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## *On the intertextuality of Paria [The Pariah] by Chęciński and Moniuszko\**

**ABSTRACT:** Stanisław Moniuszko's opera about Pariah which was based on Casimire Delavigne's tragedy from 1821, expressed the composer's dream of creating a cosmopolitan and 'European' work with universal message. Usually, the researchers review this aspect from the perspective of music and culture studies, e.g. searching for a relationship between *The Pariah* and Moniuszko's contemporary opera music or focusing on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century views on the effect of class inequalities and social exclusion. However, equally interesting are the diverse and complex relationships of *The Pariah's* libretto with 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature, rarely taken up and investigated in the research into Moniuszko's legacy. Jan Chęciński's text, apart from the obvious dependence of the story and playwriting on the French playwright's tragedy, has its theme and linguistic style deeply rooted in Polish and European 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary tradition created, among others, by Mickiewicz, Malczewski, Byron and Scribe. Given Moniuszko's desired cosmopolitanism and universality of *The Pariah*, this is an issue which is undoubtedly very important.

**KEYWORDS:** Chęciński, Scribe, Byron, Mickiewicz, *The Pariah*, *La Juive*, *Cain*, *Forefathers' Eve*, libretto, intertextuality

'They don't play Delavigne anywhere these days, and few people read him: that is the best assessment of his worth' – that is how the nineteenth-century Warsaw journalist Stefan Pawlicki (1868)<sup>1</sup> began his review of *Paria* [The Pariah], a French tragedy which was staged at the Teatr Wielki (Grand Theatre) in Warsaw on 7 May 1868 in a translation by Waław Szymanowski with music by Stanisław Moniuszko. In a lengthy article, the critic presented a detailed analysis of this work by the Parisian tragedian and assessed the value of Szymanowski's

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are given after this source.

translation and the qualities of the Warsaw production, in which the splendid acting – as he asserted – helped to ‘ensure the play of the utmost success’.<sup>2</sup> Pawlicki sought the reasons for the weakness of Delavigne’s drama primarily in the author’s failure to comprehend the essence of tragedy, and consequently the lack of conflict based on the dialectic between individual will and social obligation and the antinomy between passion and necessity. The critic argued that tragic conflict ‘arises when a strong individual clashes with the general, fixed laws that govern society’, that it was the result of a deliberate struggle freely taken up by both sides and pursued with the utmost awareness, and in *The Pariah* there was no struggle of that sort. The poet’s shortcomings in shaping tragic conflict were accompanied, in the reviewer’s opinion, by the flawed creation of the characters, especially Idamor, whose tragic character was – due to the ‘mask of falsehood’ which the author ascribed to him – ‘ill conceived’ and ‘distorted’. Yet the critic was of the opinion that the weakness of the French original was eliminated by three facts: the excellent work accomplished by the translator, who shortened the text considerably and ‘restored freedom and naturalness to the dialogues’, Moniuszko’s excellent composition and the skill of the Warsaw actors.<sup>3</sup> It is striking that similar statements were written by essentially all the authors of reviews published in the Warsaw press after the premiere of Moniuszko and Chęciński’s *The Pariah* – a premiere that took place just a year and a half after the first performance of Delavigne’s play in Szymanowski’s translation (on 11 December 1869). There were quite a number of articles, with seven published after the first performance and two more, during the same season, in 1870.<sup>4</sup> Opinions with regard to Moniuszko’s composition were divided – uneven, often ambivalent.<sup>5</sup> Yet there was general agreement about the literary aspect of the work. The French original was held to be inexpressibly weak, ‘lacking grace’, as Władysław Wiślicki

<sup>2</sup> The reviewer emphasised above all the splendid roles of Jan Królikowski, Józef Rychter and Salomea Palińska, as well as Jan Chęciński’s creation of the high priest (Pawlicki, 1868).

<sup>3</sup> ‘*The Pariah*, which we saw on the stage of the Grand Theatre, is an excellent work. Mr Szymanowski’s verse, the play of the actors and Moniuszko’s music came together in a whole that was so delightful, so distinguished in our repertoire, that we have had nothing like it for many a year – nothing that could stand proudly alongside this tragic creation’, (Pawlicki, 1868, p. 531).

