

# Bard in a Barn: Iconography, Appropriation, and Shakespeare at Winedale

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## Abstract

Recent scholarship on Shakespeare and appropriation has contributed to the growing interest in the ways we "mean by" Shakespeare. Studies as wide-ranging as Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare*, Michael Bristol's *Big-Time Shakespeare*, and Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* chart the use of Shakespeare in everything from politics to colonialism to films and novels. Largely unexplored, however, is the way in which Shakespeare is used to mean in Shakespeare festivals. This essay examines one such festival, Shakespeare at Winedale, to consider how the festival's student performers and the agrarian community in which the festival is hosted come together to re-make themselves in Shakespeare's image and to re-invent the plays in the style of the rural American Southwest.

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While we may acknowledge that drama gives us stories that imitate life, we may also say that drama in turn reproduces the structures that it appears merely to reflect. Drama — or, more generally, "art" — reflects life, reproducing and working through scenarios from the "real" world outside of art, but at the same time, by providing a rhetoric and a meaning on which to model life, it helps to bring about those very scenarios. The rich appeal of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor — all the world's a stage — owes its resilience precisely to this resemblance.

## *Theatrum Mundi*

Insofar as life takes art as a model for understanding and producing itself, drama merits special attention as an art form whose components most obviously resemble the things they represent. Typically, the two components of a metaphor, the "tenor" and the "vehicle," are fundamentally dissimilar, and the pleasure of comparing them comes from teasing out their latent similarities: love is only like a rose when one considers beauty and joy coupled with fragility and the potential pain of thorns, and so forth. Two dissimilar things become similar when juxtaposed in metaphor. The components of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, however, are already similar, as drama and life, the

stage and the world, are exhaustively analogous by design. "All the world's a stage" folds the usual art-life relationship back on itself: the world works like a staged drama, which itself is modeled on the world.<sup>1</sup>

The art-life relationship described by the *theatrum mundi* metaphor echoes throughout the study of literature, but also finds a home in anthropology. Victor Turner, in an account of his study of the Ndembu tribe in Africa, notes that "life, after all, is as much an imitation of art as the reverse" (Turner 1982, 72). By way of illustration, he offers an instance of how the Ndembu use their cultural lore as a template for behavior:

Those who, as children in the Ndembu society, have listened to innumerable stories about Yala Mwaku and Luweji Ankonde, know all about "inaugural motifs" — "when the king was drunk and helpless, his sons beat and reviled him" — "transitional motifs" — "his daughter found him near death and comforted and tended him" — and "terminal motifs" — "the king gave his daughter the *lukanu* and excluded his sons from the royal succession." When these same Ndembu, now full-grown, wish to provoke a breach or to claim that some party has crucially disturbed the placid social order, they have a frame available to "inaugurate" a social drama, with a repertoire of "transitional" and "ending" motifs to continue the framing process and channel the subsequent agonistic developments. (72)

In this argument, the energy of imitation moves back and forth between life and art, or between life and what Turner calls "genres of cultural performance," in which category staged drama falls. These stories are powerful tools of enculturation that teach the children who hear them not only how to understand conflict and resolution by rehearsing them in tales from the cultural store, but also how to go about initiating and drawing to a close actual instances of conflict. They provide a structural model — a "frame" — for inaugurating, understanding, and recreating dramatic stories in life.

Recent critical interest in the use of Shakespeare as a source of meaning in our own culture has approached the art-life exchange from several angles that seem distinct, but that share a fundamental similarity. "Meaning by Shakespeare," Shakespeare and "appropriation," Shakespeare and the "invention of the human" — each line of thought contends that Shakespeare, the source of many of our most important and potent stories, is used not only to respond to or make sense of the world around us, but also to model scenarios, values, conflicts, and resolutions.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most radical and least substantiated of these positions is Harold Bloom's, which asserts that Shakespeare invented the modern human. Bloom tends toward Shakespearean character criticism and generalizations, as opposed to case studies, arguing that Shakespeare provides a cultural

catalogue of people, conflicts, and resolutions that we understand as imitating our world but that in fact can be seen to configure our world. It is not we who have invented Shakespeare; it is Shakespeare who has invented us. The human dramas described in the plays, from life and death to outrageous fortune to disprized love to filial duty — the list surely begins for Bloom with *Hamlet*, despite his affinity for Falstaff — are so many modules that we use to understand and perform our own lives. They provide the rhetoric, the lexicon, and the subject positions that we inhabit as we go about our lives in a world that ostensibly exists prior to and independent of the plays (Bloom 1998).

