

UPSIDE-DOWN SEX: A VIRILE NATION AND ITS UNDERBELLIES*

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On 9 September 1886 some twenty men, mostly youths, raped Mary Jane Hicks, a sixteen-year-old orphan, on a scrubby mound called Mt Rennie in the wastelands on the south-eastern outskirts of the city of Sydney. In November that year, eleven young men and a thirty-five year-old cab-driver were brought to trial for this offence. Nine of the youths and the cab-driver were convicted (Peers *passim*; Walker *passim*). These events were voluminously reported and widely and intensively debated. Much comment focussed on the death sentences passed on the nine convicted, and on the four executions that were eventually carried out before a crowd of one hundred and fifty, some of whom had bought tickets to watch the spectacle in Darlinghurst Gaol, on 7 January 1887 (Peers 102-03; Walker 28-29). Two sets of comments highlight prevailing assumptions about male sexuality.

There were, on one hand, reports that such a deed was only one of many which “have been the boast of workgrounds and factory yards”. Young male employees formed “companies of twos and threes, and of tens and twelves” and “sought satisfaction of their lusts exactly as other parties combine and hunt for sport”. The proprietor of the Australian Rope Works, a factory near Mt Rennie which employed some of the youths involved in the trial, observed that for two years before this case he had overheard “youths and young men describing and boasting of the way they had overcome young girls”. These reports were made much of by the pro-hanging lobby, eager to shock young larrikins into a measure of respectability – and perhaps anxious to assert their own distance from such behaviour.

On the other hand, there were comments that blamed the victim herself. These referred to Mary Jane Hicks as a “lying little street tramp” who had “voluntarily entered into immoral relations” with a bunch of “dirty little larrikins”. Such commentators fastened upon a report in which a senior police constable stated that he and his wife had taken Mary Jane Hicks into their household after the assault but had found her lazy, untruthful and disreputably knowledgeable about prostitutes and prostitution. These commentators continued to insist – even after it had become widely known that some of the Mt Rennie youths had been carrying knives – that

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this was “an offence against which common maidenly or womanly instincts would have been a most effective guard”. Commentators of this ilk were vociferously opposed to the death sentences. The *Bulletin* remarked: “If the prisoners’ deed deserved so frightful a penalty, where is there a ‘man of the world’ who would go unwhipped?” All men, they implied – middle-class gentlemen quite as much as the working-class larrikins at Mt Rennie – would at some time or other use rougher than usual handling¹ to gain their way with a woman, even perhaps their wives. A cross-class alliance, they suggested implicitly, united all men who assumed that their masculinity entitled them to abuse women, no matter what differences – in education, morality and religion, say – might otherwise separate them. (For the quotations in this and the previous paragraph, see Peers *passim*; Walker *passim*; Allen *Sex and Secrets* 54, 56-57; Bavin-Mizzi, 146-77, 170. For middle-class masculinity, see Crotty *passim*.)

My concern in this article is with nationalism and masculinism. There is nothing new about giving attention to questions of gender in relation to nationalism and the “legend of the nineties” in Australia. From cultural critics like John Docker and David Walker to cultural historians like Susan Sheridan and Robert Dixon to historians like Marilyn Lake, Judith Allen (and, indeed, myself), there has been an abundance of scholarship historicising Australian nationalism, challenging its privileging of male writers and painters, analysing its masculinity (Docker, Sheridan, Dixon, Lake, Allen *Rose Scott*, Magarey). Tellingly, Susan Martin’s chapter on this period in the *Oxford Literary History of Australia* is titled “National Dress or National Trousers” (Martin 89-104). But attention to gender, or to masculinity, is not quite the same as attention to masculinism – a political commitment based on solidarity between men as men, a commitment to maintaining the social dominance of men – as historians Marilyn Lake and Martin Crotty and sociologist Michael Roper have pointed out (Crotty 8; Roper 414-15).² In this article, I am concerned with nationalism and the forms of masculinism evident in the second set of comments on the Mt Rennie case.

