

Causes of the Salem Witchcraft Hysteria

Dusty Marie

In 1692, the relatively poor farming community of Salem Village, Massachusetts, became the site of one of the most peculiar events in American history. Hysteria, rumors, and accusations of witchcraft spread rapidly, originating from the home of Reverend Samuel Parris. When two young female members of Parris's household started exhibiting strange symptoms, doctors could find no explanation beyond the supernatural. Soon, others throughout the community began to experience similar signs. Those afflicted pointed accusing fingers at their neighbors, leading many to believe that witchcraft and its associated evil had infiltrated the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

From June 1692 to May 1693, nearly 200 people were accused of witchcraft. Prior to the dissolution of the Special Court of Oyer and Terminer, established to try and convict the accused witches, twenty individuals were sentenced to death. In just over three months, fourteen women and five men were executed by hanging. One man was pressed to death under heavy stones. Several more died while imprisoned in harsh conditions. By 1695, relative peace and normalcy had returned to Salem Village.

Much has been written about the details surrounding the Salem witchcraft hysteria, yet much remains to be discovered. Chronologies, intensely researched books and articles, and countless retellings have done little to create a consensus regarding the cause of this Colonial American episode. Research has suggested various reasons, such as strict Puritan beliefs and the possibility of poisoning, to resolve the affair, yet there still fails to be one accepted explanation. As time has passed, numerous unique perspectives have emerged across various fields of study. By comparing and contrasting the lenses through which this event has already been interpreted, it is possible to discover a common link to a singular cause

The hysteria and resulting trials have long been a favored subject of study among historians. While many placed the strict Puritan religion and its leaders at fault, others made compelling arguments for increasingly modern alternative agents. In recent decades, researchers have raised questions concerning race relations and applied them to the events at Salem. Through this lens, emphasis was placed on the role of African and Native Americans, their proximity to Salem Village, and Salem's conditioned fear of the "other." Similarly, the growth of women's studies inspired considerable attention to the feminine situation in Colonial Massachusetts. This perspective opened doors of study into domestic roles, Puritan prejudice, and emotional significance. These lenses brought to light areas often overlooked by traditional accounts and provided a more inclusive examination of the event.

Puritanism was defined by strict beliefs adhering to Scripture. Derived from Calvinism, its main driving force for both life and politics was the idea that its followers were predestined by God to be pious examples in their communities. Numerous historians blamed Puritan theology for the chaos occurring at Salem in 1692. Among those who believed religion to be the cause of events was David Harley. In his 1996 article, "Explaining Salem: Calvinist Psychology and the Diagnosis of Possession," Harley argued that the lack of distinction between demonic possession and witchcraft affliction was not only what guided the hysteria but also what led to the collapse of the trials. By examining the history of Calvinist doctrine, he revealed the difficulties leaders had in making a correct diagnosis since symptoms of obsession, caused indirectly by witchcraft, and possession, caused directly by the Devil, often overlapped.

Throughout his research, Harley relied heavily on the works of Calvinist leaders Increase and Cotton Mather. By utilizing these works, he revealed the gaps in their writings which "left

ajar the door through which afflicted accusers were to troop in such numbers.”¹ Since neither of these prominent leaders was willing to commit to a definition of bewitchment or possession, the afflicted individuals, unhindered by specifications, simply accused whomever they chose. Harley contended that once Cotton Mather and the Boston clergy “condemned the use of spectral evidence and the ordeals of touch and sight,” leaders were left with no other choice than to deem the events as a mass possession directly by the Devil, thus disabling the trials.²

Harley concluded that historians have overlooked the issue of rediagnosis in their attempts to objectively capture what really happened: “To explain the dynamics of Salem, or any other cases of witchcraft or possession, the historian must initially focus on the explanatory systems available to the participants. It was the interplay of the explanations offered at the time that shaped events.”³ By briefly exploring other accounts which have attempted to address this issue, he proved that the importance of rediagnosis in the trials has been largely disregarded. However, instead of providing a summary of evidence for his accepted cause, Harley spent much of the conclusion admonishing traditional historians for neglecting the topic of rediagnosis in their efforts to force the truth to fit their personal understanding. Conversely, he lauded historians of science and medicine, such as himself, for conducting research in a less condescending manner.

