

**Contracts, Surveillance, and Censure of Political Power  
in Sabadino degli Arienti's "Triunfo da Camarino" Novella  
(*Le porretane* 1.1)**

**Abstract:** This essay argues that the first novella of Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's *Porretane* asserts the individual's right to privacy and underscores the importance of contractual obligations regardless of social status. It offers, moreover, a thinly veiled critique of the military adventurism and rhetorical manipulation of those wielding political power, specifically the pope and the emperor, implicitly pitting the free movement inherent in a market economy against the coercive violence of the political state.

**Key words:** Sabadino degli Arienti, *Porretane*, Triunfo da Camarino, novella, Renaissance, Cockaigne, Bentivoglio, contracts, surveillance, Ercole d'Este.

In the opening tale of his sixty-one novella collection entitled *Le porretane*, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti (1443/5-1510) tells the story of a servant named Triunfo da Camarino, who regularly stages a dialogue between the emperor and the pope during his daily hour of privacy and who abruptly leaves his aristocratic employer after the latter spies on him and discovers his secret pastime.<sup>1</sup> The introductory summary announces that the tale will end with the "shaming" of Triunfo and at the conclusion of the story the fictional listeners gathered in Porretta all laugh at the servant and comment on his apparent folly.<sup>2</sup> Arienti's actual narrative, however, suggests quite opposite meanings to those explicitly offered to us in the frame. Through a close reading of the novella, with particular attention to its economic and political aspects, this essay aims to tease out the more radical implications of Triunfo's words and actions that could have been discerned by an attentive late fifteenth-century reader.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Carolyn James for her feedback on an earlier draft of this essay. For more on Sabadino's literary career, see James's *Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti* as well as her edition of his letters, *The Letters of Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti: 1481-1510*.

<sup>2</sup> Taking the introductory announcement at face value, Bruno Basile adds his own note asserting that "the novella is dedicated to the popular theme of the dream as a possible evasion of a very modest social condition" (12n).

*A Labor Contract*

The novella opens as Piero delli Ubaldini hires Triunfo as a stable boy for his horses (“uno famiglio per il bisogno delli suoi cavagli” 12). The description of the labor agreement highlights the agency of the latter through the specific conditions that he sets: “He stipulated that he wanted every day to have an hour for himself” (“pattegiò seco che ogni giorno voleva una ora di tempo per lui”). Triunfo’s one free hour per day may seem exceedingly meager to us, but the reference to Triunfo’s negotiation (“pattegiò”) draws attention to the contractual nature of the employment. Although not usually the focal point of fiction, contracts were in fact a common facet of life in fifteenth-century Italy, regularly used to establish relationships of all kinds, from marriage to military service to artistic commissions, and including, as in the case of the present novella, domestic employment.<sup>3</sup> As defined by Stephen Kinsella, “a contract is a non-coerced mutual agreement between two or more parties [...] usually used to make long-term commitments structured and clearly defined” (12).<sup>4</sup> In distinguishing contractual bonds from hegemonic bonds, Ludwig von Mises contrasts the symmetrical nature of voluntary interpersonal exchange contracts with the asymmetrical nature of relations based on coercion (196).<sup>5</sup> Thus, despite Triunfo’s lesser economic means and lower social status, the voluntary nature of the contract renders him an equal party exercising his individual preference and acknowledges his right to self-ownership.<sup>6</sup>

Piero delli Ubaldini accepts Triunfo’s terms without further ado because he finds him “of good appearance and seeming to be in accordance with his name”

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<sup>3</sup> In a practice continued today, marriage contracts were read aloud so that everyone present would be a witness to the agreement. The military title of “condottiere” is actually derived from the “condotta” or contract for raising and leading troops. For contracts in commissioning art, see O’Malley. For domestic labor, see Romano, who points out that there was actually a sellers’ market for domestic labor in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, partially due to severe outbreaks of plague which reduced the numbers of men available for such service. Consequently, wage rates for male servants increased during this period.