Bloom's argument falls somewhere between the fanciful and the absurd for many people, but it is not really as far-fetched as it may sound. Articulated in less totalizing terms, it is no different from Turner's observation about the function of stories and social dramas in the Ndembu society. Insofar as drama gives us a particularly mimetic form of art, it is least difficult with drama to accept the premise that the exchange of energy between art and life is a two-way affair. And insofar as Shakespeare's dramas are regarded with a special cultural reverence bordering on veneration, it is least difficult to credit his centrality for us among the different sets of narratives that we might use to structure our lives.

Studies of Shakespeare and appropriation take up the *theatrum mundi* metaphor less absolutely than Harold Bloom does, but with stakes that are equally high. If Shakespeare did not foresee and enable every contemporary human possibility, he has certainly been used to validate everything from personal struggles to local actions to global policies and ideologies. The plays have also been used as cultural touchstones and cultural anvils in individual appropriations that hammer out new territory on a Shakespearean model. When we encounter new cultural space — such as the American South — we put it into a dialogue with Shakespeare in order to investigate it in the terms that are most central to our culture. We map unmapped territory with Shakespeare, the most powerful cultural-cartographic tool we have; we find a way to make Shakespeare speak on behalf of the new cultural space, thereby both rendering that space familiar and validating it in terms of our most celebrated cultural (re)source.

Bound up somewhere in this process is the activity that Terence Hawkes has referred to as "meaning by Shakespeare": "The plays have the same function as, and work like, the words of which they are made. We *use* them in order to generate meaning. In the twentieth century, Shakespeare plays have become one of the central agencies through which our culture performs this operation. That is what they do, that is how they work, and that is what they are for. Shakespeare doesn't mean: we mean *by* Shakespeare" (Hawkes 1992, 3). For Bloom, the plays are *the* central agency, while for Hawkes, they are *a* central agency. The "appropriation" and "meaning by" approaches tend to locate agency in the users of the plays, while Bloom's approach locates

agency in the plays themselves, but otherwise, the schools are quite similar. The process whereby Shakespeare — or "Shakespeare" — ended up with the cultural prominence he has is probably a more contentious affair than the generally agreed upon result: Shakespeare is our most esteemed touchstone, and he is used to explain, to explore, to validate, to sell, and so forth.

### Shakespeare at Winedale

Here, I would like to consider how one particular community in the American Southwest uses Shakespeare to "mean" in a Shakespeare festival. Certainly, communities have been known to gather around and define themselves in relation to Shakespeare festivals of various sorts, from Stratford, England, to Montgomery, Alabama, and each undoubtedly meets Shakespeare halfway, bringing as much to the playwright and the plays as the playwright and plays bring to the community. There is an exchange of influence and appropriation: early modern diction overflows the plays and spills onto T-shirts and into gift shops, sometimes with comical results ("free stuff for thou," reads an internet promotion for a production of *Twelfth Night*), while the plays tend to bear some sort of signature stamp of the festival's cultural heritage.

The festival that I want to discuss, Shakespeare at Winedale, is particularly interesting in that it involves not only a community audience in the rural Southwest, but also a community of student performers who are transplanted from a university setting to an isolated patch of farmland for the duration of their work with the festival. Audiences and students engage Shakespeare in a rural setting, putting "the Southwest" and "Shakespeare" into an intense, interactive dialogue, while the students' work on the plays models the *theatrum mundi* trope and the various modes of meaning by Shakespeare discussed above. The exchange begins as students use Shakespeare to structure, model, and understand their own human and social dramas: life imitates Shakespeare. But the exchange continues as the rural setting, the rhythms of rural life, and the world of the community audience begin to inscribe themselves on Shakespeare: "Shakespeare" is re-made in the patterns and images of the American Southwest. As the festival moves to public performances, any given moment on stage can involve influence in multiple directions: Shakespeare invents the Southwest, the Southwest (re)invents Shakespeare.