Ten years later, Richard Latner also addressed the events at Salem through the lens of religion in his article, “‘Here Are No Newters’: Witchcraft and Religious Discord in Salem Village and Andover.” Similar to Harley was Latner’s choice to place blame on religious leadership. However, instead of focusing on the lack of Calvinist definitions for possession and

¹ David Harley, “Explaining Salem: Calvinist Psychology and the Diagnosis of Possession,” *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 2 (April 1996): 316, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2170393>.

² *Ibid.*, 318.

³ *Ibid.*, 329.

witchcraft, Latner suspected the “young, aggressive ministers quick to believe reports of evil spirits.”⁴ He, by examining the history of Salem Village and its neighboring town Andover, discovered a disproportionately higher number of witchcraft accusations in that area concurrent with the ordinations of two young, Harvard-educated Puritan ministers to the local churches.

Latner placed much emphasis on the arrival of Samuel Parris, the minister of Salem Village Church. Through extensive use of quotations taken from the minister’s sermons, Latner argued that Parris helped to instigate the hysteria in Salem “from a noxious mix of psychological rigidity and religious enthusiasm that ill served a divided community.”⁵ He contended that Parris, through his efforts to purify the church at Salem by reinstating restrictive Puritan practices, created a separation between the pious, devout membership and those outside the church, generating even deeper divisions within the village as a whole. Parris’s sermons were filled with constant references to himself and his church as God’s chosen people and all those outside the Covenant membership as enemies of Christ. Latner even referred to the fact that the outbreak began in the minister’s own home and implicated Parris even further: “Parris, with his proclivity for religious enthusiasm and his disposition to identify his opponents with the enemies of God’s church, turned what might have been contained as a private incident of bewitchment into a public crusade against the devil and his minions.”⁶

In his conclusion, Latner underscored the influence of Joseph Green, Parris’s replacement, on Salem Village. He showed that Green’s leadership, which brought peace and unity back to the village in 1697, accentuated the role that religious strife played in the events.⁷

⁴ Richard Latner, “‘Here Are No Newtters’: Witchcraft and Religious Discord in Salem Village and Andover,” *The New England Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (March 2006): 93, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/20474413>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

Although his reasoning is compelling, especially supported by church records and sermons, Latner's article lacked the intensive analysis of primary sources implemented by Harley in his examination of the Mathers' writing. In this endeavor, he perhaps relied too heavily on his own merits as a historian of Salem witchcraft and, therefore, failed to achieve a greater depth and range in his research.

Benjamin Ray, a historian of religion, took a similar approach and stance to Latner in his article, "Satan's War against the Covenant in Salem Village, 1692." He even referenced Latner's article in several places throughout his research. Ray's belief that Samuel Parris was the driving force behind the hysteria mirrored Latner's hypothesis; however, the method chosen to present the material was different. Ray purposefully arranged his research chronologically in order to analyze the patterns which developed throughout the episode. By employing this technique, he demonstrated the progression of instability between Parris's Covenant and the outside villagers.

While Ray did quote from Parris's sermons, he was far less interested than Latner in what Parris actually said. Instead, he focused on the impact of the minister's words on the citizens of Salem Village. In referencing Parris's orations leading up to the outbreak of accusations, Ray asserted that Parris "had aroused villagers' fears of demonic activity and created the climate in which accusations might flourish."⁸ He argued that as opposition to Parris's ministry grew, Parris used his position in the pulpit to exploit division and incite his followers into action. However, instead of using Parris's own words to back up these claims, Ray relied on quotes from former Salem Village minister Reverend Deodat Lawson who was visiting the town at the time of the outbreak. He seemed to place much more importance on Lawson's perspective of the events than on Samuel Parris's actual role.

⁸ Benjamin C. Ray, "Satan's War against the Covenant in Salem Village, 1692," *The New England Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (March 2007): 82, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/20474511>.