<sup>4</sup> Historians of contract law credit the nineteenth-century legal scholar Henry Sumner Maine for outlining the opposition between relationships based on contracts, or voluntary stipulations, and those based on hereditary status, or ascribed positions within a society along a hierarchically ordered social scale. According to Maine, societies of contract, based on the principle of the free exchange of goods and services on the marketplace, have clear advantages over societies of status since the former entail a more efficient distribution of rights and duties, leading to increased economic productivity as well as greater personal liberty.

<sup>5</sup> For the equilibrium between both parties in a labor contract — against the Marxist view that workers are necessarily at a disadvantage with respect to their employer — see Mises 196-69 (“Contractual Bonds and Hegemonic Bonds”) and Leoni 105-26.

<sup>6</sup> For the universal right of self-ownership, see Rothbard 33-36.

("de bono aspecto e parendoli quello conseguente al nome" 12). This linking of Triunfo's pleasing demeanor to his given name, reminiscent of the Latin dictum "nomina sunt consequentia rerum," invites us to reflect on the name's connotations. The usage of the term *triumph* ranges from the glory of military victory to the literary genre immortalized by Petrarch in *I trionfi*, a moral poem describing the triumphs of love, chastity, death, fame, time, and eternity, in successive visions. Arienti, using *triumph* in the latter sense, would later make prominent use of the term in his *De triumphis religionis* (1497), a treatise celebrating the "triumphs of the many virtues" ("triumphi de tante virtute" 30) of Duke Ercole d'Este of Ferrara (r. 1471-1505). Indeed, Arienti reaffirms the centrality of the triumph conceit in the headings of each of the ten books of that work, including the "triumpho" of magnanimity (37), of the dignity of munificence (50), and of faith (79).<sup>7</sup> For Piero delli Ubaldini to immediately conclude that Triunfo's appearance matched such an illustrious name, the latter must have made quite a first impression.

And yet, while taking the time to describe Piero delli Ubaldini's rank, provenance, personal habits, reputation, and wealth (i.e., he was a gentleman and knight from the city of Urbino, of excellent habits, with a good reputation and very abundantly endowed with the goods of fortune), Arienti does not divulge any information whatsoever about Triunfo's identity beyond his appellation "da Camarino," alternately written "da Camerino.") One might initially wonder whether this surname could suggest his possible geographical origin just as Piero's designation "delli Ubaldini" points to his family's hereditary nobility.<sup>8</sup> Camerino, a town in the Marche region located about 120 kilometers from Urbino, the novella's location, does not, however, provide any immediate keys to further understanding the character. Although this small mountain town had its own ducal court, a thriving economy, and a university offering degrees in civil law, canonical law, medicine, and literary studies, there are no textual clues regarding Triunfo's own prior activities.<sup>9</sup> All one can really

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<sup>7</sup> The heading to Book 7 uses both the noun and verb form: "Dela conditione, dignitate et excellentia della iustitia e suo triumpho, le virtù dela quale se intender à con illustri exempli l'huomo farsi cittadino del cielo et Ferrara de felicità triumphare" (82). In the same work, Arienti explicitly links names to their referents, maintaining that the Belfiore palace should be called "Iocundo Sole" because of its "magnifice opere" (72).

<sup>8</sup> Although Piero has not been identified with a historical personage, "Degli Ubaldini" was a noble family name. The Archbishop Ruggieri degli Ubaldini, condemned to suffer within the jaws of Count Ugolino in Dante's *Inferno*, is just one of many notables with that family name. The preposition "di" indicates his family nobility whereas "da" indicates simply one's provenance.