Shakespeare at Winedale is actually an academic program, run out of the University of Texas. Every summer since 1971, the Shakespeare at Winedale program has selected some dozen to eighteen students, mostly but not exclusively undergraduate English majors from the University of Texas, and transported them to a plot of university-owned land in the middle of the Texas hill country, where they participate in nine weeks of intensive study of Shakespeare through performance. Academic record and personal interest factor into the selection process,

which involves a paper application and two brief interviews and which favors a willingness to get dirty and to take risks over experience in dramatic performance. The program's director assigns each student various roles in three plays, with the total number of lines being generally equal. Students are required to complete basic preparation, including the memorization of lines, before arriving at the festival site in early June. Line memorization is particularly important, since most students have no dramatic training and are undertaking performance for the first time — the language of Shakespeare, rather than the conventions of theater, is trusted to guide performance. Students reside in a small dormitory a short walk from the theater (a converted hay barn), effectively sequestered as a group from the outside world. For the first five weeks in residence, participants explore the plays, words first and from the ground up, through rehearsal, improvisation, generic role-play, experimentation, and so forth. They begin work early, typically before dawn, and they continue well into the evening, breaking for meals and occasionally attending community events in nearby rural towns.

Particulars vary from summer to summer, but generally, students are responsible for every aspect and facet of the play productions and of the public performances in which the program culminates. The director and support staff assign roles, oversee the rehearsal process, and coordinate the day-to-day schedule, but otherwise, students are left to shape the plays themselves. They create their own costumes, they design sets and lighting schemes, they outfit the theater space itself — a bare apron stage, a discovery space, and a balcony — and they co-direct each scene in each play as a group. They do little else. Emergencies and planned excursions aside, they do not leave the site, and interaction with the outside world is minimal. At the conclusion of the preparation period, public performances begin, six per week for four weeks, Thursday through Sunday, with each play being performed twice per week. Since the summer of 1998, students have followed the performances in Texas with a group trip to England, where they re-mount one of the summer's plays during a final week abroad. As with the preparation process, the orchestration of the performances themselves is effected almost exclusively by the students. They clean and prepare the theater space and surrounding grounds, which can involve anything from de-scaling the fans in the theater cooling system to reserving chairs to filling Gatorade and water coolers for audience members. On "off" days between performances, they maintain and repair costumes, lights, and props; they continue work on the plays; they make adjustments to scenes; they sometimes even trade roles.

The intensive study is meant to be demanding — physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Days are long and dirty. Not all participants finish their course of study, and when someone departs early, it is usually a matter of significant distress. Participants quickly discover that the study

of Shakespeare is only one of the initiatives driving the program and its participants. In some sense, the challenge of Shakespeare and public performance — itself monumental, particularly for actors who typically have no theatrical training — is merely the pretense for a myriad of other challenges: challenges to learn, to grow, to discover, to experiment, to fail. Most students consider the experience humbling, enabling, and momentous, if not utterly transforming. The program has led to marriages, divorces, career choices, and career changes, and every graduating class adds to a network of former students. The program's alumni base is fanatic about support and patronage, and each summer class invariably features veterans of previous summers who return to find a new set of personal challenges that they feel can only be provided by, and met in, the agonizing hours of heat and toil in the Texas desert. The plays of Shakespeare might seem to recede almost to irrelevance in the larger scheme of the program.

And yet, they never do. For all the extra agendas, the plays themselves remain the vehicle for every moment of exploration and discovery. Although one divines ulterior purposes for any given activity, the sense of immersion in Shakespeare is profound. Every thought, action, impulse, and achievement is effected in Shakespearean terms, often literally. As with any sequestered community that cooperates in day-to-day life, a private language, both of camaraderie and conflict, develops and is used richly and complexly. And as with any such community, the language is constitutive and exclusive: it builds and binds its members in solidarity. But the language of Winedale student communities is unique in that it is grounded in the language of Shakespeare, itself certainly difficult, archaic in some senses, and perhaps perfectly suited to adoption by a group of people whose work and play together facilitates and requires close bonds and a private vernacular.