¹ The phrase “rougher than usual handling” refers to a notorious statement made by Justice Bollen of the Supreme Court of South Australia in 1993 in a case in which a wife alleged that her husband had used violence against her. Justice Bollen is reported to have said: “Of course, you may run into considering [...] the question of, shall I say, persuasion. There is, of course, nothing wrong with a husband, faced with his wife’s initial refusal to engage in intercourse, in attempting, in an acceptable way, to persuade her to change her mind and that may involve a measure of rougher than usual handling.” Quoted in *Director of Public Prosecutions v. Respondent*, unreported, Supreme Court of South Australia, 20 April 1993 (qtd. in Scutt 299-323). I thank the anonymous reader for *AVSJ* who provided this reference.

² The term “masculinism” was in common usage among some feminists in Australia during the early 1980s, but its first appearance in print was in Marilyn Lake’s article in *Australian Historical Studies* in 1986.

Let me approach my subject indirectly, pausing for a moment over the contexts of both nationalism and masculinity. The context for the first is Australia's particular relationship to the British Empire, the tension between nationalism and imperialism in the late nineteenth century. The context for the second is a consequence of the first: the needs of empire created and policed a specific gender regime that, in Australia, became more than a regime; it became a political commitment. My argument is that the late nineteenth-century moment of imperialism – with international competition for leadership in industry and trade, and international military conflict – generated a perceived wish for highly specific performances of masculinity. In Britain, for instance, a combination of legislation, law-enforcement and scandal – from Labouchère's amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 through the Cleveland Street scandal to the trials of Oscar Wilde – effectively defined homosexuality and re-inscribed its illegality in public consciousness. It did this in precisely the same period that sexological definitions stigmatised feminists and New Women, indeed any women leading lives separately from male-dominated households, as sexually perverse. The result was a fresh and confining emphasis on what Adrienne Rich has named "compulsory heterosexuality", necessarily accompanied by what Michel Foucault named "the hysterisation" of women's bodies, and what I want to call, complementarily, "the testosteronisation" of men's bodies. (A complementary biologisation of men's bodies was no part of Foucault's story; like so many white male philosophers, he made no distinction between the universal human and the male.) (Rich 631-60; Foucault, [1976/78] 1981: 104).

The last three processes – making heterosexuality compulsory and focussing both women and men exclusively on their reproductive capacities – occurred in Australia, too. But they acquired different inflections from this country's specific nationalism and relationship to empire. A broad brush depicts the distinctive quality of Australia's nationalism as racial exclusivity. Among the earliest legislation passed by the new Australian parliament were the Acts introducing the infamous White Australia Policy in relation to immigration, and, in mid-1902, the Act that enfranchised white women throughout the nation and simultaneously prepared the ground for the *dis*-enfranchisement of all Aboriginal Australians, male as well as female (Grimshaw 78-79; Magarey, *Politics of Passion* 34-35; Stretton and Finnimore 525). The same broad brush depicts Australia's relationship to imperialism as adolescent, combining an assertion of newness – modernity, vigour, energy, above all health, to be distinguished from the traditional, effete and played-out nature of "old" Europe and Britain – with a constant, if reluctant, awareness of the authority and emotional bonds of what so many Australians continued to refer to as "home" (e.g. Macintyre 339). Racism and an insistence on the health of the new "white" nation meant that the national icon might be the figure of the Bushman, but that he had to be a testosteronised Bushman, a figure who was assumed to be

enjoying – or suffering – a pronounced case of priapism, as though constantly on Viagra.

Support for this figure was urged from all sides. Consider, for example, the pronouncements of the leading gynaecologist in Melbourne in the 1890s, a distinguished and authoritative expert evocatively named Walter Balls-Headley. He was the Lecturer on Midwifery and the Diseases of Women at the University of Melbourne, honorary physician to the Women's Hospital, president of the Medical Society of Victoria in 1889, president of the Obstetrics and Gynaecology section of the Intercolonial Medical Congress in Sydney in 1892, and vice-president of the British Gynaecological Society of London in 1897 and 1898. In 1894 he published a book titled *The Evolution of the Diseases of Women*.

It is a scholarly and well-written work, the bulk of it devoted to descriptions of diseases occurring in women's reproductive organs, and ways of treating them – useful to a professional readership. Other doctors would not have been shocked by the treatment recommended for gonorrhoea, even though it could not have avoided extremes of pain for their patients: it included washing out the bladder with boric acid solution and subsequent injections of a solution of potassium permanganate, and injecting the uterus with no less than a pint of perchloride solution three or four times a day. This was a standard treatment of the time. But Balls-Headley's book was more than a technical exposition, for its first two chapters explain, in a vein worthy of Herbert Spencer, why the diseases that fill his other twenty chapters have evolved. And those chapters brought him a far wider audience.

