Fantastic lactations: fiction and kinship in the French Middle Ages

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ABSTRACT
Among the many representations of cross-species suckling in medieval French literature, two fourteenth-century examples are remarkable for their portrayals of fantastic creatures that nurse human infants. In *Le conte du papegau* (The Tale of the Parrot), a unicorn suckles a motherless child, and in *Tristan de Nanteuil* (Tristan of Nanteuil), a siren nurses a child abandoned at sea. The substitution of a fantastic creature for the wild animal that more commonly suckles an abandoned child emphasizes the fictionality of the episode. This emphasis on the fictional and the fantastic opens a moment of reflection in which the relationships defined through suckling come under consideration. Fantasy disrupts the conventional representation of kinship bonds based on blood and introduces symbolic relationships based on shared milk; cross-species nursing defines cross-species kinships.

KEY WORDS
Lactation,
milk,
blood,
kinship,
animality,
Middle Ages,
Tristan de Nanteuil,
Le conte du papegau.

RÉSUMÉ
Allaitements fantastiques : fiction et parenté au Moyen Âge français.
Parmi les maintes représentations de l'allaitement interspécifique dans la littérature médiévale française, se trouvent deux exemples remarquables de créatures fantastiques qui allaitent des enfants humains. Dans *Le conte du papegau*, une licorne nourrit un enfant sans mère et dans *Tristan de Nanteuil*, une sirène allaite un enfant abandonné en mer. La substitution d'une créature fantastique à l'animal sauvage, qui plus souvent nourrit l'enfant humain abandonné, souligne le caractère fictionnel de l'épisode. Cette insistance sur la fiction et sur le fantastique ouvre une interrogation sur les relations définies par l'allaitement. La fantaisie trouble la représentation conventionnelle des liens de parenté fondés sur le sang et introduit des relations symboliques fondées sur un lait partagé; l'allaitement entre animal et humain définit une parenté interspécifique.

MOTS CLÉS
Allaitement,
lait,
sang,
parenté,
animalité,
Moyen Âge,
Tristan de Nanteuil,
Le conte du papegau.

INTRODUCTION

Medieval French literature includes a number of narratives in which an abandoned child is suckled by a wild animal. While we occasionally find examples of human mothers who suckle nonhuman animals, as in the story of Madonna Beritola from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, trans-species nursing in literary texts usually involves a female animal and a male human child (Boccaccio 1951 ; McCracken 2013). To be sure, medieval texts recognize the nursing animal's behavior as marvelous and providential, but it also appears as natural. Animals that rescue human infants from starvation demonstrate a trans-species maternal instinct: a mother will respond to a hungry infant, whether or not the infant is her own or of her own kind (for examples see Mickel & Nelson 1977; Kibler *et al.* 1980; Chrétien de Troyes 2007; Baird 2011). In other words, the maternal animal's rescue is a marvel or a miracle, but the notion of a species-transcending maternal instinct tends also to identify the nursing relationship as somehow natural. Two fourteenth-century French narratives make an unusual change to the conventional story of the human child and the nurturing wild animal by representing fantastic creatures as nursemaids. In *Le conte du papegau*, a late Arthurian romance, a unicorn suckles a motherless infant, and in *Tristan de Nanteuil,* an epic narrative, a siren nurses a child alone on a boat at sea. The substitution of a fantastic creature for the wild animals that more commonly suckle abandoned children in medieval narratives rewrites the "nature" of the nursing relationship, since it disrupts the logic of the "natural" response of a wild animal to an infant in need. The fictionality of "natural" maternal instinct is underscored, and I will argue here that the emphasis on the fictional and the fantastic opens a moment of reflection in which the nature of the relationships defined through suckling comes under consideration. *Le conte du papegau* and *Tristan de Nanteuil* imagine bonds of milk kinship that link not just the nursemaid and the child, but also the child and an animal that drinks the fantastic creature's milk. Fantasy disrupts the conventional representation of kinship bonds based on blood and introduces symbolic relationships based on shared milk; cross-species nursing grounds cross-species kinship.