<sup>9</sup> The connotation, in any event, would have been positive. De Marchi calls Camerino a "vital link in the traffic between the Adriatic and the hinterland," where "opposing tendencies and worlds crossed paths" (25). Di Stefano specifies that during the

know about Triunfo is in the here and now of the novella, in which he carries out his duties so marvelously (“che era una meraviglia”) that Piero “would not want him to leave for anything in the world” (“per cosa del mondo non l’averebbe lassato da sé partire”). Indeed, whereas Triunfo had originally been hired simply as a groom for the horses, it appears that before long he was in charge of the entire household, including his patron: “Using his condition of a servant with discretion, he served and governed his patron, the house, and the horses with much faithfulness and diligence” (“usando cum discrezione la sua servitù, il patrone, la casa e li cavagli cum tanta fede e diligenza serviva e governava”).

More precise information about Triunfo is only offered to the reader when it comes to describing his daily hour of leisure. The narrator envisions him as he enters his room (“camera”) and locks the door so that nobody can enter without his permission (“senza sua licenzia”). This precaution underscores the fact that the daily hour owned by Triunfo must be free not only from interference and interruption, but also from surveillance. Speaking of privacy as the condition of personal autonomy, Carlo Lottieri remarks that as political states become absolute powers in the course of history, “it is only by hiding that a subject can succeed in preserving his own privacy” (Lottieri 105). In the domestic space evoked at the onset of the novella, however, Triunfo’s right to privacy is a mutually agreed-upon condition of his employment.

This action of carving out an impenetrable, private space might thus suggest another connotation of “Camerino,” which in Italian means “a small room.” This was a common noun in late fifteenth-century Italy, used not only in a generic sense, but also to connote a private, intimate chamber valued precisely for its strictly personal nature and often richly decorated. In his *De triumphis religionis*, Arienti describes numerous “stantie e camarini et lochi” adorned with imaginative mural paintings in the Estense country residences (72).<sup>10</sup> The Castello Estense’s “Camerini del principe” are considered to have been “il luogo più fastoso e segreto” of the castle.<sup>11</sup> A century later Torquato Tasso (1544-1595) would complain about not having any “camera” or “camerino” of his own as a courtier in Ferrara.<sup>12</sup>

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Quattrocento the town witnessed a significant rise in “entrepreneurial and merchant activities at all levels of society” (48).

<sup>10</sup> The images in these rooms evoked both real and imagined spaces, from commemorations of recent events involving the Estense (61), to mythological scenes (64), to “camerin[i] a leoni” (70) and other exotic animals.

<sup>11</sup> Castello Estense di Ferrara: <http://www.castelloestense.it/it/il-castello/alla-scoperta-del-castello/primo-piano/i-camerini-del-principe/>

<sup>12</sup> Tasso’s usage is cited in the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* under “camerino.”

*A Staged Scene*

When Triunfo withdraws into the confines of his "camera" to engage in an activity beyond the gaze of his aristocratic employer or anyone else within the fictional space of the story, Arienti nevertheless allows the reader to witness the extraordinary scene that ensues.<sup>13</sup> Setting up along the wall "a curtain of black cloth, in which was depicted the pope with the cardinals, in the manner of an assembly, along with many kings, princes, lords, and Christian dukes" ("una cortina di tela nera, in la quale era dipincto il papa cum li cardinali, in modo quando fanno concistoro, e multi re, principi, signori e duci cristiani" 13), Triunfo takes on the role of emperor by placing a diadem on his head and scepter in his hand. Nevertheless, he begins by giving voice not to the emperor, but to the pope, who proposes certain measures "for the health of the common Christian states" ("in salute de li communi Stati cristiani"). Reported in direct discourse, the "pope" exhorts those present to love one another and to "leave aside your weapons and warfare amongst yourselves and take up arms in defense of the Christian faith, which is still being afflicted and tormented by those Infidels and rabied Turks" ("lassare le arme e guerre fra voi e quelle prendere solamente in defensione della cristiana fede, che da quilli infideli e rabidi turchi è tuttavia afflicta e cruciata" 13). He goes on to threaten them with both earthly destruction and eternal damnation if they do not heed his call to institute a Crusade: "If this proposal of mine is not embraced by you with high spirits, in the end you will lose grace in this world and glory in heaven and you will go to the infernal realms, where you will be eternally tormented" ("Questo mio proponimento non essendo da voi cum alto animo abrazzato, perdereti alfin la grazia de questo mondo e la gloria del cielo e andarete a l'infenali regni, dove eternamente sareti tormentati" 13-14).<sup>14</sup> Although it is not directly stated here, popes routinely used the threat of excommunication to instill fear and force obedience.

