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PART I

The eighteenth-century legacy

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CHAPTER 1

Auspices

Historical approaches to Jane Austen have often had the paradoxical effect of sidelining her from history altogether. With an irony she herself would have enjoyed, the old and long-standing icon of a writer untouched by events has been broken up only to make way for the portrait of a misty-eyed reactionary. Over the last decades the idea that Austen was bent on reviling the French Revolution and all its works has stuck, and since the position has never been systematically challenged, even her fervent defenders have been saddled with the sense that she is a figure out of key with her time, while for others she appears as the arch party-pooper, darting withering looks at each fresh trend and cult. Though dissent on the part of her contemporaries is commonly taken as a mark of constructive engagement, in her case it is rarely seen as anything other than defensive, the product of denial, or even of ignorance. The military tactics promisingly assigned to her subject by Marilyn Butler in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* turn out, in the end, to be those of siege rather than battle. Far from being granted the dignity of a resourceful campaigner, Austen the Anti-Jacobin comes over as a lodger in the keep, time-warped for once and all by her early exposure to 'old-fashioned' sermons and conduct-books.[1] When, in the new preface to her seminal study, Butler returns to the question of Austen's failure to respond to her age, the harsh verdict of the re-trial is well summed up by the Rowlandson cartoon on the cover. 'Disturbers of Domestic Happiness' shows three cockaded men raiding a living-room, where the representatives of domestic life, slumped on a sofa, sleep on undisturbed.[2]

Though Butler's work appeared at the start of a period that saw the rise of women's criticism and of a new historicism, it has kept its currency. It owes this hardiness partly to its thoroughgoing historical approach. Butler

[1] Marilyn Butler makes this point explicitly in *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (Oxford, 1981): 'Her reading, in sermons and conduct-books, must have given her old-fashioned notions of social cohesion and obligation', p. 102.

[2] Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford, 1987), ix–xlvi.

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sets out to construct the meaning that the novels had in their original context, and pursues her findings regardless of whether or not they are attractive to contemporary readers, as when she warns that Austen's morality is 'preconceived and inflexible', and 'of a type that may be antipathetic to the modern layman'.[3] This is not usually the case with gender-centred studies of Austen, which tend to concentrate on the significance that the novels have for the present.[4] And while many writers in this tradition have managed to combine relevance with sophisticated historical insight, such readings – being of an essentially different order – almost invariably sidestep rather than interlock with Butler's, so that battle over the war of ideas has seldom been joined.[5] In consequence the Anti-Jacobin Austen is still very much at large, not only among those who have built on Butler's work but also among those who, writing from a different perspective, have tried to integrate her thesis within a postmodernist account, one recent critic deferring to the 'Tory feminism', and 'counter-revolutionary' plotting of *Mansfield Park* while describing the novel itself as 'an evangelical sermon'.[6] A further reason for Butler's prevalence is that her work is rooted in a tradition that was fully conversant with formalism and with textual analysis. Subsequent attempts to question the view of Jane Austen as a Tory reactionary have often had to draw on a more limited – and less demonstrative – range of critical methods.[7] While it is true that the most vivid and finely focused of recent accounts of Jane Austen have implicitly opposed the Butlerian thesis, they have done so without providing a rebuttal. The time is ripe, then, for a

[3] Ibid., pp. 298, 296. I am indebted here to Alistair M. Duckworth's thought-provoking essay, 'Jane Austen and the Conflict of Interpretations' in Janet Todd's anthology, *Jane Austen: New Perspectives* (1983), pp. 39–52. For a valuable review of feminist critics of the eighties see the opening pages of Janet Todd's 'Jane Austen, Politics and Sensibility', in Susan Sellers, ed., *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (Hemel Hempstead, 1991), pp. 71–87.

[4] Highly influential in this category is Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago, 1984). Particularly sensitive to textual nuance and period concerns is Margaret Kirkham's *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction* (1983, rev. edn 1996).

[5] The most important exceptions here are Claudia L. Johnson's two pioneering books, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago, 1988) and *Equivocal Beings* (Chicago, 1995), and Mary Waldron's *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time* (Cambridge, 1999), but this last excellent study touches only incidentally on Austen's thought and politics.

[6] Clara Tuite, 'Domestic Retrenchment and Imperial Expansion: the Proper Plots of *Mansfield Park*', in You-me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, eds., *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* (2000), pp. 96, 99, 102. The same line is adopted in her *Romantic Austen* (Cambridge, 2002), despite the retrieval of sensibility there.

