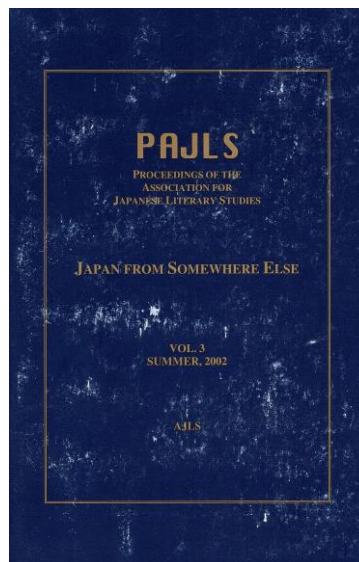


“Rhetoric of Taxonomy: The Pillow Books of Sei Shōnagon, Peter Greenaway, and Ruth L. Ozeki”

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**RHETORIC OF TAXONOMY: THE PILLOW BOOKS OF SEI
SHŌNAGON, PETER GREENAWAY,
AND RUTH L. OZEKI**

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Some of the key texts of the Japanese literary canon celebrate the millennial anniversary of their production with the arrival of the twenty-first century. These are the works of the mid-Heian period, written at the turn of the eleventh century by the women of the court. These writings are being recognized anew in Japan, most notably by the vigorous marketing of Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji monogatari*, which includes a 2000-yen bill (the denomination signifying the new century, of course) that features the author and her text. Outside Japan and outside the confines of East Asian academic departments, it seems the culture and literature of Japan's mid-Heian period are also enjoying a millennial vogue of sorts. The *Genji monogatari* has been the inspiration for two publications recently—Liza Dalby's *The Tale of Murasaki: A Novel*, published in 1999, which Catherine Ryu discussed at this conference, and Royall Tyler's English translation of *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), published in October 2001, have both ignited interest in Heian culture in the American press. *Genji monogatari* is not, however, the only mid-Heian text to inspire modern-day creations that have attracted popular interest: Sei Shōnagon's early-eleventh-century *Makura no sōshi* or *The Pillow Book* spawned two works in the 1990s that draw from it stylistically and thematically. They are Peter Greenaway's 1996 film *The Pillow Book* and Ruth L. Ozeki's 1998 novel *My Year of Meats*. In order to differentiate Sei Shōnagon's text and Greenaway's film, I will be referring to the Heian text as *Makura no sōshi* and to Greenaway's film as *The Pillow Book* throughout my discussion.

As a specialist of mid-Heian period literature, and particularly of Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi*, I was delighted and intrigued to discover Greenaway's film and Ozeki's novel. This is partly because I expected that such highly publicized vehicles would propel *Makura no sōshi* into the popular imagination in the U.S., and, frankly, I was curious to see how Sei Shōnagon's text had been "packaged." Secondly, Greenaway's *Pillow Book* and Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* rework elements of *Makura no sōshi* into twentieth-century contexts, and, in the process, they expose salient aspects of the source that are obscured by the unwieldy critical apparatuses, such as

multiple variant manuscripts, that accompany the practice of studying premodern texts. Both Greenaway's film and Ozeki's novel incorporate *Makura no sōshi* intertextually, and thus are not adaptations in the strict sense—that is to say, these works employ *Makura no sōshi* for their respective narrative strategies.¹ In my discussion today, I will focus specifically on the rhetorical effects of this intertextuality in Greenaway's *Pillow Book* and Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*. I will also consider how *Makura no sōshi* serves as a source or model of *écriture féminine*, a writing of/by the female body that challenges conventional, patriarchal (phallogocentric) language and thought.²