<sup>4</sup> Here is a precise list of those reviews:

W. Wiślicki, ‘Paria’, opera w trzech aktach, z prologiem, treść Jana Chęcińskiego (według myśli wziętej z tragedii Kazimierza Delavigne’a), muzyka Stanisława Moniuszki [*The Pariah*, an opera in three acts, with prologue, libretto by Jan Chęciński (after an idea taken from a tragedy by Casimir Delavigne), music by Stanisław Moniuszko]. *Kłosy*, 234 (11/23 December 1869);

[J. Sikorski], ‘Paria’. Opera w trzech aktach, słowa J. Chęcińskiego, muzyka St. Moniuszki (pierwsze przedstawienie d. 11 b.m.) [*The Pariah*. An opera in three acts, words by J. Chęciński, music by S. Moniuszko (first performance 11 inst.)]. *Gazeta Polska*, 13 December 1869;

*Kurier Codzienny*, 13 December 1869;

A. Walicki, *Kurier Warszawski*, 13 December 1869;

J. Kleczyński, ‘Paria’ [*The Pariah*]. *Bluszcz*, 51 (22 December 1869);

J. Kleczyński, ‘Paria’ [*The Pariah*]. *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 104 (25 December 1869), 321–322; *Przegląd Tygodniowy Życia Społecznego, Literatury i Sztuk Pięknych*, 52 (26 December 1869);

B. Wilczyński, *Przegląd muzyczny* [Music review]. *Biblioteka Warszawska*, 1870/1, 284–287;

A. Walicki, *Kurier Warszawski*, 18 May 1870.

<sup>5</sup> I do not dwell on this aspect, since it has already been addressed (see Szymocha, 2005; Topolska, 2014).

(1868) wrote in *Kłosy*, ‘causing distaste on account of the false depiction of the play’s main characters’, but the version which Chęciński turned into a libretto was perceived in a wholly different way, with critics noting the aptness of the cuts made by the librettist, the naturalness of the verbal expression and the beneficial changes made to the portrayal of the characters (in particular Djares and Idamor):

Mr Chęciński, taking up the subject with these principal shortcomings, coped with it admirably, creating one of his finest libretti. And although he claims that today he would do it better than he could have done ten years ago, we find the libretto, as refashioned, to be a splendid fabric, exceedingly favourable for an opera composer. Mr Chęciński, shortening the drama, selecting the most important moments, turning the wild character of Djares into a distracted old man and softening the overly sharp contours of the active protagonists, produced, insofar as he was able with such a subject, a stage work with quite striking situations. Avoiding over-long dialogues and giving the composer the opportunity to write a few arias, duets, choruses and finales, he ably discharged his difficult task (Wiślicki, 1868).

At this point, we should ask about the reasons for that exceptional favour which the critics afforded the two Polish authors of the adaptations of Delavigne’s tragedy (both the play and the opera) – favour that, be it only in comparison with Chęciński’s confession in the foreword attached to the edition of the libretto to *The Pariah* in his translation published in 1869, indicating his dissatisfaction with his work from ten years before and combined with an attempt at accounting for certain misunderstandings in his collaboration with the composer,<sup>6</sup> may appear somewhat surprising. Were the journalists who so starkly contrasted the literary value of the French and Polish versions of *The Pariah* and so unanimously praised the effects of the work carried out by Szymanowski and Chęciński concerned solely with the dramatic and linguistic qualities of their translations? The wealth of intertextual references discernible in Chęciński’s libretto, which bore a crucial influence on the notional and philosophical undertones of the whole work, allows us to suppose that in the Aesopian language of Warsaw critics that univocal approval addressed to the author could have signified something more.