[7] Nancy Armstrong in her study of early eighteenth-century fiction compellingly argues, in passing, that Austen, rather than being seen as a Tory or as a member of the landed gentry, should be approached as a linguistic identity that voices 'a middle class aristocracy'. See *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 159–60. Butler's thesis is implicitly opposed by Roger Gard in a series of commonsensical and subtle readings in *Jane Austen's Novels*: *The Art of Clarity* (1992).

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study that confronts Butler's more squarely, and more on its own terms – a rash undertaking were it not for the many critical contributions of the last decades that yield some higher ground.

My brief in this book is that Jane Austen is a writer of centrist views who derives in large measure from the Enlightenment, more particularly from that sceptical tradition within it that flourished in England and Scotland during the second half of the eighteenth century. This tradition stands at some remove from the popular conception of the movement as a whole. While celebrating reason, scientific method, and social reform, the Anglo-Scottish school dwelt on the irrationality of human nature, tempered the optimism of the *philosophes* with an emphasis on the limits of individual heroism, and instilled a distrust of dirigism and of the doctrinaire. Less militant than its French counterpart, the sceptical Enlightenment nurtured a particular dislike of civil faction and of the bigotry that went with it, and this relaxed spirit of partisanship made it accessible to many institutions and intellectual cults of the age. We shall see how deeply the ideas of writers like David Hume and Adam Smith penetrated movements as diverse in tone and mode as the picturesque and the Evangelical revival. But of particular significance here, is the openness of the contemporary Anglican church to the Enlightenment, for it is precisely the assumption of its imperviousness that has so often been invoked to underline Jane Austen's mental seclusion.

Exponents of the reactionary Austen have regularly stressed her religious beliefs, even though she has often been found deficient in this quarter – even 'supremely irreligious' in one instance – by the devout.[8] Readings of this kind tend to place Austen as an Evangelical (which she was not) or as an 'orthodox' Christian rather than as the Anglican Erasmian that she was,[9] the better to insist on the fixity of her views, or – in the case of materialist approaches – on their archaic character as the product of an outmoded infrastructure. If her religion is unusually secularized, as Butler implies, that is what was immediately demanded to buttress the status quo, and to shield it from the eroding forces of change.[10] This approach relies, all too clearly, on the old and long-entrenched view that Christianity and the Enlightenment were as chalk and cheese, as far removed from each other as reason and *l'infâme*.

[8] G. K. Chesterton, 'The Evolution of *Emma*', collected in Ian Littlewood, ed., *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*, 4 vols. (Mountfield, 1998), I, 444. See also Cardinal Newman's remarks to Anne Mozley, *Letters and Correspondence of Newman*, ed. Anne Mozley (1891), II, 223.

[9] For discussion of the tolerance and rationalism of the Erasmian tradition see Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Catholics, Anglicans, and Puritans* (1988), particularly ch. 2.

[10] Butler, *War of Ideas*, pp. 1–2, 93–9.

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From writers who have focused on Jane Austen's religion there emerges a different picture, however, and one that joins up convincingly not only with the accounts of church historians but with recent studies of the neglected course of the Enlightenment in Britain itself after the earlier part of the century.[11] For European historians like Venturi, drawing principally from the continent in the mid-century, the true *riformatore* leads a life independent of public office, and certainly free of the least whiff of the ecclesiastical; but across the channel, the philosopher and theologian had long existed on better terms, owing in part to the enduring influence of Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). But thanks for this are also due to the character of Anglicanism itself, a rambling edifice raised on very different kinds of foundation, better able to cope with additions and alteration than other creeds of more imposing design. Erastian in original conception ('by law established'), Catholic by descent, and invigorated by Calvinism, it was an institution particularly ill-suited to preserving any fixed body of belief. Indeed, to some chroniclers, surveying its protean history, this ability to adapt appears as something of a fatal flaw. E. R. Norman in his *Church and Society in England 1770–1970* remarks on the eagerness of the church, in almost every generation, to appropriate 'the most progressive ideas available', often at the cost of weakening morale.[12]

Though the Enlightenment undoubtedly sparked division as well as debate in the Anglican church, its traces are as far-reaching as its impact was forceful. Attempts to address the corpus of doctrinal writing in this period as a thing *sui generis* swiftly reveal just how integral philosophical traditions were to its development. It takes a work of comprehensive scope like Leslie Stephen's *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) to bring any sense of relation to bear on the many divines treated by Abbey and Overton in their strictly in-house *English Church in the Eighteenth Century* (1878). In a telling phrase Stephen describes the continual concessions made by Joseph Butler and other mainstream theologians to empiricist thought as 'bowing the knee in the house of Rimmon' – a breach of taboo that was no sin when made in the service of Jehovah.[13] It could equally be said, however, that philosophers went out of their way to attach their systems