Greenaway's and Ozeki's creative engagements with *Makura no sōshi* now are part of the reception history of this text, a history that has not always regarded *Makura no sōshi* highly. Although it has been a standard in the Japanese canon since the eighteenth century as the progenitor of the *zuihitsu* or miscellany genre, *Makura no sōshi* has been treated as a maverick text. Its non-linear, fragmentary form, with its amalgamation of lists, essays, and memoir passages, and its lack of a unified "plot" per se makes it resistant to the methods of interpretation we apply to most traditional, linear narratives. It also cannot be fully analyzed through the established exegetical tradition of *waka* or Japanese poetry, although the poetic quality of *Makura no sōshi*'s prose has long been noted. The text can perhaps be described as what Umberto Eco has called an "open work" in which "the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work to be completed."³ In other words, it is a work in which internal relationships between elements have not been made explicit or fully narrativized, so the reader, in effect, completes the work only through the act of interpretation. Roland Barthes's concept of the "writerly text"—a text that "make[s] the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text"⁴ can also be used to describe *Makura no sōshi*'s narrative strategy. The lists in *Makura no sōshi* require this type of active participation on the part of the reader, for one needs to tease out the significance of an item through the

¹ Both Greenaway and Ozeki shape their readings of *Makura no sōshi* through Ivan Morris's translation *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*. The extent to which Morris's characterization of the work in his translation has influenced Greenaway and Ozeki should be taken into consideration, but such an investigation is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

² For a critique of *écriture féminine* see, Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward An Understanding of L'Écriture Féminine."

³ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 19.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 4.

given subject heading and the other accompanying entries. The reader can also apply this interpretive method between passages: occasionally there are associative links, although for the most part there are not. Greenaway's *Pillow Book* and Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* play upon this openness of *Makura no sōshi* by featuring readers who in fact become writers in the act of interpreting this text. Indeed, both Greenaway's film and Ozeki's novel are packaged as the "pillow books" resulting from the female protagonists' engagements with *Makura no sōshi*.

Before proceeding further, I would like to provide a brief synopsis of Greenaway's film and Ozeki's novel in order to set up my discussion. The plot of Peter Greenaway's *Pillow Book* is difficult to trace, for his film is driven by concept, rather than narrative.⁵ It is, in its sparest outline, a story about a half-Chinese, half-Japanese woman, Nagiko, who comes into maturity and self-fulfillment, resulting in her being able to narrate her story in her "pillow book"—symbolized by the tattooed text on her body at the end of the film (which contrasts with the palimpsest nature of her body up to that point), as well as, self-reflexively, the film itself. More specifically, the protagonist is the daughter of a calligrapher who commemorates his daughter's birthday by inscribing her name on her face—a ritual that mimics God's creation of man and that performatively signifies the daughter's placement within the patriarchal order. As a counterpoint to this phallogocentric gesture, Nagiko is also situated within a lineage of female writing by her aunt who informs her that she is named after Sei Shōnagon, the author of *Makura no sōshi* ("Sei Shōnagon" is a court sobriquet, and "Nagiko" is a personal name attributed to the author in Edo-period scholarship). Imprinted by these early experiences, Nagiko seeks a lover who can replicate her father's ritual, and, at the same time, desires to become a writer like Sei Shōnagon. The two pursuits converge when she begins to find pleasure in writing on her lovers' bodies. The film climaxes with the protagonist's pursuit of revenge against a publisher who had extorted her father and desecrated the body of her lover⁶. The film's primary trope, which is serviced by this plot, is that of the "body as text/text as

⁵ Amy Lawrence's observation that Peter Greenaway's concern centers around "How to make art out of *ideas* about art" (p. 5) is a useful description of the filmmaker's approach.

⁶ The publisher blackmails Nagiko's father by exchanging sex for publication. In a convoluted plot twist, Nagiko's lover, Jerome, is involved with this very same publisher. When Jerome dies, Nagiko inscribes calligraphy onto his body, creating "The Book of the Lover." The publisher disinters Jerome's body and flays his skin to create, literally, a book.

body”—in other words, that a body can be “read” like a book, or that a book can be “physically experienced” like a body. In short, this film valorizes the pleasures of the body and of literature and graphically represents this through calligraphy featured on human bodies.