After being told that the pope said many other things that are not reported or even summarized, the reader gets to hear the emperor's reply in first-person discourse. Accusing the pope of not practicing what he preaches, the "emperor" proclaims his intention to govern his realm as he pleases: "But you want your speeches to be believed? Begin first, like a good shepherd, to give an example to us! And if you won't give this example, I intend, as far as I'm concerned, to enjoy my realm without fear of the Turks or of Hell" ("Ma voleti voi che a le vostre persuasione si creda? Cominciate prima, come bon pastore, dare exemplo

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<sup>13</sup> It was apparently not unusual for a servant to have his own private chamber.

<sup>14</sup> In remarking that "the poor *famiglio* does not do anything other than evoke a widespread outlook in this period" (13n), Basile fails to note that Triunfo critiques the hypocrisy of this viewpoint immediately after evoking it.

a nui! E se questo exemplo non darete, io intendo, quanto per me, goldere il mio reame senza paura de turchi né de inferno” 14).

The most striking part of the emperor’s speech, however, is the vision from the previous night that he goes on to relate as evidence of the emptiness of the pope’s threats. After recounting some preliminaries, the “emperor” recalls how he found himself in a fantastic landscape in which a long-toothed Lucifer appeared exiting a sumptuous palace and mounting a horse. Although the emperor was warned by someone present that the devil would devour him, he had no qualms about running over to Lucifer in order to pay his respects (“volendo per reverenzia correre a tenere la staffa” 14-15). As if to prove the falseness of the warning, the emperor claims that Lucifer was overjoyed to see him and welcomed him warmly, saying: “My son, you are now and always welcome here!” (“Figliuol mio, tu sii adesso e per sempre el benvenuto!” 15).

As the vision continues, the reader learns that the dominion of the devil is not the place of torment conjured up by the pope, but rather a realm of plenty filled with an infinite multitude of souls where “one drinks and eats in abundance” (“Se beve e mangia alla gagliarda!” 15). Such gastronomical havens, often referred to as the “land of Cockaigne” or “paese di Cuccagna” in medieval and Renaissance popular literature, are generally situated in a remote time and place or even in a heavenly afterlife (Rossi 402-08).<sup>15</sup> Whereas such imagined sites free from the scarcity of resources conditioning life on earth generally counter the realities of poverty and death, especially for the disadvantaged, in this case the vision is evoked to refute the pope’s threat of the hellish torments for those who refuse to embark on a new crusade. The emperor demonstrates a mocking, irreverent attitude toward orthodox belief, moreover, when he states that he is not simply uninterested in battling the Turks and unconcerned with Hell, but he would actually prefer to remain in Lucifer’s realm where he can indulge his senses.

Not only is the emperor attracted to the pleasures available in Hell, but he also seeks to secure for himself the power that the pope commands on earth: “I intend that the absolute power that you normally have, Holy Father, more than all the others with your cardinal sons of the Church, be granted to me.”<sup>16</sup> The phrase “figliuoli cardini della Chiesa” is especially ambiguous since the term

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<sup>15</sup> Among the renditions of the “paese di Cuccagna” in Italian Renaissance literature, Rossi lists a sixteenth-century *Trionfo dei poltroni* (399) and early seventeenth-century *Trionfo della Cuccagna* (400). See also Boiteux 36-45. Basile refers to this segment as simply reflecting a “carnevalesque code in decline” (“codice carnascialesco in declino”) and “the myth of the ‘saturnali’” (12n).