A UNICORN AND ITS SON

The anonymous *Conte du papegau* is a late Arthurian romance, long denigrated as a derivative tale exemplary of the decadence of late medieval Arthuriana. Recently, however, this tale about King Arthur's early adventures has received new critical attention, particularly for its representations of human-animal encounters (Berthelot 1994; Taylor 1994; Victorin 2002; Gaucher 2006). In one of the romance's final episodes, the young King Arthur sails back toward Brittany when his ship is blown off course and comes to the shore of an unknown island. Arthur goes out to explore this land and meets a dwarf who explains his own arrival on the island. The dwarf and his pregnant wife were on a sea voyage with the dwarf's lord, and their ship came to port so that the dwarf's wife could debark to give birth more comfortably. After three days, the child had still not been born and a favorable wind took the ship back to sea, leaving the dwarf and his wife behind on the island. Soon afterwards, the dwarf's wife dies while delivering a son, and the new father must seek shelter for himself and his infant son. He finds a great hollow tree, but when he goes inside with his son he finds that the tree is already occupied by a wild beast's newly born young. Before the dwarf can take his son and leave the shelter, the mother of the newborn animals returns.

The dwarf's description of this beast casts it as both familiar and extraordinary. A razor-sharp horn protrudes from its head, he notes with amazement. He claims that the beast is marvelously large, but then compares it to a familiar domestic animal, a horse ("Si estoit une beste a merveilles grant, aussi grande comme ung grant cheval, et avoit une corne enmy le front aussi tranchant come nul rasoir du monde", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 236). We are perhaps seeing from the dwarf's perspective, since to this small-sized man, a horse might seem "marvelously large", but the comparison domesticates the beast: it is like a horse, the dwarf says, and then he says that the smallest of its fourteen teats is the size of a cow's ("Et si avoit grans mamelles .xiiii., dont la maindre estoit aussi grant comme la mamelle d'une vasche", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 236). The unicorn is also like a domestic animal in its service to the humans, a striking departure from the more usual characterization of the beast as violent and aggressive (Pastoureau & Delahaye 2013). It lies before the human baby and positions itself so that the infant grasps its teat in his mouth, and when the child feels it, he suckles strongly, "as Nature instructs" ("la beste […] fist tant par son engin que l'enfant ot sa mamelle en sa bouche. Et quant l'enfant senti la molece de la mamelle, ainsi comme Nature luy enseigna, si alaita fort et bien", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 238). The infant suckles by instinct; his "natural" ability to nurse corresponds to the unicorn's apparently "natural" response to the infant's cries.

In fact, this animal is hyper-maternal: after it has suckled the human child along with its own young, it sees the dwarf and, thinking he is a child, it pushes him, too, toward one of its teats. ("Et quant mon filz et ses faons orent assés alaitez, la beste qui me vit petit, car je suis nain, cuida que je fusse jeunes et me bouta de sa teste vers une de ses mamelles qui encor estoit toute plaine", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 238). For the unicorn, all small beings are young and ought to be nursed. And the dwarf, being thirsty, willingly suckles; he describes the milk as the sweetest and best he has ever tasted ("et je qui avoye soif, fis ce que la beste vouloit et si l'alaictay et trouvay le meilleur lait et le plus doulx que oncques mais eusse mengé", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 238). This unusual example of an adult suckling from an animal offers the equally unusual appreciation of the qualities of unicorn's milk, but this nurture does not sustain the dwarf. He also needs to eat meat, and the unicorn helps him to procure game, killing other animals with its razor-sharp horn, until his son is old enough to hunt.

The unicorn's milk has no effect on the dwarf beyond satisfying his thirst, but it seems to have an extraordinary effect on the dwarf's son: the human infant grows up to become a giant. The text does not explicitly tell us that the unicorn's milk causes the son's gigantism, but the dwarf suggests that the fantastic animal's nurturance caused his son's extraordinary growth: "my child was well nourished by this milk, as can still be seen", he explains ("Et mon enfant se norissoit trop bien de ce lait, si que encores y pert, la Dieu mercy", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 238). And as the dwarf further explains, his son gained in size, he lost in intelligence ("il est creu devant son sens", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 232), a characterization that aligns the giant with the beasts that do not share human reason. The giant's failure to distinguish between animals he can hunt for food and those which he should not kill demonstrates his lack of intelligence and his isolation from human culture. He kills humans as well as wild animals, bringing all his prey back to his father to learn whether it can be consumed ("si ne trouve nul, ne homme ne femme quelle qu'elle soit, dont il en a moult en ceste forest, qu'il ne l'ocie et puis m'apourte tout pour veoir que c'est et le quel est bon pour mengier", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 232). Only the dwarf's repeated lessons prevent his giant son from falling into cannibalism, not because he wants to eat people, but because for the giant, people are animals, and all animals can be hunted.