Through the sheer force of exposure and repetitive interaction during scenework and performances, most of the class will know most of the lines in each play by the end of the summer, and with the lines to hand, and an ample supply of circumstances to which to apply them, one begins to think very readily and immediately in Shakespeare's words, on Shakespeare's terms. One begins to see every scenario, on-stage or off, via analogous moments in Shakespeare. In 1997, John of Gaunt's "When, Harry, when?" (*Richard II*) and Leontes's "Shall I be heard?" (*The Winter's Tale*) were adopted by the students as expressions of impatience. "Horsing foot on foot" and "meeting noses," from *The Winter's Tale*, denoted flirtation, and the Shepherd's phrase "heavy matters" was used as a label for group discussion of serious subjects. This use of language involves more than simply quoting Shakespeare at appropriate moments. "Shall I be heard?" carries a sense of Leontes's error in judgment (nobody on stage moves at his absurd command to take Hermione to prison), just as "horsing foot on foot" is implicitly illicit rather than innocent. The Shepherd's simple wisdom in 3.3, which emerges in contrast to Leontes's raging in 3.2, lends to the phrase "heavy

matters" a kind of contemplative dignity. In each borrowing of Shakespearean diction, intricate connotations accompany the simple denotations. Situational quotation of Shakespeare is, of course, quite common, both inside and outside of the academy (e.g., "Ay, there's the rub" to indicate a drawback), but when such accents come to dominate group communication, and when they draw on ever more intricate and specific moments in Shakespeare, quotation becomes "meaning by Shakespeare."

Students communicating in Shakespeare appropriate not only the words, but also the larger "social dramas" of the plays in which they work. In the summer of 1995, *As You Like It*, the first project the class worked on, took on the rhythms and movements of day-to-day work — or rather, daily work took on the rhythms and movements of *As You Like It*, whose forest of Arden, bucolic if dark, seemed at any given point indistinguishable from the students' own idyllic exile. Its themes, its imagery, its syntax and rhetoric became a dynamic, organic map of every minute spent that summer, at work or at play. Hardship was celebrated as opportunity ("Sweet are the uses of adversity"); isolation was figured as invaluable fraternity (a genderless fraternity, as gender itself seemed reduced to a matter of costume); and the shepherd's life was infinitely preferable, at least for a time, to the bustling outside world the class members had left behind.

At Winedale, participants undergo complete immersion in Shakespeare, meaning always by Shakespeare, and finding themselves already meant by Shakespeare. The words tend to stay with one, too, long after the summer has come to a close. It is as if, having acquired a Shakespearean lexicon, one actively makes sense of the "outside" world via a Shakespearean grammar: there is never anything that is not like something in Shakespeare, who seems to have anticipated all possibilities. Arguments like Harold Bloom's begin to seem not only tenable, but indeed quite compelling.

This brief introduction should serve to suggest how dynamic is the process of appropriation, of meaning-making, and of invention, in the study of Shakespeare through performance at Winedale. Shakespeare becomes a sounding board for anything and everything, and participants, having for the duration of a summer relinquished day-to-day attachments to their personal lives outside the program, return to the "real world" indelibly marked with Shakespeare. In terms of meaning-making via Shakespeare, the intense inhabitation of Shakespeare plays required by performance has a fairly obvious significance. Students of the plays use them actively to mean, but they invariably find themselves "already meant" at the same time.

## Community and Performance in Rural Texas

The Shakespeare at Winedale program does involve full-scale public performance, and as a working Shakespeare festival that depends heavily on the support of the surrounding community, the way Shakespeare means and is meant involves more than the student performers at its core. Modeled in spirit on Peter Brook's work with his actors to empty them of the clutter of cultural training and assumptions by transporting them to new spaces, the Winedale experience is meant in part to remove the participants from the comfort and constraint of their personal surroundings in order to foster discovery, invention, and ensemble. Brook took his actors to Africa; Winedale takes its students to rural Texas (Brook 1968). The Winedale (re)move is nowhere near as radical as Brook's, of course, but it is analogous, allowing — requiring, in effect — participants to leave behind the expectations and limitations they perceive to enable and govern their lives back home. In this way, the rural Southwest becomes an empty space, an unfamiliar location in which preconceived notions of life or of art do not necessarily obtain. It is the un-delineated space in which discovery and invention can happen.