<sup>16</sup> Of course, the emperor exaggerates since the pope never had absolute power. See Lottieri for how the power struggles between the pope and various secular authorities played out over time, actually allowing for greater autonomy of Italy’s smaller political units.

"sons" could be read in a biological rather than spiritual sense to indicate papal nepotism.<sup>17</sup> After all, Pope Innocent VIII (1484–92) had two illegitimate children before he entered the clergy. When his eldest son married Lorenzo de' Medici's daughter, he granted the cardinal's hat to Lorenzo's son Giovanni (later Pope Leo X). Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503) was particularly notorious for conferring church benefices upon his illegitimate sons, most famously Cesare Borgia upon whom he bestowed the cardinalate in 1493 (Gervaso 102–13).<sup>18</sup>

As the narrative moves back to third person discourse, the reader learns that the emperor went on to speak "of arms and great deeds of war and, taking the currycomb in his hand, made fencing motions in front of those kings, princes, and lords, and then in their name responded with the most inane speeches in the world" ("de opera d'arme e de gran facti de guerra e, prendendo la striglia in mano, scrimiva denanti a quilli re, principi e signori, e poi in nome de loro respondeva le magior papolate del mondo" 15–16). The scene concludes as the emperor, "creating mayhem in the world through his weapons" ("ponendo il mondo sottosopra in arme" 16), counters the pope's initial speech with an exhortation to take up arms on his behalf. And while the emperor's vision of a diabolical paradise may have vividly opposed the pope's threats, in his own desire to rule the earth he simply replaces the pope's spiritual threats and incentives with material ones: "Brothers of mine, if you will not follow my will and counsel for love of fava-bean polenta and soup, you will fall into my disfavor" ("Fratelli miei, se non sequireti il mio volere e consiglio per amore del maco e della suppa, cadereti nella mia disgrazia" 16). Indeed, his reference to purely culinary incentives dispenses with the pretense that he is concerned with the fate of humankind or Christendom when inciting others to wage war. His choice, moreover, of dishes that were staples of peasant cooking rather than exquisite or exotic delicacies apt to entice royalty, while comically deflating the figure of the emperor, may also remind readers of the humble social origins of the actor behind the imperial persona he is portraying.

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<sup>17</sup> I thank one of my readers for noting further that the syntagm "figliuoli cardini" contains an additional ironic, parodic, and satirical tone in that several of the prelates' biological sons also became cardinals, a term derived from *cardine* (hinge, pivot), in this case of the church.

<sup>18</sup> "All [popes ruling from the 1450s on] exploited the papacy to promote their families' political and economic interests. The horror provoked by the cardinalates and bishoprics that Sixtus IV [1471–84] showered on his licentious and bloodthirsty Riario nephews (six bishoprics to Pietro) was exceeded only (perhaps) by Alexander VI's favours to his son Cesare Borgia, Captain General of the papal armies" (Peterson 74).

*The Drama's Political Implications*

In his classic *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Peter Burke asks: "How can we tell whether ordinary people were politically conscious or not?" (259). Studying popular movements and literature from western Europe between 1500 and 1800, Burke finds, in fact, that "craftsmen and peasants were taking an increasing interest in the actions of governments and feeling a greater sense of involvement with politics than before" (259).<sup>19</sup> Their attention, moreover, tended to be focused on rulers of states rather than local affairs.<sup>20</sup> It may therefore not be so incongruous that Arienti's stable boy spends his only free hour each day elaborately staging a diatribe between the pope and emperor. This provocative criticism of papal and imperial authority would have resonated, moreover, with contemporary readers, who routinely witnessed popes engaging in secular politics to increase their temporal power as well as potentates warmongering to extend their wealth and territory.