In medieval narratives, human children rescued by nursing animals are often shown to receive some of the animal's characteristics through its milk. The maternal wolf or lion or bear transmits its fierceness and courage to the child or, less often, the child receives the bodily characteristics of the animal that suckles him, as in the late medieval *Valentin et Orson*, where a bear's milk makes a human child furry like the wild beast: "Si fut l'enfant pour cause de la nutrition de l'ourse tant velu ainsi comme une beste sauvage" (Baird 2011: 46). Human children may also acquire animal qualities as the result of contact and learning, but representations of cross-species suckling suggest that maternal milk may transmit animal characteristics to the human child, as *Valentin et Orson* explains. Such understandings of the effects of mother's milk are no doubt modeled on the common belief that human mothers may also transmit their qualities to their suckling children. Mother's milk, a form of mother's blood, conveys a woman's virtues or faults to the child she nurses. Bernardino of Siena writes that "the child acquires certain of the customs of the one who suckles him. If the one who cares for him has evil customs or is of base condition, he will receive the impress of those customs because of having sucked her polluted blood" (Atkinson 1991: 60). Fictional accounts of wild animals that suckle human infants represent the transmission of qualities like courage and fierceness through the animal's milk, and they also claim that animal nurturance may also shape the infant's body.

The dwarf's son who grows into a moronic giant because he drank unicorn's milk is most likely a parodic figure and the episode is probably a humorous rewriting of narratives in which a maternal animal rescues a human child and sets him on the path toward an extraordinary destiny (Smith 1994; Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 27-30; Dittmar *et al.* 2011; Greene 2014). The parodic nature of the episode – including the introduction of a fantastic suckling animal – emphasizes its fictionality, particularly since the unicorn portrayed in this narrative is somewhat anomalous. The text does not mention the marvelous qualities attributed to this fantastic creature in bestiaries and natural histories, where we learn of the purifying virtues of the unicorn's horn, its ability to elude even the most experienced hunters, and its attraction to virgins. In *Le conte du papegau*, the primary indications of the unicorn's fantastic nature are its ability to kill prey with its marvelously sharp horn and the effect of its milk on the human child.

As I indicated above, *Le conte du papegau* describes the animal in terms both familiar and extraordinary: it is marvelously big, but like a horse or a cow, and it has a razor-sharp horn in the middle of its forehead. The horn is the distinguishing characteristic of this fantastic animal, as Michel Pastoureau & Elisabeth Delahaye note with reference to the various ways in which the unicorn is represented in bestiary illustrations: "Tous en font un animal hybride, qui emprunte les différentes parties de son corps à d'autres animaux. Mais elle seule possède au milieu du front une corne rectiligne, très brillante et très longue […] C'est une merveille de la nature très recherchée" (Pastoureau & Delahaye 2013: 35; see also Tagliatesta 2007). This natural marvel is an "inexistent species" according Virginie Greene. In her reading, the unicorn is "an object of thought", an inexistent species that motivates the development of a fictional realm in which thought occurs. That is, the "object of thought" marks a moment in which the text calls attention to its own fictionality and to the operation of logic that fiction articulates. The text's representation of an inexistent species thus calls attention both to an object of thought and to thinking through fiction, and she insists that fiction enables a particular kind of thinking that values complexity without striving for completeness or wholeness (Greene 2014: 83). This claim may elucidate the representation of the unicorn in *Le conte du papegau*. By seeing the unicorn as a figure of thought, as a fantastic creature and not just a marvelous creature, we understand the work of fiction in making sense of the relationships defined by suckling. In the parodic substitution of a fantastic creature for the deer (or even the bear or the lion) that more often suckles an abandoned human infant in stories about children lost in the forest, the story emphasizes its own fictionality and introduces a complexity to the animal-human relationship. Here the temporary period of need that usually limits the duration of the relationship between the human child and the animal that suckles him is extended into a lifelong relation of affective kinship.