On the other hand, Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* follows one year in the life of two women—a half-Japanese, half-Caucasian American woman, named Jane Takagi-Little, who is a documentary filmmaker and the first-person narrator of this novel, and Akiko Ueno, a bulimic, Japanese housewife. Packaged as a documentary novel written by the character Jane herself, it chronicles her experiences while on the road producing *My American Wife!*, a Japanese television show, which is sponsored by an American meat-exporting business. During this year, Jane finds herself embroiled in love, concerns about infertility, questions of truth and authenticity in media, and the unsavory practices of the meat industry. Akiko, meanwhile, watches the episodes of *My American Wife!*, finds the courage to leave her abusive, child-craving husband, and reclaims her own body (figuratively and literally). Both Jane and Akiko are avid readers of Sei Shōnagon’s *Makura no sōshi*.

So, how do these starkly different plots employ Sei Shōnagon’s *Makura no sōshi* as an intertext? There is one key difference that should be addressed first: the difference in media. However, here I find it interesting to note that Peter Greenaway is an unusually text-oriented filmmaker, while Ruth L. Ozeki is a writer with experience in filmmaking⁷. In Greenaway’s *Pillow Book*, the allusions to passages from *Makura no sōshi* appear as reenacted Heian-period scenes superimposed on the screen, with the text of the passage appearing in stylized typeface. These scenes are juxtaposed against frames showing the modern world of the protagonist. In Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*, the most prominent allusions to *Makura no sōshi* are used as epigraphs to each of the chapters, and they serve a similar role as the allusions in Greenaway’s film by evocatively framing the late-twentieth-century activities described within.

The figure of the author Sei Shōnagon and the culture of the Heian court loom large in Peter Greenaway’s and Ruth Ozeki’s interpretations of *Makura no sōshi*. In both the film and the novel, Sei Shōnagon and her pillow book are presented as inspirations for the late-twentieth-century female protagonists. Greenaway goes so far as to posit that his modern day protagonist *is* Sei Shōnagon—that is, the late-twentieth-century “reincarnation” of the late-tenth-century author. To mark this identity of the

⁷ Ruth L. Ozeki has directed two documentaries, *Body of Correspondence* (1994) and *Halving the Bones* (1995).

heroine with Sei Shōnagon, Greenaway has named his heroine Nagiko, a name which has been proposed as the author's personal name. To reinforce the parallelism between the late-tenth and late-twentieth centuries, Greenaway has also given the father of the twentieth-century heroine the name of Sei Shōnagon's father—Motosuke. The culture of the Heian court, with its unequalled corpus of writing by women at such an early period of history, provides an ideal against which Greenaway's and Ozeki's beleaguered heroines imagine a different destiny for themselves. Their musings are no doubt aided by the exotic appeal lent to the Heian period by the passage of time. Both the film and novel present Sei Shōnagon as a sophisticated wit, who enjoys the autonomy of mind and body that the modern-day would-be Sei Shōnagons aspire to. Exercising their powers of ventriloquism, the creators' place pithy characterizations of *Makura no sōshi* into the mouths of characters. Greenaway interjects his particular take on the text by inventing a bold statement for Sei Shōnagon herself, namely:

I am certain that there are two things in life which are dependable—the delights of the flesh and the delights of literature. I have had the good fortune to bring them together and enjoy them together in full quantity.⁸

This is the theme of Greenaway's film, and *Makura no sōshi*, it would seem, is his vehicle to convey it. Although *Makura no sōshi* includes both "the delights of the flesh and the delights of literature," nowhere does Sei Shōnagon explicitly link the two. Here we clearly see how Greenaway's creative agenda freely remakes *Makura no sōshi*.

Ozeki, on the other hand, is not as high-handed in her packaging of *Makura no sōshi*. However, Jane Takagi-Little, her first-person narrator of *My Year of Meats*, offers us the following comments on the Heian text:

We know quite a bit about Japanese life then—at least the life of the court and the upper classes—thanks to the great female documentarians of that millennium, like Sei Shōnagon. She was the author of *The Pillow Book*, which contains detailed accounts of her life and her lovers, and one hundred sixty-four lists of things . . .⁹

⁸ Peter Greenaway, *The Pillow Book* (Paris: Dis Voir, 1996), 77.

⁹ Ruth L. Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 14.