There is no doubting that the libretto of Moniuszko’s *The Pariah* is not a mere superficial translation of the French playwright’s tragedy or a slavish literary calque. Scholars have already pointed out certain qualities of this text, resulting from the inventiveness of both Chęciński and Moniuszko himself, as well as interesting connotations with nineteenth-century operatic theatre. I have in mind here above all an article by Grzegorz Zieziula in which the author persuasively argues the existence of close relations between the libretto of *The Pariah*,

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<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to the first edition of the libretto of *The Pariah*, in 1869, Chęciński wrote: ‘I have and always have had an aversion to adaptations. Only two paths appealed to me: writing from my own inspiration or simply translating. [...] I thought that *The Pariah* as an opera would be confined to the archives for all eternity, and I was secretly glad [...]. But my malicious glee was short-lived. One fine morning, the composer of *Halka* called on me and asked me to rework the lines of the first duet between Idamor and Neala. “But why on earth – I cried in surprise – are you writing music to *The Pariah* again?”’ (Chęciński, 1868). Chęciński goes on to quote his dialogue with Moniuszko, in which the composer declares that he has decided to finish the composition previously begun, has made changes and cuts to the libretto and is against the librettist altering the text he wrote years before. All quotations from the libretto of *The Pariah* come from that edition.

on one hand, and the libretto of Gaspar Spontini's *La Vestale* and the book of Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*, on the other, at the same time underscoring the role played by Chęciński's translational experience as the author of the Polish translation of Eugène Scribe's libretto to the French composer's opera (Zieziula, 2005). The similarities of dramatic fabric between *The Pariah* and *La Vestale* which Zieziula identified are indeed very distinct: for instance the Priestesses' chorus from the first act of Moniuszko's *The Pariah* ('Spod gwiazdistej noc opończy zwalnia jasny dzień' / 'From beneath the starry mantle wakes the sunlit day'), which has no equivalent in Delavigne's tragedy, is a clear reminiscence of the Vestal Virgins' morning hymn from the first act of Spontini's opera ('Fille du ciel'), and Neala's song that follows it, dramatically enhanced with an off-stage chorus of youths ('Czystego ducha wnoście korne modły' / 'To raise a pure soul's humble prayers!'), exactly reflects an analogous solution in the French composer's work: Julie's recitative and aria accompanied by a chorus of the Vestal Virgins ('O d'un pouvoir funeste') (Zieziula, 2005, p. 41). The careful reader's attention is directed towards Scribe's libretto for Meyerbeer, meanwhile, mainly by the character of Djares – his song 'Znam gród wspaniały' ('I know a city'), from Act 2 scene 6 in Moniuszko's opera (sometimes dubbed the 'beggar's song'), also without a prototype in Delavigne's tragedy, is clearly linked to the beggar's 'romance à couplets' from Act 4 scene 2 of *Le Prophète*, intoned by Fidès, seeking his son. As Zieziula concludes: the mother of John of Leiden, the supposed prophet from the French composer's work, is a psychological prototype for Djares, and many of her words 'could have served as an ideological motto for the character of Idamor's father' (Zieziula, 2005, p. 42).

Zieziula's observations concerning the crucial influence exerted on Chęciński's literary craftsmanship by his familiarity with Scribe's work may be expanded, of course. As we know, Chęciński also translated another of the French playwright's librettos of importance for the history of nineteenth-century opera – for *La Juive* (Pol. *Żydówka*). That composition was premiered in Warsaw in 1857, so just two years before the first version of *The Pariah* written by Chęciński for Moniuszko. The clearest indication that Chęciński was inspired by the libretto of Jacques Halévy's opera comes in a scene from the prologue of *The Pariah* that does not appear in the structure of Delavigne's tragedy, where the defenceless pariah is being chased by an enflamed crowd. Most crucial here is the similarity between the situational solution employed by Chęciński and the concept applied by Scribe: I have in mind the clash between the actions of the crowd united against the individual and the latter's defender. In *La Juive*, the role of protector to Eléazar, tormented by a group of opponents, is taken by Léopold; in Moniuszko's opera, the pursued pariah is defended, initially of course, by Idamor. But that is not all – there is also a striking similarity between some phrases written by the Polish librettist and lines from the libretto of *La Juive*. The first words of the chorus of persecutors in *The Pariah*, 'Chwytać go! Chwytać go!' ('Seize him! Seize him!') replicate exactly the words of Ruggiero, who attacks Eléazar for trading on a feast day, and further phrases echo the chorus's song from the final scene of the French opera's opening act, in which the people call for Eléazar's death.