Ray concluded his article by citing numerous statistics to show that “accusations in Salem Village, it is apparent, sprang from the heart of an embattled congregation, and members initially directed their fears against those who were not members—the many ‘outsiders’ living among them.”⁹ This, he reasoned, was driven by Parris’s constant references to himself and his Covenant as godly and to all those outside of church membership as wicked enemies. Despite this convincing explanation, Ray’s premise suffered from the lack of direct quotations used by Latner and the in-depth analysis of sources practiced by Harley. Although Ray certainly had access to an abundance of primary sources as an editor of the trial records, much of his research appeared to be taken from previously published books and articles. Therefore, though his article was informative, Ray added minimal insight into the exploration of a cause for the Salem witchcraft hysteria.

As time has passed, more contemporary perspectives were added to the events at Salem. One of these interpretations explored the role of race and ethnicity. Several historians examined both the influence of African and Native Americans in Colonial Massachusetts and the perceptions of white European settlers about African and Indian cultures. Timothy McMillan asserted, in his article, “Black Magic: Witchcraft, Race, and Resistance in Colonial New England,” that Colonial era witchcraft has been examined through multiple lenses but “rarely in terms of race and ethnicity.”¹⁰ McMillan, perhaps having been inspired by the end of apartheid and the 1994 multiracial elections in South Africa, researched the religion and beliefs of African Americans during the period surrounding the events at Salem to determine the role of race as an impetus for the spread of witchcraft accusations.

⁹ Ray, “Satan’s War,” 91.

¹⁰ Timothy J. McMillan, “Black Magic: Witchcraft, Race, and Resistance in Colonial New England,” *Journal of Black Studies* 25, no. 1 (September 1994): 99, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2784416>.

McMillan argued that in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of race and witchcraft in Colonial New England, the historian must take into account the bias of traditionally white European records. He stated that “written records of Whites are the major source of data about the attitudes and practices of enslaved Blacks.” He further contended that “Europeans often misinterpreted and undervalued the cultures of the Africans.”¹¹ In an attempt to address these often overlooked interpretations, McMillan examined several cases of witchcraft accusations against Blacks, including that of Candy who not only confessed to practicing witchcraft in Salem but actually testified against her own mistress, Marguerett Hawks. This, he claimed, was a moment of empowerment often utilized by Blacks of that period but rarely recorded in archival documents.¹²

Though he presented intriguing questions for research, McMillan was unable to answer many of them due to the lack of primary sources concerning African Americans during the Colonial period. Much of the information he introduced was taken from Southern accounts of Black religion and culture and applied to African Americans living in New England. He concluded that Blacks were seen as “true witches” and perceived to be “inherently evil creatures, unable to control their connection to satanic wickedness.”¹³ This, McMillan believed, put African Americans of the Colonial period at a greater risk for witchcraft accusations. While this may be true, he either failed to conduct original research or was unable to locate the necessary sources to validate his theory.

John McWilliams also considered the role of race and ethnicity in his 1996 article, “Indian John and the Northern Tawnies.” However, instead of studying the influence of African

¹¹ McMillan, “Black Magic,” 102.

¹² *Ibid.*, 105.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 112.

Americans on events, as McMillan did, McWilliams focused primarily on the misunderstanding of Native American culture and the resulting fear of Indian attacks. He, most likely compelled by his extensive historical research into James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, explored numerous accounts related to the witchcraft hysteria in Salem and the surrounding towns to demonstrate the effects of the northern Indian wars on Colonial New England.

By comparing the timing of witchcraft accusations to that of the Indian wars, McWilliams presented evidence of the rising fear in Salem in the years preceding 1692. He also utilized statistics to show that the majority of accusations were from Salem Village and the northern communities under the greatest threat of Indians attacks. McWilliams specifically explored the trial of former Salem Village minister George Burroughs. Burroughs, accused "of bewitching the soldiers" of the English army, was believed to be "a spiritual agent of the French and Indians."¹⁴ McWilliams argued that it was Burroughs's assumed association with the northern Indians and their supposed devilish ways that was the most condemning. He also called into question the actions of Indian John, a Native American slave of Salem Village minister Samuel Parris, during the Salem trials. McWilliams described the conduct of Indian John as being suspiciously calculated and gave an account of Indian John's attempt to convince people that "the whipping scars of slavery" were actually the "witch marks" of the afflicted.¹⁵ He contended that Indian John was likely exploiting the white residents and leaders fears toward Native Americans in order to save himself.