Beginning with the uncompromising statement, "Evolution is the mode of progress of the world" (vii), he set about arguing for recognition of sexual difference as the "natural" foundation of sexual relations. He gave the sexual double standard all the authority of science: "In woman" he wrote, "the sexual instinct – that is the natural, unreasoning impulse by which she is guided to the propagation of the race – is usually more pronounced". But in men what is pronounced is "the sexual appetite – that is, the desire of gratification in the act of union" (2). "The ideal of marriage" he proclaimed:

is the formation of unity, a perfect whole, a complete sexual body able and willing, healthily and happily, to perpetuate the race. It is woman's work to produce the next generation, and to maintain its vitality and further development; and the well-being of the other half of her complete system, her husband. [...] It is man's business to complete sexual unity, and to provide sustenance, bodily and mental, for these two halves and the product of their union, the child; in doing this with the increased requirements of civilisation, he assists the progressive evolution of the human race. (8)

He added to this a strong suggestion that a woman who had a strong sexual "instinct" but no means of satisfying it might well go mad (324). In his address to the Intercolonial Medical Congress in 1892, he asserted that "high intellectuality" and postponed marriage would be likely to result in "uterine congestions and inflammations, or myomatous growths" that could well require removal of a woman's ovaries, a treatment – equivalent to castration for a man – used in the United States for treatment of women's mental disorders (Balls-Headley, "President's Address" 523-26, 532-33; also Barker-Benfield 81-83, 126, 286, 343, 347-48). By implicit threat as well as explicit exhortation, then, Balls-Headley required all men and women to marry and beget children to populate the plenty surrounding them in Australia.

Women had good reason to object to his analysis, as a number of feminists pointed out. "Alexa" exclaimed in the *Woman's Voice*: "Everything we had thought to be of importance, the higher nature of man or woman, the sacredness of individuality [...] are all to be seen as nothing in comparison with a rabbit-like fecundity on the part of woman and unrestrained indulgence for the superior sex". "If woman is to be ONLY a breeding machine", she expostulated, "won't she make rather a poor one?" ("Alexa" 255, 246). For Balls-Headley's work enshrined sexual difference – men's lust and women's wish for children – at the heart of the Australian paradise, making intrinsic to that paradise a sexual double standard within, as well as outside, marriage. It gave the sanction of medical science to the legal right that a husband enjoyed, a right of access to his wife's body whether she wished it or not. It gave fresh emphasis to what was a well-established grievance for women in relation to marriage: that relations between a husband and a wife could best be characterised as feudal, in which the master owns the serf or, in this case, the wife, body and soul. It allowed for men's infection of their wives with sexually transmitted diseases, as a result of both sexual double standard and acceptance of young men "sowing their wild oats". It represented men's sexuality as helplessly "hydraulic". And that supposed "law of nature" maintained that in men, periodic ejaculation was essential to good health, and that once aroused, men were at the mercy of their biology until they had achieved ejaculation. Men's bodies were "testosteronised" indeed, and the consequent masculinism formed the core of Australian nationalism.

There were others besides those who defended the Mt Rennie rapists who showed just how widely, across all class differences, this "law of nature" was believed and promulgated. Labor MLA, Frank Cotton, writing to feminist leader Rose Scott, exclaimed in anguish, "You don't realise, you can't realise what the curse of 'compulsory celibacy' means under existing economic conditions", he protested. He invoked economic depression and the consequent postponement of marriage, and then besought her understanding. "We're not iron and we're not ice, and after all it's no use shutting our eyes to the fact that the laws of nature are the laws of God" (Allen, *Rose Scott* 116). Others were more aggressive. In response to a

request that he support legislation to raise the age of consent for girls, Labor MLA Arthur Griffith waxed indignant:

I have a little lad at home with light in his eyes and red blood in his veins. Suppose when he is 16 he is seduced by some pretty little girl his own age [...] you ask if [...] I will help to brand the lad as a criminal, my reply is No! and a much more emphatic no than I can use in addressing a lady (Allen, *Rose Scott* 193).