So as with the inspiration from the libretto of *Le Prophète*, here too Chęciński's operatic-theatrical and translational experience has been brought to bear. Moniuszko's librettist drew directly on the dramatic scheme employed in Scribe's book and also used wordings that he considered apt while working on his own translation (a translation that received lofty praise from the critics) of this very passage of the text. For the audience gathered at Warsaw's Grand Theatre for the premiere performances of the opera, who would certainly have remembered the phrases from *La Juive*, which had been a great success there, this fact could have considerably strengthened the sense of listening to a 'cosmopolitan' opera and a masterwork of the genre.

At this point, it should be stated that Chęciński as a librettist took inspiration not only from contemporary opera, but also from literature not directly connected to dramatic-musical theatre. He did so also in his poetic and dramatic works. Some scholars have looked into this question, emphasising Chęciński's skill in employing patterns of versification, style and plot and his facility in adapting them to the needs of his own writing.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the librettos written by Chęciński are strongly rooted in nineteenth-century literary culture. This is most distinctly manifest, of course, in *Straszny dwór* [*The Haunted Manor*], where the book is larded with wordings that bring to mind phrases familiar from nineteenth-century literature (above all from the works of Polish Romantics: Adam Mickiewicz, Aleksander Fredro, Seweryn Goszczyński, Antoni Malczewski, Władysław Syrokomla and Józef Ignacy Kraszewski<sup>8</sup>). Subtle literary echoes can also be found in the book of *The Pariah*, although crucially, due to the seriousness of the subject taken from Delavigne's tragedy, there is no trace here of the satirical bite which in other librettos by Chęciński is a crucial element of the writer's deliberate intertextual playing. One good example here is the scene of the prologue analysed above. Chęciński depicted the rage of the crowd ready to deliver a fatal blow to Djares by comparing it to a predatory flock of wild birds and the power of talons tearing apart defenceless bodies. A distant – but perhaps apposite – association here is with the chorus of birds from the second part of Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [*Forefathers' Eve*]. That comparison heightens the impression of the cruelty and ruthlessness of the crowd surrounding the old pariah, since the brutality of the birds of prey depicted by Mickiewicz strikes at the merciless criminal, while the bestiality of the human horde in *The Pariah* feeds solely on the zeal of ossified social prejudices.

A striking intertextual game can be discerned in Chęciński's libretto also in one of the final scenes – another that is absent from Delavigne's play. It is the scene of the wedding procession of Idamor, Djares's son, and the priest's daughter Neala. Let us stress that Idamor is also a pariah, but he left his family home

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<sup>7</sup> Żabnicki (1957) points to the playwright's numerous links to the poetry of Władysław Syrokomla, the tales of Henryk Rzewuski, Ignacy Chodźko and Kazimierz Władysław Wójcicki, and the comedies of Aleksander Fredro and Józef Korzeniowski. Among more recent studies, it is worth invoking the works by Dobrochna Ratajczakowa (2006, 2012), who has discussed similarities between Chęciński's work and neo-Sarmatian and Biedermeier aesthetics. I look more closely at this question in the article 'Jan Chęciński – Moniuszkowski librecista' (Borkowska-Rychlewska, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> I discuss this question in detail in two articles (Borkowska-Rychlewska, 2019a, 2019c).

and with youthful determination forced his way up to the social heights. Yet the blot on his conscience is not his craving for social advancement and his desire to win the hand of the priest's daughter. Idamor, alarmed at the possibility of losing the social position he has gained, in a moment of moral truth, betrayed his father, leaving him at the mercy of the rabid mob. In the closing scene, when Djares, crazed with suffering, breaks up the wedding procession, the truth about Idamor's background emerges. Djares unequivocally defines the red tilak on his son's forehead, marking his religious and caste affiliation, as a 'sign of damnation':

DJARES:

A wedding altar! A joyous procession!  
Nuptial robes! Clothes of wondrous colours!  
And here on his forehead the sign of damnation!  
Stained by his father's blood!