It is never an entirely "empty" space, of course, and in fact, the rhythms and images of rural life in the Southwest begin immediately to color the learning process. The same bucolic setting and local customs that serve to put distance between university students and their lives back home also inscribe themselves on the Shakespearean experience: early mornings and long working days are modeled on a kind of frontier spirit in which grit, determination, and innovation make anything possible. The countryside site is abundantly marked with instances of rural southwestern culture, from farmsteads to churches, and the historic landmarks on the Winedale land itself provide for a setting a kind of habitable, living museum. The Winedale Historical Center administrates a number of historic sites on the university-owned, 225-acre plot, among which are a nineteenth-century homestead and stagecoach stop and a transverse crib or "Four Square" barn, both in their original locations and both fitted with period furniture, equipment, and tools. Other nineteenth-century buildings relocated to the area — an oak cottage, a schoolhouse, and a cedar cabin — help make the site a tribute to the local cultural past on which the current community is founded. The theater itself is a converted hay barn whose timbers originally served as part of a cotton gin (a wonderful echo of the first Globe's use of the old Theatre's timbers). It is complete with tiered seating, an apron stage with an upper level, dressing rooms, a light booth, and so forth, but the students know it, affectionately, as "the barn," and its original function underpins the performances, the scenework, and all other activity that takes place there.

The country setting works its way directly into the plays. Any point at which Shakespeare offers a country-simpleton character lends itself with inviting readiness to a Texas yokel portrayal: the "clown" William from *As You Like It* often ends up in sandals and a straw hat with a Texas



drawl. *Love's Labor's Lost's* Costard was played to a similar effect, with great success, in 2003, and Master Ford's handlebar moustache and cowboy boots lent his otherwise Elizabethan costume some local color in the 2003 season. But these stylized and often stereotypical characterizations of "the Southwest" represent only the more superficial markings of the local community on Shakespeare. When Clayton Stromberger, a Winedale student in the 1980s, returned in 1995 to perform in a veterans' reunion production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he drew on personalities from the community to bring to Snout the Tinker a kind of genuine local color that amounts to "appropriation" in the richest sense. The Roundtop area is largely German-Texan, and Winedale itself, in Mr. Stromberger's words, is a "German-Texas immigrant agrarian community on the cusp between Central and East Texas."<sup>3</sup> Snout's German-Texan drawl and German drinking songs led the mechanicals' ensemble, just as Shakespeare's Athens craftsmen were remade in the image of Winedale's agrarian locals. Where Shakespeare borrowed from his own rural roots, Winedale students can look to their adoptive community of locals. Appropriation here is intricate and complex: a performer is borrowing a "real life" rubric of the rural Southwest to explore a Shakespearean character. Shakespeare is appropriated to represent local culture, which thereby finds itself articulated in Shakespearean terms.

Since the program's inception, this local community has also participated directly, becoming an important part of the process and, inevitably, part of the plays. In the early decades of Shakespeare at Winedale, students arrived to a welcoming dinner prepared by locals, initiating a relationship between town and gown in which the students became honorary members of the community. Successive generations of locals and of students have seen changes in the amount of daily interaction, but the community has always been a consistent — and insistent — source of support for the program. Contributions come in all forms, from costumes and costume materials to sewing and sewing instruction to a variety of props, some of which are antiques from the blacksmithing and cabinetmaking collection housed on site. The original punched tin lanterns that have served since the 1970s as house lights in the theater are the handiwork of a local tinker. Locals have been regular participants in meals, downtime, and even group improvisation exercises, lending their skills, their enthusiasm, and their creativity to the rehearsal and discovery process. Donations of community time and resources underwrite the program even during the off season and help generally to sustain the spirit of collaboration that drives work on the plays.