[11] For Austen and religion see, principally, Irene Collins, *Jane Austen and the Clergy* (1994), and *Jane Austen: The Parson's Daughter* (1998); Christopher Brooke, *Jane Austen: Illusion and Reality* (Cambridge, 1999); William Jarvis, *Jane Austen and Religion* (Stonefield, 1996); Oliver MacDonagh, *Jane Austen: Real and Imagined Worlds* (1991), ch. 1; and George Tucker, *Jane Austen: The Woman* (1994), ch. 10.
[12] E. R. Norman, *Church and Society in England, 1770–1970* (Oxford, 1976), p. 42.
[13] II Kings, 5: 18. Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1962 edn), II, 42.

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to doctrine; Joseph Priestley, for example, speculating on the composition of the resurrected body, or David Hartley exploring the effects of hellfire on vibratiuncles. In most controversies, it is not unusual to find philosophers and divines siding together against earlier positions – positions held, invariably, by both philosophers and divines.

This complexity is often missed by critics who are after a clear-cut 'background' to Jane Austen. Writing on education in the novels, D. D. Devlin, for one, reduces the empirical tradition to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, forgetting that writers like Hume and Smith reacted against the idea of an innate moral sense and the related premium on intentionality every bit as vigorously as did Butler or Reid.[14] Indeed, a Christian apologist in the later part of the century would have been hard put to find better arguments against Deism or 'natural religion' than those advanced by Hume, whose dramatic and scrupulously balanced *Dialogues* (1779) were generally taken to be of a theistic tendency throughout the nineteenth century, and even beyond.[15] During Jane Austen's lifetime both Hume's *History* and *Essays* were widely recommended for educational reading by writers of a didactic turn,[16] and the same holds true for Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, echoes of which are to be found in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*.[17]

Adam Smith supplies a good instance of how a classic of the Enlightenment could lend itself to – or even seem to invite – endorsement by the devout, for at strategic points in his moral treatise he tags a Christian gloss to his arguments and vocabulary. Nor were such bridging tactics by any means purely retrospective, for a passage on the subject of conscience that closely follows Joseph Butler probably formed part of the original lecture series from which the book grew.[18] Though Smith drew heavily on both empiricist and Stoic traditions for his ethics – dwelling on the power of self-love

[14] See D. D. Devlin (who believes that Butler's idea of conscience is distinct), *Jane Austen and Education* (1975), pp. 68–75.

[15] A list of such readers would include Dugald Stewart and James Hastings of encyclopaedia fame; see *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Oxford, 1935), pp. 74–6.

[16] For the *History* see 'Appendix 1: Books for Young Ladies' in Frank W. Bradbrook, *Jane Austen and her Predecessors* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 141–2; and for the *Essays* see *Letters Written by the Earl of Chesterfield to his Son* (1775), IV, 88–9. The four-volume collection made by Hume under the title *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* was a popular vehicle for his writing, and included practically all the essays as well as both *Enquiries*.

[17] Maria Edgeworth's Belinda keeps a copy of the *Theory* on her dressing table see *Belinda*, ed. Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick (Oxford, 1994), p. 228; and see Kenneth Moler, 'The Bennet Girls and Adam Smith on Vanity and Pride', *Philological Quarterly*, 46 (1967), 567–9.

[18] See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford, 1979), III.5.5, 164–5, and see footnote. Hereafter *TMS*.

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and the need for self-command – he repeatedly calls attention to the way in which his theory yields a precise understanding of the commandment. 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.[19] And just as he gives psychological substance to Butler's entirely intuitive sense of the term 'conscience', he supplies a material basis for this commandment too, describing an internal process through which self-interest is mediated by the desire for social approval, and by our ability to imagine the feelings of others. Discourse of this kind gave a new and exhilarating dimension to religious authority. It pointed to the way things actually worked in the ordinary world, grounding the dictates of Scripture on all-too-human needs and natures. It had the virtue, in sum, of translating the fiat of faith or of reason into a descriptive language that gave full value to the force of earthly desires.