So, in other words, Greenaway's *Makura no sōshi* is about sex and literature; Ozeki's *Makura no sōshi* is a documentary written specifically by a role model "female documentarian" of the Heian period.

The lists that Jane mentions are undoubtedly the most salient feature of *Makura no sōshi*. As a matter of fact, *Makura no sōshi* can be credited with elevating the list to a literary form within the Japanese tradition—it stands at the head of a tradition of "monozukushi" or "the enumeration of things" that flowered in the medieval and early modern periods in Japan.¹⁰ Such lists as "Amusing Things," "Elegant Things," "Hateful Things," and "Embarrassing Things," evoke the particular milieu of the Heian court, but also reach across time to tickle the sensibilities of the twenty-first-century reader. Ozeki uses the list form early in her book, cleverly hinting at the ways in which *Makura no sōshi* might influence her novel. This is the memo sent by the Japanese advertising representative to the American Research Staff of the show *My American Wife!*:

Here is list of IMPORTANT THINGS for *My American Wife!*

DESIRABLE THINGS:

1. Attractiveness, wholesomeness, warm personality
2. Delicious meat recipe (NOTE: Pork and other meats is second class meats, so please remember this easy motto: "Pork is Possible, but Beef is Best!")
3. Attractive, docile husband
4. Attractive, obedient children
5. Attractive, wholesome lifestyle
6. Attractive, clean house
7. Attractive friends and neighbors
8. Exciting hobbies

UNDESIRABLE THINGS:

¹⁰ Jacqueline Pigeot's *Monozukushi: Nihonteki retorikku no dentō* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1997) diachronically analyzes lists within Japanese literary works, from *Makura no sōshi* to *Ryōjin hishō* (Secret handbook on dust on the beams, mid-to late twelfth century) to medieval *otogizōshi* (popular short narratives). During the time that I was preparing this presentation, Stefania Burk pointed me to an article featuring a dissertation by Robert Belknap that focuses on literary lists in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: Peter Monaghan, "Literary Lists Are (1)Interesting (2)Important (3)Everywhere," September 28, 2001, pp. A28-9. The study of the list as a literary technique is just emerging in English-language scholarship of literature.

1. Physical imperfections
2. Obesity
3. Squalor
4. Second class peoples

****MOST IMPORTANT THING IS VALUES, WHICH MUST
BE ALL-AMERICAN¹¹

The expectations of the Japanese staff are expressed here in seemingly clear black-and-white dichotomies of “Desirable Things” and “Undesirable Things.” However, the prejudicial, subjective categorizations (as well as the non-native locutions) hint at the troubles that lie ahead for this television production. The list is also the style of writing imitated by Nagiko in Greenaway’s *Pillow Book* and by Jane and Akiko in Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*.¹² Why should this be? The answer seems obvious: lists are relatively easy to compile and allow these women access to individual expression and literary aspirations. The rhetoric of taxonomy also allows one to control experience: once something is classified, it is contained. As Akiko remarks, “Shōnagon was so sure of herself and her prescriptions, and [she]found that it comforted her to read them.”¹³ Akiko, on the other hand, “could not imagine what such certainty would feel like. She never felt at all sure of anything, even of her likes and dislikes.”¹⁴

It is through writing lists that Akiko finds a means of expressing her inner state. Her list “Things That Make One’s Heart Beat Faster” poignantly expresses her very specific torment:

Rain clouds massing before thunder. To stand on one’s balcony
looking toward the city. To see the dull green-ocher ring forming
around the point of impact, that bruised sky, my *Tokyo heart*.

To contemplate his key in the latch, the scraping of his shoe, his
sock-clad heel hitting the hollow floor. To feel the sweet, humid

¹¹ Ozeki, 11-12.

¹² *The Pillow Book* is not the first of Greenaway’s works to reflect an interest in taxonomy. In fact, most of his works explore the art of categorization and listing (for instance *A Zed and Two Noughts* ([1985] and *Drowning by Numbers* [1988]). In the case of this particular film, however, a source for the listing is made explicit.

¹³ Ozeki, 38.