Cotton believed that the sexual double standard had such widespread assent that there was *no* social circle – middle class or employed in a rope-works – that would exclude a man solely on the grounds of having been “the cause of a girl’s ruin” (Allen, *Rose Scott* 56). Parliamentary debates on female suffrage in South Australia in the early 1890s were choked with more and less euphemistic references to women’s primary function – to provoke and satisfy men’s sexual desires. These utterly respectable – and thoroughly virile – parliamentarians bragged about their sexual susceptibility. One, who asked whether “the partisan woman was not a freak of nature”, boasted that he “did not think he would be able to sit by the side of one of these beautiful creatures” in a “calm and dispassionate manner”. Another uttered what was, apparently, their worst threat, that if women were involved in politics, “men would become still more shy of matrimony”. “It is a positive fact”, one proclaimed, “that so-called emancipated women in blue stockings had far less attraction for the other sex than those who were true to what had been considered genuine womanhood with all its fascinating and captivating charms”. They even gave voice to the fear of castration lurking beneath such strident assertions: was female suffrage legislation an admission that the present electorate was effete and incapable? “Was manhood played out?” (South Australian *Parliamentary Debates*, qtd. in Magarey, *Passions of the First Wave* 28-29).

In Victoria one of the three hundred women who went in deputation to the Legislative Council to plead for votes for women in September 1898 described the conduct of the honourable members with analogies to “a den of satyrs, or a ‘sexual degenerates’ ward of a lunatic asylum, rather than a body of ‘elected’ legislators”. Their deputation was “crowded into a place reeking with tobacco and grog, and ogled and giggled at”, she reported. The women’s careful speeches were interrupted with “low jests” and such interjections as “‘Who’ll mind the babies?’ ‘New Woman’, and others not fit to print”. One parliamentarian accosted two of the younger members of the deputation, leering, “You girls don’t want votes. You want – something else.” (*Tocsin*, 22 Sept. 1898, qtd. in MacKenzie 48).

Henry Parkes, head of the government of New South Wales for much of the second half of the nineteenth century, was simultaneously husband and father of one family, and lover and father of a second. He joined the deputation to the New South

Wales Governor to plead for clemency for those convicted of the Mt Rennie rape (Martin 366, 378, 419, 421-22, 424; Allen, *Rose Scott* 56).

There were limits to such masculinism, though, if only on the outskirts of the lunatic fringe. A New Zealander of Irish ancestry named Arthur Desmond, in Sydney in the early 1890s, showed where they lay. A radical anarchist, journalist, poet and political agitator, he was also known as “Ragnar Redbeard”. Between about 1893 and 1895 he produced a weekly paper called *Hard Kash*, in which he listed the personal financial holdings of prominent statesmen who were on record for having urged the population to restraint and belt-tightening during the economic depression of the early 1890s. Pursued by the Ministry of Justice, he had to keep his means of production underground, quite literally: the press on which *Hard Kash* was printed was hidden in a “cave” in Paddington. At the same time, he was writing a Nietzschean work called *Might Is Right*, which included such chapter-headings as “Love and Women and War”, “Female Animals Love the Best Fighting Males”, “Sexual Selection and the Necessity of Unmerciful Conflict”, “History, Biology and Contemporary Events – All Unite in Demonstrating that Might is Right”. But even in the radical nationalists’ masculinist Sydney, Desmond was unable to find a publisher for a work in which the “denunciation of women, and the glorification of the doctrine of Force” was “so vitriolic and vehement”. His Chicago publishers later claimed that “Redbeard’s teachings were responsible for the great European war since they taught William of Germany, Roosevelt, d’Annunzio – and W.M. Hughes – all to be strenuous and ruthless” (Reeve 3-5). Desmond left Australia in about 1895, to escape arrest. This was one testosteroneised urban bushman whose priapism was too pronounced even for his Australian sympathisers.

Further, there were hesitations at the heart of the hydraulic versions of masculinity, hesitations that suggest that the widespread confidence in the performative inevitability of male sexuality may sometimes have been misplaced; that the assurance of masculinism was far from universal.