In the second of her two rewarding studies of Jane Austen's relationship to the Anglican church, Irene Collins evokes the mental atmosphere at Steventon rectory during the years of the novelist's adolescence. She argues, with the aid of fresh research, that Jane's father was latitudinarian by inclination and that he was, like many other parsons of his generation, 'a true son of the Enlightenment': an avid and omnivorous reader, a keen classicist, a dabbler in science, and a warm-hearted upholder of the Stoic maxim that individuals be recommended to their own care.[20] It is certainly not necessary to posit any formal belief on George Austen's part in 'natural religion' to appreciate that he was of the sect that delighted in the many new – and still opening – fields of inquiry that were giving greater definition to the created world. No doubt there were parsons' daughters whose horizons terminated in evening prayers and needlework, but as a teenager Jane Austen was, even by the admission of a brother, remarkably sharp-eyed about the outside world.[21] And while the exact nature of her political opinions and religious faith are likely to remain open to dispute and reinterpretation, there is little room for disagreement about her responsiveness to her times. In his recent study *Jane Austen and the Navy* (2000), Brian Southam has shown just how minutely sensitive novels like *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* are to the home-front history of the respective years in which they are set. But the other major novels, each of which first took shape in the 1790s, are as firmly rooted in observation as the later group, and tell as much about the vicissitudes of the social and cultural climate on which they drew. When viewed contextually they

[19] *TMS*, I.i.5.5; and III.I.I. [20] Collins, *Clergy*, xix, p. 19. See *TMS*, VI.ii.I.I, 219.

[21] In the course of a brief memoir of his sister, Francis Austen remarks as 'a matter of surprise' on how extraordinarily observant she was 'at a very early age'. See M. A. D. Howe, 'A Jane Austen Letter', *Yale Review*, 15 (1925–6), 321.

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show just how receptive Jane Austen was, and how keenly she engaged with contemporary ideas.

This engagement was no less acute for being on the whole more exploratory than dogmatic. Austen seems, like other enlightened writers before her, deliberately to have steered clear of allegiance to Party; and she may well have sustained this stance even in private, for her niece Caroline could recall no obvious political 'bias' from her conversation, nor – however she racked her brains – any sign of partisan views on the French Revolution or other upheavals of the age.[22] Consistent with this report is a passage from a letter written to Cassandra in 1808 that shows Jane adroitly deflecting to her brother Edward an appeal made to her own 'interest' on behalf of the Hampshire Tory candidate, Thomas Heathcote.[23]

As far as religion goes, it is clear that Jane Austen died a believer, but she ranks among the least proselytizing of Christian novelists, and may, without ever having ceased to believe in the utility of belief, have been something of a private sceptic in the first part of her career. References to her faith throughout this period are both few and light in tone, and Irene Collins has noted, from the same years, the 'remarkably stereotyped terms' used by her in letters to bereaved relations.[24] It is significant, perhaps, that of the two versions of the letter she wrote to her brother Francis telling him of their father's death, only the first contains any mention of an afterlife, and a non-committal one at that. Instead of referring to her father's 'constant preparation for another world', she dwells in the second on her family's 'preparation' for the shocking event.[25] In all probability, her novelistic reticence towards the supernatural had to do with the strong preference she shows as a writer for sticking to the observable; but the resulting solidity of her fiction calls inference into play. Though questions of politics and religion are continually raised in the reading of the novels, and will occupy a good part of this study, I shall start on more neutral ground by examining some of the ways in which Jane Austen reveals herself habitually, even unconsciously, as a person fully alive to her age.

[22] See Caroline Austen, 'My Aunt Jane Austen: A Memoir', in Littlewood, ed., *Critical Assessments*, I, 48.

[23] See *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford, 1995) (hereafter *Letters*), p. 154. Jane Austen's poem 'On Sir Home Popham's Sentence – April 1807' opens with a scathing attack on the recently dissolved Ministry of Talents, but even Sheridan lampooned this ministry in its last months of office, and championship of Popham transcended Party interests – the City awarding him a sword of honour shortly after his official reprimand. See p. 165 below for Coleridge's remarks on this ministry.

[24] Collins, *Parson's Daughter*, p. 181.

[25] 21 and 22 Jan. 1805, *Letters*, pp. 96–7.

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SCIENCE, THE SELF, AND A CHANGING WORLD

'Man is perpetually changing every particle of his body; and every thought of his mind is in continual flux and succession.'[26] So Adam Smith wrote in an essay first published in 1795, and his linkage of organic and mental process, and his stress on the fluid nature of each, is typical of the sceptical Enlightenment as a whole. Earlier in the century, Newton's 'mechanical philosophy' – remarkable for its mathematical expression of physical forces – had inspired a confidence in the general applicability of 'laws sublimely simple' as the poet Thomson put it. And though the occasional note of caution was sounded, as by Alexander Pope – 'Could he, whose rules the rapid Comet bind, / Describe or fix one movement of his Mind?', the answer to this question was often taken to be in principle 'yes'.[27] As the century wore on, however, faith in the possibility of a rationally deduced ethics receded,[28] and other doubts were fed by the spread of associationism in psychology, and by major advances in the life sciences. In so far as Jane Austen is allowed a context in the history of ideas today, it is usually as an Augustan aftercomer, clinging to the certainties of a fast-vanishing era. In the nineteenth century, however, she was renowned as a chief innovator of the 'modern' novel, the originality of which was tied to its insight into inner complexities.[29] A Victorian critic spoke for many readers when he declared that Austen's characters unfolded 'a living history', noting that morality in the novels had to do with disposition and process rather than with subscription to an inflexible code: 'She contemplates virtues, not as fixed quantities, or as definable qualities, but as continuous struggles and conquests, as progressive states of mind, advancing by repulsing their contraries, or losing ground by being overcome.'[30]