McWilliams concluded by asserting "that neither the extent nor the intensity of Salem's experience of witchcraft is explicable without reference to the northern war and the communal

¹⁴ John McWilliams, "Indian John and the Northern Tawnies," *The New England Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (December 1996):593, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/366555>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 599.

spectre of the Indian devil.”¹⁶ This, he argued, may not have been the singular cause but was certainly a driving force in the events. Unlike McMillan, who relied predominately on existing research instead of primary sources, McWilliams explored original documents and provided compelling arguments supported by those accounts.

A year after McWilliams provided an account of Indian John’s actions, Elaine Breslaw presented intriguing research into the role of another Native American - Tituba, Indian John’s wife, who was also a slave in the Parris household. Breslaw, having lived for a year in Barbados, was especially intrigued by the potential African influences on Tituba during her time spent serving Parris in that county. By examining Tituba’s complex background and behavior and noting the elements of various cultures referenced in her confession, Breslaw showed that Tituba’s influence “was of key significance in the shaping of the bizarre events at Salem.” She further theorized that Tituba’s well-crafted confession “became a model for others desperate to save their lives.”¹⁷

Like McWilliams in his interpretation of Indian John’s behavior, Breslaw reasoned that Tituba was well aware of the fears of the community and utilized her knowledge as an American Indian with Creole African and Puritan English influences to guide the events. By exploring records from the trials and comparing them to accounts of African and Indian beliefs and practices, Breslaw demonstrated that Tituba’s confession was a serious driving force behind the hysteria. She contended that “Tituba’s testimony was not merely the frightened response of a slave woman, but, arguably, a sophisticated manipulation of her interrogators’ deepest fears.”¹⁸ Tituba would have been well acquainted with Puritan concepts, but, as Breslaw stated, she also

¹⁶ McWilliams, “Indian John,” 604.

¹⁷ Elaine G. Breslaw, “Tituba’s Confessions: The Multicultural Dimensions of the 1692 Salem Witch-Hunt,” *Ethnohistory* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1997):536, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/483035>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 541.

would have retained much of the knowledge of Indian culture and practices she had learned from childhood; these she combined to create a “story with ideas so strange and new as to convince [the magistrates] of a satanic invasion.”¹⁹

Breslaw concluded that through her clever use of knowledge and her credibility as an Indian, assumed by Puritans to be of a diabolical spirit and therefore trustworthy in the identification of malevolence, Tituba was able to save her own life: “Tituba’s confession was a ploy to confirm Puritan anxieties, to shift blame to outsiders, and to distract her tormentors with the fear of evil.”²⁰ However, in preserving her own wellbeing, Breslaw argued, Tituba also unintentionally promoted the factors needed to create a mass witchcraft hysteria.

Beginning in the 1980s, the growth of women’s studies provided a new lens for the events at Salem. Ann Kibbey applied this modern perspective to her 1982 article, “Mutations of the Supernatural: Witchcraft, Remarkable Providences, and the Power of Puritan Men,” by examining the relationship between Puritan beliefs of witchcraft and providence and the power assigned to Puritan men. By doing so, she revealed “that men were responsible for the public articulation of the concept of the symbolic witch and for the social fact of widespread prosecution and execution.”²¹ This, Kibbey believed, placed already vulnerable women in an even more powerless state.

Kibbey thoroughly explored documents and accounts of previous trials to evince the development of the Puritan idea of witchcraft. She argued that as Protestantism distanced itself from Catholicism, the lines between the occult and the Puritan deity blurred: “Strange as it seems, what for centuries had been the evil deeds of witches and sorcerers became, for American

¹⁹ Breslaw, “Tituba’s Confession,” 543.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 548.

²¹ Ann Kibbey, “Mutations of the Supernatural: Witchcraft, Remarkable Providences, and the Power of Puritan Men,” *American Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 128, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2712606>.