(Act 3, scene 3)

It is difficult to say whether Chęciński and Moniuszko had any detailed knowledge of Indian culture. For many nineteenth-century writers and intellectuals, it was a very interesting area, and we find elements of a fascination with India, for example, in the philosophical writings of Józef Kremer and Karol Libelt, in some literary works by Juliusz Słowacki, Cyprian Norwid and Leszek Dunin-Borkowski, and also in critical treatises, such as Norwid's *Sztuka w obliczu dziejów* [Art and history] (1850) and Kremer's *Listy z Krakowa* [Letters from Cracow] (1855).<sup>9</sup> It would appear, however, that Dżares's affected cry on spotting a trace of red on his son's forehead was not the effect of any great effort on the part of the composer and librettist to introduce their audience to Indian culture and use it as a prism for defining Idamor's condition. In Chęciński's libretto, the young pariah's tilak, although representing a clear element of exotic staffage, is primarily an allusion to the mark of Cain, and consequently to the numerous literary reminiscences of that motif and its symbolism. Byron's drama looms here, of course, as a fundamental reference point for the generation of Chęciński and Moniuszko. At this point, it is worth noting that in the English Romantic's work, the biblical tale of the man who brought death to the Earth and the symbolic suggestiveness of the mark on his temple carry highly ambiguous overtones. In Byron's (1821, p. 436) own words, the mark on Cain's forehead is not only a brand that singles out the murderer – both stigma and warning – but also, paradoxically, a protective cloak and the initial stirrings of his conscience:

ANGEL

The Lord thy God

And mine commandeth me to set his seal  
On Cain, so that he may go forth in safety.  
Who slayeth Cain, a sevenfold vengeance shall  
Be taken on his head. Come hither!  
[...]

<sup>9</sup> On the presence of Indian motifs in nineteenth-century Polish literature, criticism and philosophy, see e.g. (Tuczyński, 1981; Falk, 2015; Nowakowska, 2015, 2018).

[The ANGEL sets the mark on CAIN's brow.

CAIN

It burns

My brow, but nought to that which is within it.

Exploring this semantic context further, we can state that Chęciński enhances reflection on Idamor's condition in this scene not only by alluding to Byron's *Cain*, but also through a less than obvious, but interpretatively highly fertile, reference to the third part of Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* (2016, p. 308). Let us remind ourselves of the relevant passage. In the closing lines of the ninth and last scene in Mickiewicz's drama, the eyes of the guślarz and the woman standing at the edge of the cemetery behold a figure pierced by a 'thousand swords', moving in a long procession of kibitkas with prisoners towards the north:

WOMAN

There was one wound between his eyes,

One only, and of no great size.

I thought it but a smudge at first.

GUŚLARZ

And that's the wound that pains him worst.

I saw it, and its depths did sound:

It is a self-inflicted wound,

And even death won't ease its pain.

WOMAN

Ah! Make him whole, great God, again!

The list of historical-literary analyses of the wound on Konrad's forehead is a very long one, and it is impossible here to discuss all of the possible interpretations of this motif indicated by Mickiewicz scholars (Borkowska-Rychlewska, 2019). Generally speaking, Mickiewiczologists describe the bloody mark as a visible and painful effect of 'the hubris and blasphemy of the Great Improvisation' in the third part of *Forefathers' Eve* (Weintraub, 1982, p. 230), although its symbolism is sometimes read from a subjective perspective as the poet's public confession, delivered beneath the mask of a literary fiction, and as an exemplification of the continuous process of his maturing and spiritual rebirth (Weintraub, 1982, pp. 250–251; cf. Majchrowski, 1993, pp. 180–181). According to this conception, the Cainian trace on Konrad's temple can be read also as an autobiographical mark of a constant impulse for self-destruction, an impulse conditioned by the laws of personal and communal history (Ziembra, 2016, p. 33). In this light, the hero of *Forefathers' Eve* would be not a model, leader or redeemer, but 'an engrossing image of collective fortunes, reflected in individual peculiarities' (Ziembra, 2016, p. 34). And in the context of the libretto of *The Pariah*, it is this trope which seems particularly interesting, as it helps us to better understand the sense of the intertextual allusion made by Chęciński. The symbolic 'sign of damnation' on Idamor's forehead holds a twofold message: it is not only a trace of belonging to