Even after it no longer feeds the humans, the unicorn remains at the service of the dwarf and his son. The unicorn comes every day to visit "the giant, its son" ("le jaiant, son filz", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 244), and out of love for the giant, it follows him on his daily hunting treks so that it can help its surrogate son, in case of need ("si aloit tousjours suyvant le jaiant pour ce que, se mestier fut, qu'elle luy aidast, tant l'amoit elle durement", Charpentier & Victorin 2004: 246). In *Le conte du papegau* the human son's bond with the fantastic

creature extends long beyond his need for milk, and the story imagines an enduring familial bond between the unicorn and the boy it suckled; this story imagines a human-animal relationship in terms of an enduring kinship relation.

Medieval literary narratives about human foundlings rescued by animals are primarily about people, not animals, and usually the story that matters is the child's story. The animal's rescue explains the child's survival alone in the wild, and although narratives about wild animals that nurse human infants may describe affection between the animal and the child, the suckling deer or lion or bear is usually left behind as the lost child inevitably leaves the forest and redirects his affect towards a human family and reintegrates into a noble lineage (Dittmar *et al.* 2011). Stories about cross-species nursing are doubled narratives of rescue: the infant is saved from death by the nursing animal, and then the human child is saved from animality by a return to human society. But in *Le conte du papegau* the unicorn is not left behind on the island when Arthur rescues the dwarf and his son. The unicorn too boards Arthur's ship to stay with "the giant, its son", who remains tied to a fantastic animality and the fantastic love of the maternal animal.

A DEER AND ITS BROTHER

An affective animal-human bond also characterizes interspecies suckling in the fourteenth-century epic narrative *Tristan de Nanteuil*, though here the relationship defined by milk is a symbolic kinship rather than a maternal bond. Like *Le conte du papegau*, *Tristan de Nanteuil* recounts the story of a human infant in need. But whereas *Le conte du papegau* represents an enduring bond between the human "son" and the fantastic maternal creature that suckles him, *Tristan de Nanteuil* represents a fantastic being as a temporary nursemaid: a siren is only one in a series of female figures that suckle the abandoned baby Tristan. Nonetheless, the siren, another fantastic "inexistent species" in Greene's formulation, proves to be an object of thought in the story, motivating a consideration of an animal-human kinship bond defined by shared milk (Greene 2014).

As the story begins, Gui de Nanteuil and his pregnant wife, Aiglentine, are at sea. As a violent storm buffets the ship, Aiglentine gives birth to a child who is named Tristan. The ship is blown off course and reaches shore after four months of travel. Gui debarks to seek provisions, leaving his wife and son behind, and while he is gone a merchant takes Aiglentine captive and sends her vessel back out to sea with the child still on board. Tristan is alone and in danger of death, the narrator tells us, but God sends a siren to suckle the child for fourteen days until the boat comes to shore in Armenia. There a fisherman finds the ship and seizes the siren and the child. He takes the infant Tristan to his wife, who nurses him. He plans to sell the siren, and as he takes her away to market, her breasts release a bowlful of milk that the fisherman stores in his house. During the night a hind enters the house and drinks the siren's milk; it immediately grows monstrously big. The deer kills the fisherman, his wife, and their six children, but it carries the baby Tristan gently into the woods, nurtures him and raises him there (Sinclair 1971).

The text explicitly claims transformative qualities for siren's milk, but – curiously enough – only in relation to animals. If an animal (*beste*) drinks siren's milk, it will grow great and powerful, the narrator tells us ("Il est de tel vertu et de tel seignorie / Que se beste en a beu, elle devient fournye, / Sy grand et sy poissant, nel tenés a folie, / Que nul ne dure a lui, tant ait chevallerie", Sinclair 1971: v. 1647-1650). The hind grows to be seven feet tall and twenty feet long; it becomes the most powerful animal in the forest. It would seem that the milk of fantastic maternal creatures promotes gigantism, if we read *Tristan de Nanteuil* alongside *Le conte du papegau*, but it is more likely that these narratives simply associate fantastic effects with the fantastic creature's nurturance (Douchet 2005: 308). But fantastic effects are limited to animals in *Tristan de Nanteuil*. The text clearly and carefully marks a difference between the human child who is nurtured but not changed by the siren's milk, and the deer that drinks it and becomes monstrously large. More important than the physical effects of the milk, however, is its construction of a kinship bond between the two nurslings.