Puritans, the benevolent signs of divine love.”²² Further adding to the confusion was the power provided to men. As Kibbey pointed out, a husband’s or father’s sins were believed to directly influence their dependents. A man’s “own moral acts” had the power to “literally destroy the lives of the people around him.”²³ This was an ability presumed to be held by the deity or else by the malicious act of a witch. Also, of significance, Kibbey asserted, is the fact that the men overseeing the trials considered themselves to be “figurative fathers of judicial authority” thus providing them with similar potentially destructive power.²⁴

In conclusion, Kibbey contended that, through the assertive power of the Puritan male, women were easy targets for accusations and convictions. Kibbey, likely influenced by her advocacy of the feminist theory, proposed that much of the reasoning behind this was the belief that women were “attempting to take for themselves a power that Puritan culture had come to associate with adult male sexual identity.”²⁵ By researching the history of Puritan beliefs and actions before and during the hysteria, Kibbey presented a convincing account of the linear progression of gender inequality which led to the events at Salem.

Thirteen years after Kibbey, Elizabeth Reis also examined the witchcraft hysteria through the lens of gender. In her article, “The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul in Puritan New England,” Reis explored what she considered an overlooked matter in the Salem episode – the Puritan belief that a “woman’s feminine soul, jeopardized in a woman’s feminine body, was frail, submissive, and passive – qualities that most New Englanders thought would allow her to become either a wife to Christ or a drudge to Satan.”²⁶ This belief, she asserted, placed women at

²² Kibbey, “Mutations of the Supernatural,” 133.

²³ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁶ Elizabeth Reis, “The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul in Puritan New England,” *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 1 (June 1995): 16, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2081913>.

a notable disadvantage in the trials and rendered them essentially powerless in the community and the church.

Reis, unlike Kibbey, focused much of her research on Puritan literature, such as sermons and religious writings. She utilized this language to demonstrate the convergence of theology, womanhood, and witchcraft in Puritan culture. Teachings were filled with references to a weak, vulnerable feminine soul inhabiting both men and women alike. While this assured Puritan men of a righteous heterosexual union with Christ, Reis argued that it made women, whose bodies were already considered weak, especially prone to accusations of witchcraft: “A stronger body was less likely to submit to the devil’s temptations and thus better protected the soul from the devil’s domination.”²⁷ Reis further examined trial documents to show how male and female accusers were affected differently depending on the gender of the accused. Women were typically afflicted similarly by both genders. However, males would only be physically distressed by other men; afflictions by a woman were directed toward the man’s property or toward his dependents, thus preserving the individual’s masculine identity.²⁸

Ironically, Puritans, as Reis concluded, viewed women’s weaker state as more prone to evil yet also as more open to servanthood for Christ. However, in the outbreak of hysteria, “New Englanders focused on the darker side of womanhood, emphasizing the vulnerability of women’s bodies and souls to the devil, rather than their openness to regeneration.”²⁹ While Kibbey chose to focus her research on accounts of the trials, Reis, inspired by her extensive work in the study of women and religion, chose various Puritan documents to support her theories, thus providing especially convincing evidence for her conclusions.

²⁷ Reis, “The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul,” 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32-34.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

Isabelle Laskaris also approached the topic of women's roles in the events at Salem in her more recent work, "Agency and Emotion of Young Female Accusers in the Salem Witchcraft Trials." However, in contrast to Kibbey's and Reis's explorations into the relatability of Puritanism to the perception of women, Laskaris focused on the emotions of the individual accusers. She revealed that while much has been studied and written about the happenings, "there has been very little analysis of the dynamics of expression that led to unprecedented cultural power amongst a typically powerless group."³⁰