Other contributions find their ways directly into the performances. A storied 1975 summer production of *Much Ado About Nothing* began with the audience leaving their chairs and lining the dirt road leading to the theater to serve as the townspeople of Messina while first the messenger

and then Don Pedro's company arrived, at full gallop, on horses borrowed from locals. Those same locals took roles in the play, and nearby Burton High School's band provided live music for every performance. Local children, their pets, and the occasional stray farm animal are regular features in the summer season, and the annual Christmas production of *The Second Shepherd's Play* often draws on the local population to fill out the cast. While from the outside, Shakespeare at Winedale appears to be built around its student performers, it is in large part the local population and its collaborative cultural traditions that enable the program to prosper. On the stage or behind the scenes, the influence the community has on the production of Shakespeare brings as much to the plays as the plays bring to the community.

### Branding the Southwestern Shakespeare

The two-way traffic between Shakespeare and the Southwest, the Southwest and Shakespeare, is succinctly and brilliantly captured in an instance of iconographic appropriation: the Winedale program logo. Designed by Jimmy Longacre at the request of director James Ayres, the logo is based on the Droeshout engraving, perhaps the most easily recognized of all Shakespearean portraits. For nearly 400 years, the engraving has signified "Shakespeare," timeless poet of the West and center of the canon. Onto the familiar lines of Shakespeare's visage, however, the Winedale logo grafts a collection of equally familiar metonymies for the American Southwest: a bandana loosely tied around the neck replaces the collar; a worn cowboy hat with curled brims covers the balding crown, the wispy facial hair is exaggerated and countrified, and a piece of hay protrudes from the left corner of the mouth. Though it returns us iconically to the level of stereotypes, the image, which features on t-shirts, posters, and programs, captures simultaneously the inscription of Shakespeare on the Southwest and the Southwest on Shakespeare; it records the validating discovery of Shakespeare in the Southwest, and vice-versa. Participants and audience members are invited by the logo to identify at once with the Texas hill country and with the spirit of the West's most celebrated cultural figure. It is a moment of meaning by Shakespeare and being meant by Shakespeare: the icon is appropriated by the rural South, borrowing the dignity, the prestige, and the cultural validation of "Shakespeare," while the rural South in turn finds itself being meant by the plays the icon represents.

### Conclusion

The *theatrum mundi* trope figures the relationship between art and life in a particularly powerful way. I return to the metaphor here, in closing, to emphasize that performance stands out among acts of Shakespearean appropriation. However one wants to characterize it —

Shakespearean appropriation, meaning by Shakespeare, Shakespeare and the invention of the human — the use of Shakespeare to mean is especially rich when students engage Shakespeare by performing the plays they study. Performance is at once both deeply personal and intensely social. It is high-stakes play, and it demands significant emotional, physical, and psychological investment. Any actor, professional or amateur, will recognize as much. Because it typically involves role-play (especially in drama), performance also demands that the performer inhabit — think in and speak through — a specific dramatic narrative with a (more or less) fixed text. She must allow a text to mean through her. But if Shakespeare is evermore turning up as the framework of our cultural dramas, it is because he is perfectly malleable, adaptable — appropriable — by anyone as the basic currency of cultural capital. Thus, academics, actors, and students, but also audiences of all sorts and the overlapping communities they comprise, are forever re-making Shakespeare, reinventing the social dramas of the plays even as they follow the scripts. At Winedale, all the world is a Shakespearean stage, and the people and places of the rural Southwest play their part.

### Notes

1. For more on the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, see Berg 1985, *Playhouse and Cosmos: Shakespeare Theater as Metaphor*, especially page 52.
2. Seminal studies and collections include Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1989); Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (1992); Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, eds., *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (1999) and *Harold Bloom's Shakespeare* (2002); and Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998).
3. I am deeply indebted to a number of people for information about the Winedale program and the local community. Here, I quote an exchange with Clayton Stromberger, a veteran student and longtime assistant and consultant of the Winedale program. I am grateful also to Professor James Loehlin, a former student and the program's current director, to Terry Galloway, former student and Winedale legend, and chiefly to Professor Jim Ayres — "Doc" — the program's architect, original director, and so much more.

### Online Resources

- "Shakespeare at Winedale" [accessed 17 February, 2004]. Available online at <http://www.shakespeare-winedale.org/>.
- "Winedale." The Center for American History [accessed 17 February, 2004]. Available online at <http://www.cah.utexas.edu/divisions/Winedale.html>.

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