Tristan de Nanteuil rewrites the most basic element of the familiar narrative about a child lost in the forest and saved by an animal, since the hind that takes the baby Tristan is not a gentle suckling maternal animal, but a fierce protector. The narrator never explains why the hind kills the fisherman and his family but saves the infant Tristan. The child's Christian lineage may save him, since we learn that the giant hind kills only Saracens, a characteristic that identifies the animal as a participant in religious strife and repeats the primary conflict between human characters in this narrative about western Christians in Muslim Armenia. But another kind of kinship may also motivate the hind's actions. The animal's bond with the child may originate in their shared relationship to the siren who suckled Tristan in the boat and whose milk the hind drank in the fisherman's house: the shared milk creates a symbolic kinship that may explain why the hind takes Tristan into the forest after killing the fisherman and his wife. And indeed, Tristan is the only human the hind tolerates. It devastates the countryside, killing people who live there, and making the forest impassable.

Anthropological studies of milk kinship have shown that in a number of cultures, the relationship between milk siblings is understood as a kinship tie to which incest prohibitions apply: a man and a woman who shared a nursemaid may not marry, a man may not marry the sister of a man who shared his nursemaid, nor may suckled children marry the children of their nurse, and so on (Altorki 1980; Héritier-Augé 1994; Parkes 2005). Milk kinship puts individuals and their extended families into relation, and families may even send children to be suckled in deliberate constructions of such relations. Although there are codified notions of milk kinship in Muslim cultures, there is little evidence that such relationships were widely recognized in Christian cultures. In fact, if bonds of milk kinship ever existed, they were displaced by the relationships defined through baptismal sponsorship; a child's

relationship to his or her godparent establishes alliances and defines kinship ties that preclude marriage within prohibited degrees (Lynch 1986).

Milk kinship seems then to have had little importance in medieval Christian cultures and it is not frequently represented in literary texts. The best known milk brothers in medieval fiction are probably King Arthur and Sir Kay, both nursed by Kay's mother, but their relationship is characterized more by rivalry than intimacy. The kinship relations that matter in fiction are those defined by bloodlines and genealogical descent, not the lateral cross-familial bonds established by sharing a nursemaid. In fact, many literary narratives about noble dynasties insist on the importance of the human mother's suckling of her own child: the noble mother's milk transmits noble virtues and supports proper dynastic succession. In other words, mother's milk pairs with paternal bloodlines to shape noble children, and particularly noble sons (McCracken 2003: 43; Sinclair 2003).

Tristan de Nanteuil is unusual in its representation of milk kinship, and it is especially unusual in its use of this relationship to describe a bond between a human and an animal. Here the kinship does not have implications for marriage alliances, but it may define certain prohibited relations. The hind takes the child into the forest, procures food for him, and cares for him, stealing milk and cheese for him to eat, but this female deer does not suckle the human child. It would have been quite logical for the animal to nurse the infant, since the child is passed from nursemaid to nursemaid in this story, but the siren's milk shared by the deer and the human child seems to preclude a suckling relationship between the deer and the child, even as it establishes a bond between them. In other words, the hind and Tristan have shared a nursemaid, and this sharing unites them in a milk kinship and prohibits a suckling relationship between them. The heir to Nanteuil, abandoned at sea then taken into the forest, has been lost to human culture, organized by genealogical succession, and integrated into a forest society organized by alliances among the animals and a milk kinship between the child and the deer. The contrast between these two models of social relations comes to the fore in *Tristan de Nanteuil* when the siren's suckling of the baby Tristan is read alongside a later episode about another hungry human infant.

The lady Clarinde is alone at sea with her newborn son Gilles. She has no food or water, and after three days, she can no longer suckle her son. Clarinde knows that her baby will soon die, and she decides to throw herself overboard. She thinks that if the child is alone and helpless, God will cause the ship to arrive at some port where the baby will find nourishment. As Clarinde prepares to leap into the sea, she offers a final prayer and suddenly feels milk return to her breasts. She turns back to feed her child and as Gilles suckles at her right breast, Clarinde feeds herself from her left. Her breasts release a boatful of milk and the mother and child survive for three more days until their boat comes to shore.