In her article, Laskaris argued that previous "medical, psychological, and fraudulent" interpretations have neglected the fact that the hysteria "was a result of internal belief actively shaped by these young female participants."³¹ By examining the behavior of the girls in relation to their emotional community and their established societal norms and by comparing that behavior to other cases of accusations across both England and New England, she attempted to show that these young women were acting as a reflection of their place in society. As Laskaris pointed out, the girls were provided unprecedented power allowing them "to drive the action beyond their affliction and take active part in the court proceedings."³² The trials permitted the young women to express emotions, such as anger, that were not tolerated in females. According to Laskaris, they were also given a rare platform in which to profess their emotional strengths, such as the ability to overcome temptation.³³

Laskaris concluded by affirming her belief that the roles of the young women have been downplayed by reason of their age and gender. She asserted that considering their behavior "as a

³⁰ Isabelle Laskaris, "Agency and Emotion of Young Female Accusers in the Salem Witchcraft Trials," *Cultural and Social History* 16, no. 4 (October 2019):413, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2019.1585316>.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 414-415.

³² *Ibid.*, 419.

³³ *Ibid.*, 423.

legitimate interpretation of witchcraft belief” allows historians to view their responses “as rational and reasonable within this cultural context, rather than hysterical and irrational as has been done in the past.”³⁴ Though her conclusion is sound, Laskaris’s arguments suffered from a lack of original research. She, perhaps due to her inexperience as a practiced historian, relied heavily on secondary literature rather than on relevant primary sources, as Kibbey and Reis did, to support her claims.

The Salem witchcraft hysteria has been researched extensively. Until recent decades, much of this research resulted in general overviews of the events or economic and legal interpretations of the trials. Few historians have searched for a singular cause and even fewer have applied cultural and social lenses to the outbreak. Examination into these potential influences is still rare, but there remains at least one area of exploration that has been completely neglected – the role of the young men and boys of Salem. The impacts of Puritan leaders, Salem Village’s men and women, and even the young girls of the community have all been researched. However, the roles played by the young men and boys of the town are suspiciously absent from nearly every account. In order to gain a more complete understanding of societal standards and cultural traditions and how these may have influenced the episode at Salem, it is important to consider the impact of the community as a whole, with young men included.

Beginning in the 1980s, in response to the growing interest in race and gender studies, new perspectives emerged alongside the well-researched influence of religion. Breslaw expertly researched Native American relations to show that “Tituba’s credibility to her Salem audience was enhanced by her identification as an American Indian whose culture had long been associated with demonic power.”³⁵ She compiled and presented intriguing evidence of the

³⁴ Laskaris, “Agency and Emotion,” 425.

³⁵ Breslaw, “Tituba’s Confession,” 536.

inherent racial fears existing in Salem in the 1690s. Reis greatly advanced the understanding of Salem's gender roles by examining Puritan beliefs about women: "Puritans believed that Satan attacked the soul by assaulting the body, and that because women's bodies were weaker, the devil could reach women's souls more easily, breaching these 'weaker vessels' with greater frequency."³⁶ This left women in a vulnerable state prone to accusatory bias.

Although much has been explored in these new fields of research, there remain many unanswered questions. McMillan raised persuasive queries into the role of African Americans in New England but failed to provide convincing evidence. When examining why Blacks were not more often accused of witchcraft, he responded that "Blacks were valuable property and thus their destruction was costly."³⁷ He cited no research to support this. Laskaris, likewise, presented intriguing insight into the emotions of the young female accusers of Salem, but she too was unable to provide necessary evidence. These are both areas which require deeper exploration.

It is vitally important to the complete understanding of the events at Salem that historians reach beyond the white male constructed trial accounts to consider alternate views. Even with a potential cause as extensively researched as Puritanism, new ideas have been assessed. Harley, for instance, revealed the mass confusion created by the Puritan's failure to define the diagnoses of bewitchment and possession and argued that by "using the terms 'obsessed' and 'possessed' almost indiscriminately, [Increase] Mather is able to bypass the question of causation."³⁸ In this manner, he demonstrated a potential, previously unexamined cause of the episode. By considering such interpretations, historians can gain greater insight into previously unexplored areas in the search for a cause of the Salem witchcraft hysteria.

³⁶ Reis, "The Devil, the Body, and the Feminine Soul," 15.

³⁷ McMillan, "Black Magic," 112.

³⁸ Harley, "Explaining Salem," 320.

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