One of the quotations that has served to back up Austen's image as an apostle of fixity is a half-sentence lifted from the biographical note written by her brother Henry for the first edition of *Northanger Abbey* and

[26] Adam Smith, 'History of the Ancient Logics and Metaphysics', *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce (Oxford, 1980), p. 121.
[27] See James Thomson, *Summer*, line 1562, see *The Seasons* and *The Castle of Indolence*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford, 1972), p. 80; and see Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, II, lines 35–6.
[28] Among the 'rationalists' who believed that morals could be derived in a quasi-mathematical fashion were Ralph Cudworth (1617–88), Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), and John Balguy (1686–1748).
[29] Walter Scott, 'Unsigned Review: *Emma*', *Quarterly Review*, 14 (Mar. 1816), collected in Littlewood, ed., *Critical Assessments*; see particularly I, 288, 291.
[30] Richard Simpson, 'Jane Austen', *North British Review*, Apr. 1870; in B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: the Critical Heritage*, [1]:1812–1870 (1968), pp. 249–50.

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Persuasion: 'she seldom changed her opinions either on books or men'.[31] In context this lapidary inscription was meant to accentuate Jane's reported enthusiasm for Gilpin and the picturesque, an aesthetic movement of liberal character that warred against clean-cut lines and unswerving views. Within the family it was especially James who shared this interest (among many others) with his younger sister, but the role of public elegist fell finally to Henry who, in the absence of his already sickening eldest brother, arranged the Winchester funeral. The 'Biographical Notice' with its Evangelical insistence on the God-fearing piety of Jane set the tone for later memorials, laying the first stone in that edifice that so well suited the book of those late twentieth-century critics who favoured a prim portrayal of their subject. Austen's own last written words – her lines on the Venta with their glance at an altogether worldly immortality – are characteristically spry and irreverent. Too irreverent, by half, to be admitted into the mausoleum benevolently assembled by the family, for as Caroline Austen put it, 'the joke about the dead Saint, & the Winchester races, all jumbled up together, would read badly as amongst the few details given, of the closing scene'.[32]

As might be suspected of a novelist who wrote so compellingly about mistaken first impressions, Jane Austen did indeed change her opinions of women and men – and of books too, if Henry's word on her disapproval of Fielding is to be trusted.[33] The certainty that readers like Marilyn Butler take to be the key feature of her world is indeed a characteristic of the way she writes,[34] but not of the realities she represents, and here, again, she is typical of the sceptical Enlightenment. Doubts, muddles, delusions,

[31] See *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1933), v, 7. All future references to the novels will be to this text unless otherwise stated. In the definitively extended *Family Record* we read, for example: 'in her teens she was staunchly anti-Whig and anti-Republican . . . she probably always retained these early views, for "she seldom changed her opinions either on books or men"'; see Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record* (1989), p. 55. This invaluable work began as a revision of Willliam and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh's *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters, a Family Record* (1913).

[32] For further discussion of this particular suppression see Margaret Doody's introduction to the finely annotated edition of the juvenilia by herself and Douglas Murray, *Catharine and Other Writings* (Oxford, 1993), xxi–xxiii; and for Caroline's letter see Deirdre le Faye, 'Jane Austen's Verses and Lord Stanhope's Disappointment', *Book Collector*, 37 (1988), 86–91. Margaret Kirkham seems to have been the first critic to call attention to the way Jane Austen's image was shaped by familial intervention; see the opening chapters of *Feminism and Fiction*.

[33] As is clear from her first surviving letter, Jane Austen once delighted in *Tom Jones*. See To Cassandra, 9–10 Jan. 1796, *Letters*, p. 2. An instance, perhaps, of what she noted in *Pride and Prejudice*: 'the feelings of the person who wrote, and the person who received it, are now so widely different' (368).

[34] See Butler, *War of Ideas*, pp. 1–3, and *passim*.

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