The perilous sea journey of the baby Tristan and the ordeal of Clarinde and her infant son are parallel episodes in which divine intervention saves a child: God provides a marvelous siren to suckle the infant Tristan in the earlier episode and then later in the story, Clarinde's breast milk is divinely restored and saves the baby Gilles as well as his mother. Both events are miraculous, though only the first also makes use of the marvelous in the figure of the fantastic siren. Both episodes insist on maternal abundance; the captured siren's breasts release a bowlful of surplus milk as she is taken away from her nursling, and Clarinde's miraculously flowing breast milk fills the boat, nourishing the mother as well as the child. The similarity of these two episodes about babies in boats invites us to read them alongside each other and calls attention to the two models of kinship they represent: an adoptive kinship characterized by a trans-species bond, and a genealogical lineage characterized by a recursive logic manifested in the mother who suckles at her own breast. The first establishes a milk kinship between the child and the deer that also drinks the siren's milk; the second insists on maternal suckling in terms of lineage.

Both genealogical descent and milk kinship might be understood as forms of blood kinship. The first is defined metaphorically through bloodlines and shared blood, and the second represents a literal transmission of mother's blood to her child, since in medieval physiology, mother's milk is understood to be produced by the transformation of mother's menstrual blood into breast milk. However, unlike the cross-species suckling relationship in *Le conte du papegau* where the unicorn's milk appears to cause the human child's gigantism (and perhaps his limited, even bestial understanding of the world), in *Tristan de Nanteuil* we find a carefully delineated distinction between cross-species nursing and the human mother's nurturance. The text specifies that the siren's milk affects the beast but not the human, and in what seems to be an implicit acknowledgement that a mother's nurturance shapes her child's identity, we find a series of human mothers, like Clarinde, who insist on suckling their own infants in *Tristan de Nanteuil* (McCracken 2014). The value of milk itself and not just of the maternal relationship seems to be at stake in these representations, and the different effects of maternal nurturance on human infants – cross-species suckling does not affect the human child, while human maternal suckling conveys noble identity – reinforce the distinction between milk kinship and noble human lineage as two forms of embodied kinship.

In this narrative about a family whose members are dispersed and exiled from their lands, the quest to unite the family and restore genealogical rights and privileges motivates the plot, and because the noble Tristan must recover his human relations, the bond with his milk sibling, the fierce nurturing hind, must be sacrificed. Once Tristan has grown to adulthood, the deer is killed by a Saracen army, and Tristan must leave the forest to find his way into human society and assume his place in a noble lineage. Yet the cross-species kinship bond persists in the story, recalled in the later, parallel episode that represents Clarinde and her child in a boat and, still later in the narrative, in the description of Clarinde's son, Gilles, who has become a holy hermit and is visited each day by a deer that sprinkles its milk on the herbs and berries the hermit eats. Both of these later episodes insist on the miraculous, and as representations of the miraculous provision of a mother's milk, they recall the divine intervention that sends the fantastic siren to suckle the baby Tristan, alone at sea.

CONCLUSIONS

Fantastic or marvelous creatures appear in many medieval narratives, and both *Le conte du papegau* and *Tristan de Nanteuil* include several examples of such creatures in addition to the maternal unicorn and siren. These beings instill marvel; they may fuction as supernatural signs of distinction for the characters or, when particularly fierce, they may test the courage of the protagonists. However, unlike the other strange beings encountered in these narratives, the fantastic creatures that suckle human infants represent not just an encounter with the marvelous, but also a site of thinking about relationships. The suckling unicorn and siren, "inexistent species", bring together the natural and the fantastic in a way that allows for the imagination of bonds defined not just by blood, but also by milk. Read alongside each other, *Le conte du papegau* and *Tristan de Nanteuil* suggest the particular significance of cross-species suckling when the nursing figure is a fantastic creature. Such scenarios allow for the representation of kinship forms not usually explored in medieval narratives: an enduring relationship between a fantastic animal and its human son, and a milk kinship between a deer and a human child.

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