¹⁴ Ozeki, 39.

steam from the meat bathe one's face as one carries it in on the platter. To retreat, to purge—not a soul sees, yet *these* produce inner pleasure.

It is night and one is feigning sleep. One becomes aware of his critical mind grazing one's sparrow ribs, considering the cavity of one's pelvis, fingering the knob of one's spine, disdaining one's breasts. Suddenly one is startled by the sound of his deep snoring.¹⁵

This list is a testament to the abuse, physical and psychological, that Akiko is undergoing in her marriage. In fulfilling the taxonomy of “things that make the heart beat faster,” Akiko begins rather objectively, with a view towards ominous clouds gathering before an imminent storm. She then places a human subject into the list, who stands looking towards the city, towards that dark sky. Next, the shade of the sky is associated with the color of the bruise that is on Akiko's body—a sign of spousal abuse. The objective observation that began this listing from here on becomes a taxonomy of incidents in Akiko's life that make her “heart beat faster,” that is to say, nervous: her husband's return home; the meat recipes from the documentary *My American Wife!* that her husband, the advertising agency representative in charge of the show, forces her to cook; the bulimia, and her husband's possessive gaze on her body.

Let's compare Akiko's list to Sei Shōnagon's on the same topic:

Things That Make the Heart Beat Faster

Sparrows feeding their young. To pass a place where babies are playing. To sleep in a room where some fine incense has been burnt. To notice that one's elegant Chinese mirror has become a little cloudy. To see a gentleman stop his carriage before one's gate and instruct his attendants to announce his arrival. To wash one's hair, make one's toilet, and put on scented robes; even if not a soul sees one, these preparations still produce an inner pleasure.

¹⁵ Ozeki, 62.

It is night and one is expecting a visitor. Suddenly one is startled by the sound of rain-drops, which the wind blows against the shutters.¹⁶

The topic as well as the similarity in syntactic flow between Akiko's list and Sei Shōnagon's list suggest that Akiko's taxonomy is a studied attempt at self-expression, closely modeled after Sei Shōnagon's writing. However, the entries listed in each of these passages points up significant differences. Some elements, such as mention of a carriage, attendants, and the scenting of robes, date Sei Shōnagon's passage to a prior age; however, the sentiments and situations described are timeless. In comparison to Sei Shōnagon's more impersonal list, Akiko's clearly reveals the constraints of her specific situation. More significantly, Akiko's list of "things that make the heart beat faster" are all marked by negative connotation, whereas Sei Shōnagon's taxonomy lists sources of both negative and positive anticipation that can rush palpitations (negative: the anxiety over the survival of helpless young sparrows or the random movements of human babies; positive: the anticipation for a meeting spurred on by preparations).

Greenaway's *Pillow Book* also features a list under the same topic of "Things that Make the Heart Beat Faster" as the film draws to an end. These are intended to be the sentiments of a woman who has found fulfillment in her life:

Warm rain falling from the mountain clouds.
 Walking slowly dressed in crimson
 thinking of Kyoto
 Kissed by a lover at the Matsuo Taisha Shrine
 Quiet water and loud water
 Love in the afternoon in imitation of history
 Love before and love after
 Flesh and the writing table
 Writing of love and finding it¹⁷

As this list appears on the screen, it is accompanied by flashbacks from the heroine's life. These items are erotic situations and sentiments specific to Greenaway's film and serve to recapitulate the theme of sex/love and literature central to the film.

¹⁶ Mark Morris, trans., *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 51

¹⁷ Greenaway, film (not included in the script).

These above examples on a single topic, “Things That Make the Heart Beat Faster,” reveal the flexibility of the list form in inscribing personal experience. The topic may be the same, but the choices of entries in the list voice individual subjectivities.¹⁸ The list reflects the way in which an individual views the world—namely, the hierarchies and values that constitute that person’s existence. This enumeration creates order out of chaos by drawing boundaries and creating the categories of experience.

