "the regular beat is consistent with the repetitive work that the elves are taking part in of rolling one barrel after another"(138)), showing that the author's technique served to underscore the intended qualities and atmosphere of singers, locations and events. Overall, the chapter synthesizes and complements Corey Olsen's lucid and accessible reading in *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit*,⁶ but the reader would have benefitted more from a few paragraphs of general conclusions rather than platitudinous final statements such as "we as readers are changed forever after reading this remarkable work from J.R.R. Tolkien, storyteller and poet" (144).

"A Turning Point in His Career: The Effect of *The Hobbit* on Middle-earth" by Sara Waldorf provides a solid, if brief, assessment of the place of *The Hobbit* in the global context of Tolkien's legendarium. Relying mainly on Tolkien's *Letters* and Christopher Tolkien's *The History of Middle-earth*, Waldorf guides the reader with a firm hand through the text's oblique relationship both with the Silmarillion-material and with the apparently conflicting elements of folklore, and from there on to the question of how the book contributed to shape later versions of Middle-earth. *The Hobbit* supersedes the previous framework in which Aelfwine acted as the transmitter of the tales set in Middle-earth; as this role is henceforth shouldered by hobbits, Tolkien is able to provide "an actual bridge for the reader between the familiar and the strange [and a] solution to finding a wide audience for Tolkien's beloved 'Silmarillion'" (152-153). Waldorf also explains how Elves and Dwarves were developed thanks to the writing of *The Hobbit*, altering previous notions and paving the way for their treatment in later stories, notably *The Lord of the Rings*—which in turn prompted Tolkien to rewrite sections of *The Hobbit* to make them more coherent with the subsequent evolution. Waldorf feels that the remaining inconsistencies of style and tone give "Tolkien's world the feature he might have most craved: an historical verisimilitude, a likeness to real-life bodies of myth and legend, which include both stories that are remote and aesthetic and stories that are earthy and

⁶ Corey Olsen, *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit* (2013).

identifiable” (157). Insightful, succinct and well-written, the chapter stands as a competent summary of this fascinating subject.

Jelena Borojević, in “*The Hobbit: A Mythopoeic Need for Adventure*,” sets out to explore how Faërie, the idea of adventure and the concept of “mythopoeia” are interrelated in *The Hobbit*. Borojević relies on philosophical and aesthetic approaches to the idea of myth and story-telling, referring to works of a number of scholars—Cassirer, Frankfort (although no reference to this source is provided in the list of works cited), Lüthi, Radin and Segal, among others—in order to stress “how useful this particular mode of thought is for our daily reconstructions of the world and for making sense of peculiar experiences” (163). This introduction extends well over six pages before the chapter finally centres on Bilbo as both an ordinary fairy-tale hero and a modern protagonist with a desire to be submerged in myth (or Faërie), thus making it easy for readers to identify with him and let themselves be dragged along on the adventure. The analysis leans towards the psychoanalytical in the next section, stressing how “Bilbo’s journey represents every journey toward meaning” (172).

A similar (if not identical) approach is adopted by Kyla Shaw in “Growing up Tolkien: Finding Our Way through Mirkwood,” in which the author holds that *The Hobbit* still appeals to readers eighty years after its publication because of its “psychological power” that helps children “develop the necessary internal resources they need to lead productive, enriched adulthoods” (175), apart from proving cathartic for adults. The lengthy explanations of the concept of “mythopoeia” of the previous chapter are here repeated, even if the term is now situated in the specific realm of children’s responses to myth-making. Alluding to findings from the field of neuroscience, Shaw concludes that “when children love a story, they weave it into the fabric of their life, and it becomes part of who they are,” and “it is for this reason that storytelling is the most effective way to make foundational and lasting changes in individuals” (180). In the rest of the chapter, Shaw highlights the psychological lessons one may learn from following Bilbo on his journey, and we find ourselves once more trudging along on the travel-worn road of the hero’s journey, with Bilbo first resisting the call to adventure, then accepting it and facing trials before he finally returns “wiser and richer,” etc. Shaw concludes the chapter on the somewhat incongruous note that *The Hobbit* “reminds readers that while we may find ourselves far from home, we are still the same person at our core” (185).

Yet another psychoanalytical reading is Aurélie Brémont’s “How to Slay a Dragon When You Are Only Three Feet Tall,” that attempts to answer the question of why Tolkien created Hobbits and used them as heroes. A summary of the general traits of Hobbits is followed by the reference, elsewhere frequently repeated, to their role as mediators between the ancient world and the modern. Brémont contrasts Bilbo with Thor, Beowulf and Sigurd and contends that Tolkien uses this character (and later hobbits) to redefine the idea of courage in the light of a Christian ethos, which in turn manifests itself

through different kinds of love: fairness to others, pride or self-love—though Brémont never really acknowledges that this category of love actually runs counter to the Christian stance—and a third type of love, not explicitly categorized, related to Bilbo’s handing over of the Arkenstone to Bard and the King. This, according to Brémont, “is the moment when both Tolkien and Bilbo realize that the *Hobbit* [*sic*] was meant for something greater, that the quest was a real journey of self-discovery” (198).

The last chapter of the book, written by M. Lee Alexander, thankfully centers on something entirely different, namely “Tolkien and the Illustrators: Visual Representations of *The Hobbit*.” Moving from a general introduction concerning Tolkien as an illustrator and observer of nature to an analysis of his illustrations for *The Hobbit*, Alexander then looks at some other illustrators of the tale, specifically the Finnish Tove Jansson, to show how the latter manages to bridge “the cultural gap” between readers of other nationalities and the reality depicted in the story. The chapter is well-documented and provides a valuable survey of Tolkien’s opinions on other illustrations, simultaneously acting as a commentary on the effects of the interaction between text and illustration—especially the concept of “Art as translation” that Alexander applies to Jansson’s renderings of scenes from *The Hobbit* which make Tolkien’s world more readily accessible to a specifically Finnish and Swedish readership.

The final sections of the book include a brief chronology of Tolkien’s life, followed by an incomplete list of Tolkien’s works and a rather arbitrary selection of secondary bibliography (which includes titles such as biographies by Robley Evans or Perry C Bramlett, but not Hammond and Scull’s monumental two-volume *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, to name but one flagrant example). The concluding index contains name-based headings but no subentries to specify related aspects.

A collection of introductory essays on *The Hobbit* of this size can only pretend to cover a limited selection of topics, and in general terms this anthology does touch upon the most relevant background, context and critical approaches for a general understanding of the work. However, given the limited extension of the book, it seems strange that as many as four essays overlap thematically—those written by Potts, Borojevic, Shaw and Brémont all deal in one way or another with *The Hobbit* as an archetypal journey of self discovery—and the overall structure of the collection marks no properly delimited boundaries between the different sections. For this reason, the book comes through as a rather haphazardly chosen collection of critical approaches, some of which are mere summaries—occasionally unacknowledged—of other scholars’ views. Having said this, the writing style is generally engaging, and the strongest contributions (Orazi, Swank, Fisher, Waldorf, Alexander) successfully fulfill what I believe should be the central aims of this kind of book, namely to provide the reader with the state of the art as well as a personal assessment of previous findings, and completing these

with new, corollary insights that will set prospective scholars on the path of further exploration.

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