Between 1888 and 1896, the evangelical Baptist Reverend Henry Varley – an Englishman who had also spent time in the United States and Australia in the 1870s, lecturing on “The Social Evil” – travelled around Australia giving lectures on “a vitally important subject” to boys and men. His subject is encapsulated in his first sentence: “in a very important sense the seed is the life”. One of these lectures, which ran to forty pages, announced that it had been given to no fewer than 300,000 men in various parts of the world. It was an extended exposition of what North American historian G.J. Barker-Benfield has called “the spermatic economy”: the importance of semen to the vitality of all aspects of a man’s physical being. It was “the sap of the whole man”, and determined “the strength of the brain, the richness of the blood, the brilliance of the eye, the vigour of the mind, the hardness of the muscle, and the firmness of the flesh”. Accordingly it needed to be preserved, not spent. Varley inveighed against masturbation (solitary or in company), visits to prostitutes, sexual excess in marriage (and he assured his listeners that he spoke as a

man “of like passions with yourselves”), contraception, adultery, even “involuntary emissions at night” which were, he asserted, “a result of past sin”. There was “a commonly expressed opinion”, he exclaimed, “that it is a natural relief, and for the health of a man to indulge [in] fornication!”. Wrong! “This statement is not only utterly untrue, but it is a dastardly lie” (Varley 1, 3, 7, 32, 26, 21, 11; Barker-Benfield ch. 15, 175-88).

Varley was but one of fourteen authors of late nineteenth-century Australian tracts, pamphlets and treatises concerned with masturbation and seminal loss listed by social and cultural historian, David Walker, in an article that also examines the extent of the sub-medical traffic in Sydney in cures for spermatorrhoea and nervous debility. That traffic was extensive: Walker calculates that it involved at least 193 unregistered practitioners acting as medical practitioners, a third of whom claimed special knowledge of nervous disorders. That meant, he notes, that there were almost as many unregistered quacks practising medicine as there were registered doctors in New South Wales. And they had a lucrative market, particularly among the inhabitants of Sydney’s 300 boarding houses and almost 2,500 lodging houses, distributed around the waterfront, the railway station and the central business district. The most prominent of the sub-medical businesses located themselves within easy walking distance of this population, and together all such businesses earned about £100,000 a year in peak years in the 1880s and 1890s, Walker estimates. Such earnings came from further afield, too. At least three of the principal sub-medical establishments catering for sexually anxious men ran mail-order businesses as well as consulting practices, and they addressed bushmen who were, in the words of one regular medical practitioner writing to the *Stock and Station Journal* in 1889, easy prey to the “nervous debility swindle”.

Walker’s article opens with an example of both anxiety and cure:

For several months George Thompson of Goulburn, New South Wales, had been feeling off-colour. He was troubled by a persistent, slight headache, and would wake unrefreshed and often felt drowsy. There was also something wrong with his testicles: one hung lower than the other and he wondered how dangerous this was. Worst of all were the wet dreams. A friend claimed that “nocturnal emission” was a minor problem which marriage would soon cure, but George was not so sure. He wrote to the Marston Remedy Company of Castlereagh Street, Sydney, early in February 1887 seeking their specialist advice. The verdict was grim: “more or less deep-seated debility of the whole sexual apparatus”. Still, the company promised that their pills would restore George Thompson to “full sexual power, vigour and continence”. In due course, Thompson received a prescription advising a fully-graded course (triple-strength) and a specially

made-to-order course of pills costing £10 in all. If the case proved more difficult, there was the heavy artillery in the Marston armoury:

One improved sexual electric intonator, single potency
Enlarge-invigorator, double (testicles and penis)
Enlarge-invigorator, single (penis only).

This case was invented by a registered medical practitioner, as part of the profession's battle against quackery. But its author maintained that both the symptoms and the treatment were similar to those of a real case (Walker, *Continence for a Nation, passim*).