a higher social caste, but above all a sign of betrayal, which made his father's heart bleed and left an indelible stain on the young soldier's conscience. The context of Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* reinforces the suggestiveness of this interpretation and additionally triggers another very important meaning. The wound on the forehead of Idamor, a protagonist dogged by pangs of conscience who sorely felt the consequences of his own pride and exoticism, is mainly, of course, a sign of betrayal resulting from a rash decision and an incautious youthful deed, but it is also – when we bring into view the final scene of Mickiewicz's drama – an overt act of accusation with regard to social and historical injustice. How apt in this light prove to be the words of Grzegorz Zieziula (2005, p. 41), who interprets the flames of the pyre, where the corpse of the titular hero is laid in the finale, as 'Idamor's moral victory, in spite of his physical annihilation'.

This perspective affords us a far better understanding also of the words of Władysław Wiślicki from the review quoted at the beginning of this article, who – praising the changes made by Chęciński to the libretto of *The Pariah* in relation to the French original – asked rhetorically: 'Delavigne's protagonists, beings with erroneous feelings, fathers who of their own free will sacrifice their children without any higher incentive, merely in order to satisfy their own personal passions – can they arouse our interest? They sooner trigger our outrage'. Chęciński's protagonists, having undergone a characterological metamorphosis based on carefully selected intertextual inspirations, did not outrage the Warsaw audience and critics, but gained their full approval. This was undoubtedly an effect of the librettist's deliberate action. Not by accident did Chęciński stress in his preface to the first edition of the libretto of *The Pariah* that the most important change he had made in relation to the French original was to the character of Djares: 'I preferred to condemn [him] to madness rather than leave him with the unyielding egoism that consciously exposed his own son to death' (Moniuszko, 1869, p. V). The sources of that metamorphosis can be sought, of course, in the operatic literature of the day, rich in models of parents crazed in desperation after the loss (death or abandonment) of their child. Again one is put in mind here of Chęciński's experience as a translator: as the author of Polish translations of the libretti of *Le Prophète*, *Rigoletto* and *Il trovatore* written in the 1850s, he was able to perceive the great dramaturgical and scenic potential in the characters of fathers and mothers immersed in painful madness after loss. One may also assume that of considerable significance for the ultimate profile of Djares in Chęciński and Moniuszko's *The Pariah* was Chęciński's reading of the plays of Juliusz Słowacki, which he greatly valued and which he was among the first to bring to the Warsaw stage.<sup>10</sup> The old pariah's suffering appears to reflect the experience of Derwid from *Lilla Weneda* and above all the Widow from *Balladyna* – a mother who,

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<sup>10</sup> On 1 May 1872 *Maria Stuart* was premiered in Warsaw in a production directed by Chęciński. The title role was taken by Helena Modjeska, with Chęciński himself taking the part of Darnley. A review appeared in *Wieniec* 38 (1872), under the heading 'Marya Sztuart [sic]. Dramat w 5-ciu aktach Juliusza Słowackiego. Pierwsze przedstawienie dnia 1-go Maja' [*Maria Stuart*: a play in 5 acts by Juliusz Słowacki. First performance 1 May].



like Djares, is downtrodden and betrayed, who also looks with despair upon the indelible Cainian mark on her own child's temple.

It could be that in the subtleties of all the operatic and literary allusions indicated here lies an answer to the question posed at the beginning as to why Warsaw reviewers of *The Pariah*, although struggling to compliment Moniuszko's composition, rated Chęciński's work so highly. Moniuszko's *The Pariah*, intended as a universal, cosmopolitan, 'European' work, in the intertextual linguistic tissue woven by the highly intelligent and alert reader of Polish and European literature of the nineteenth century that Jan Chęciński undoubtedly was, took on completely different ideological and philosophical overtones than its French prototype. The utmost seriousness in the modifications of literary motifs that were recognisable to Polish audiences of those times, the lack of irony, which Chęciński used to such splendid effect in the libretto of *The Haunted Manor*, and all with the aim of underlining the moral victory of those who had ostensibly lost and were seemingly annihilated – that is what a careful audience could have seen and heard in *The Pariah*.

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