Let us now turn to the issue of language and female subjectivity, as shaped by reference to *Makura no sōshi*. The ramifications of the gender-based restrictions on Japanese and Chinese language usage in Heian Japan has been dealt with at length in critical studies that have been informed by feminist/gender studies’ theories of masculine and feminine language. In *My Year of Meats* Jane summarizes the usual arguments of this analysis and remarks on its significance for her:

Murasaki Shikibu scorned what she called Shōnagon’s “Chinese writings,” and this is why: Japan had no written language at all until the sixth century, when the characters were borrowed from Chinese. In Shōnagon’s day, these bold characters were used only by men—lofty poets and scholars—while the women diarists, who were writing prose, like Murasaki and Shōnagon, were supposed to use a simplified alphabet, which was soft and feminine. But Shōnagon overstepped her bounds. From time to time, she wrote in Chinese characters. She dabbled in the male tongue.

Murasaki may not have liked her much, but I admire Shōnagon, listmaker and leaver of presumptuous scatterings. She inspired me to become a documentarian, to speak men’s Japanese, to be different. She is why I chose to make TV. I wanted to think that some girl would watch my shows in Japan, now or maybe even a thousand years from now, and be inspired and learn something real about America. Like I did.¹⁹

¹⁸ As Atsuko Sakaki pointed out in her discussant remarks, the list form bears out the statement by the prolific list-maker protagonist of Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity*: “. . . what matters is what you like, not what you *are* like” (117). In other words, one’s tastes define oneself. It should be noted, however, that in Hornby’s novel, the protagonist’s spiritual epiphany is signified by his realization of the converse: “. . . maybe, given the right set of peculiar, freakish, probably unrepeatable circumstances, it’s not what you like but what you’re like that’s important” (280).

¹⁹ Ozeki, 15.

This “transgressive” nature of Sei Shōnagon’s writing is highlighted in both Greenaway’s film and Ozeki’s novel, with the heroines writing and speaking in multiple languages. Greenaway’s Nagiko speaks Cantonese, Japanese, and English, writes in multiple languages, and has men write on her/inscribe her in various languages as well. On the other hand, Ozeki’s Jane Takagi-Little speaks a masculine Japanese to gain footing within a predominantly male film crew. This linguistic hybridity can perhaps be interpreted as an aspect of “l’écriture féminine” / feminine writing, which challenges the hegemony of the phallogocentric male language. In other words, manipulation of multiple languages through their combination points to the possibility for a creation of a new feminine language.²⁰

Finally, Greenaway’s *Pillow Book* and Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* replicate the montage structure of *Makura no sōshi*, namely, through *My Year of Meats*’ juxtaposition of writing styles—journal entries, first-person narrative, third-person narrative, memos, faxes, letters, excerpts from *Makura no sōshi*, or in Greenaway’s case, visual styles—black and white, color, superimposed frames, split frames, subtitles. The results in both written and film media are similar—they create a non-linear narrative. The audience of the work is forced to adjust one’s strategy as well as speed of comprehension, thus disrupting orthodox notions of how to read or view. These techniques of narration are termed “post-modern” in analyses of Greenaway’s and Ozeki’s work, but these characteristics ironically can be found in their late-tenth-century source work, *Makura no sōshi*.

In summary, the aspects of *Makura no sōshi* reflected in Greenaway’s *Pillow Book* and Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* are: the figure of the sexually and intellectually independent Sei Shōnagon; the use of transgressive language; the rhetoric of taxonomy; and the technique of montage. Whereas we would, I think, recognize these aspects collectively as traits of *écriture féminine* when presented within the 1990s works, such qualities in *Makura no sōshi* have yet to be considered as “strategies” of a specifically feminine writing in the reception of *Makura no sōshi*.

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²⁰ It is interesting to note that both Greenaway and Ozeki naturalize their heroines’ linguistic prowess by presenting them as being of mixed blood: Greenaway’s Nagiko is half Chinese and half Japanese, while Ozeki’s Jane is half Japanese and half Caucasian American. Ethnic and racial hybridity and the creation of a hybrid language to represent this identity are key problematics in both works. The parallel in Heian Japan would be what Jane points out—the cultural dialectic between things Chinese and Japanese. Significantly, women are the innovators of this cultural, linguistic hybridity in all of these works.

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