Of course, both anxieties and quackeries can be seen as the Australian version of what Foucault characterised as "the war against onanism, which in the West lasted nearly two centuries" (Foucault 104; see also Garton 122-25). Their emergence in the late nineteenth century in Australia was, David Walker suggests, closely linked to both fears of national decline and aspirations for greatness for the new nation. To that explanation, I would add the pressures of the "testosteronisation" of men's bodies, the demands of masculinism. Martin Crotty has argued that there was a considerable change in the ideal of manliness in Australia between the 1870s and the first decade of the new Australian nation in the twentieth century. The manliness of the frontier had to combat brutishness, immoral muscularity, irreligion and barbarism, so it emphasised morality, religiosity and intellectual development. The decline in the cultural authority of the churches and the simultaneous rise of secular demands focussed on nation and empire, Crotty maintains, saw the religious and intellectual boy losing place to the fit and athletic boy, thence to the military boy. The collection of Spencerian ideas mistakenly called "Social Darwinism" gathered strength and, writes Crotty, "the idea that the first requirement to be a good human being was to be a good animal found an increasingly receptive audience" (Crotty 222). In a good male animal, sexuality was hydraulic. The emergence of the sex-cure industry in the late nineteenth century in Australia was the underbelly of the ideal of brawny, athletic and military masculinity – to say nothing of the acceptance of the sexual double-standard, across all class differences – of our increasingly virile masculinist nationalism. What was believed to be sexual pleasure for all men was clearly very alarming to those who were afraid that they would not, quite literally, measure up.

Soon after the quack sex-cure businesses had begun to succumb to attacks from the registered medical – and the legal – profession, people in Sydney were growing accustomed to the sight of William James Chidley getting about the streets dressed in a brief Grecian-style tunic and sandals, a symbol of his call to Australians to dress more appropriately for our sub-tropical climate. But Chidley provoked attention for more than his unusual dress. Having spent much time in the public library reading the works of Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, he developed a

theory about the origins of pain and evil, and the cures necessary to remedy the human condition. One of his arguments concerned the centrality of masturbation in male youth culture. Another, crucial to his theory, concerned the sexual abuse of women by men. Such abuse, a product of the evils attendant upon civilisation in Chidley's Arcadian view, consisted in the use of an erect penis in heterosexual sexual intercourse. Opposed to everything that he called "civilisation", Chidley maintained that "civilised coition" was characterised by male force exercised against the often unwilling or unready female. He described the penetration of an inert vagina by an erect penis as the "crowbar" method of sexual intercourse. He argued that such a form of copulation should be replaced by an act grounded in love and mutual attraction, in which the woman would be the initiator, for, he maintained, in mutual sexual excitement, the vagina formed a vacuum which would draw into it the flaccid or semi-erect penis. He offered these views to anyone who would read his pamphlet, *The Answer*, or listen to him speak. He gave several lectures in the Domain around Christmas time in 1913, and he addressed a large number of well-dressed women assembled outside the Mitchell Library on Boxing Day in 1914.

Chidley presented a version of male sexuality that was diametrically opposed to the hydraulic. Feminists liked it: one suffrage leader, Belle Golding, proposed the first public motion for a deputation to the government in his defence in 1912, and Rose Scott, principal suffrage leader, made private representations on his behalf to the Chief Secretary. Some men defended him too. But men of authority, masculinists to a man, made it clear that they found Chidley's challenge to the ideal of hydraulic male sexuality not only offensive, but also terrifying. The legal and medical professions united in masculinist solidarity against him. The police took him to court more than twenty times between March 1912 and February 1916. The courts declared *The Answer* obscene and prohibited its dissemination. Some members of the medical profession defined him as insane. He died in the Callan Park lunatic asylum in 1916 (Garton 124-25; Finnane esp. 214-19).

In conclusion, I would note that the underbelly of the virile nationalism of the era of Federation in Australia played a greater part in the nation's affairs than might be expected. For this period is also the time of what the demographers have dubbed "the Australian family transition" when the fertility rate of women who married plummeted – by eight per cent during the 1880s and then by a further eighteen per cent during the 1890s. Never again did settler Australian women bear as many children as they had before the 1880s (Caldwell and Ruzicka 87). I have argued elsewhere that the family transition can be characterised as "the first sexual revolution in Australia", and that it had owed much to feminist critiques of the condition of marriage and heterosexual relations of the time (Magarey, *Passions of the First Wave Feminists* 111-15). But I would argue, too, as I have in this article, that this major demographic transformation also had to do with the impossibility of the virility demanded by the masculinist radical nationalists. The soft underbelly of

the iconic priapic Bushman stands hand-in-hand with feminism among the principal causes of the Australian family transition, our first sexual revolution.

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