Yet, rather than comment on Triunfo's blatantly irreverent treatment of the pope and emperor, the narrator intervenes at this point to draw attention to the protagonist's state of mind: "And in this way, sweetly fantasizing, he persuaded himself during that time that he was the emperor" ("e a questo modo, beccandose dolcemente il cervello, se persuadeva per quel tempo essere imperatore" 16). Bruno Basile, editor of the novella collection's most recent edition (1981), instructs the reader to view Triunfo's actions in equally disparaging terms, replacing the narrator's allusion to a purportedly mental feat of persuasion with a reference to Triunfo's emotional state of "hopefulness" and, subsequently, to his "sweet madness" (12n). Nothing in the narrative itself, however, would lead us to surmise either that Triunfo had persuaded himself he was actually an emperor, as the narrator would have it, or that in his craziness he hoped to rule the world, as Basile would seem to suggest. At no point during the scene does Arienti allow us to ascertain what Triunfo is harboring within his heart and soul as he gives voice to the pope and emperor. On the contrary, by directly reporting the dialogue and action, the author compels us to experience the scene as a performance.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Although *Le porretane* fall outside Burke's range of dates by a decade, his study still offers invaluable insights into the daily reality of working classes in Renaissance Italy relevant to this novella.

<sup>20</sup> "For the early modern period it may be appropriate to define as 'affairs of state,' not local issues but the concerns of rulers, in other words the succession, war, taxation, and economic and religious problems in so far as they forced themselves on the attention of governments. Political consciousness might be defined as awareness of these problems and their possible solutions, involving a 'public opinion', and a critical (though not necessarily hostile) attitude to the government" (Burke, *Popular Culture* 259).

<sup>21</sup> The novella genre allows for a split between the events related and the storyteller's commentary on those events. Since the judgment expressed in this instance is contrary to



Indeed, Triunfo's contrast between the pope and emperor has all the trappings of an outright theatrical spectacle. Through the backdrop, props, and various characters impersonated in the dialogue, Triunfo has brought an imaginary setting to life, even enacting a play within a play by relating the emperor's visit to Lucifer's realm in first-person discourse. What is particular to this novella is that the protagonist is staging a daily performance, not for an audience of spectators, but for his own private pleasure. Triunfo has intentionally kept his show beyond the gaze of his employer — and everyone else, for that matter. At the end of his allotted hour, he returns to his customary duties in the house and stables "with the greatest diligence" ("cum summa diligenza").

In this light, the dramatic space may evoke yet another connotation of "Camerino," pertaining specifically to theater, since the "camerino" is the dressing room in which an actor sheds his everyday identity and takes on the guise of the character he will be portraying. At the outset, in fact, the reader witnesses Triunfo changing into the personage of the emperor by donning a crown and taking hold of a scepter, two symbols of his power. At the conclusion of the emperor's dialogue, moreover, he refers to his power metonymically as "this crown of mine" ("questa mia corona") while putting "his hand over the round gilded white paper on his head" ("la mano sopra una carta tonda dorata avea in capo" 16). By simultaneously picturing both the "emperor" speaking within the play and the actor Triunfo making use of his props, Arienti comically draws our attention from the scene represented to the act of representation itself.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, Italian folk theater that has survived into the present shares some of the same characteristics as Triunfo's one-man show. Traditional puppet theater, currently confined to Sicily but once popular in parts of the Italian peninsula as well, often begins with a council scene in which the emperor Charlemagne is surrounded by his knights and the Bishop Turpin, with the puppeteer giving voice to the various characters in turn.<sup>23</sup> Storytellers and

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the details of the plot, I treat it as the view not of the author himself but of the storyteller, who later explains his personal relation to the events described.

<sup>22</sup> In this context, the repeated references to the "camera" in this scene may be deliberately evocative of Triunfo's theatrical vocation: he is depicted entering his "camera," extending the backdrop along the wall of this same "camera," and exiting the "camera" to go back to his daily business; moreover, when Piero later takes on the guise of spectator, he is said to be looking through a hole in the wall of the "camera."

<sup>23</sup> As McCormick notes, "passing references reveal much puppet activity in the sixteenth century, but the concrete documents out of which a history might be written are all but non-existent" (9). He goes on to cite a 1552 description in which glove-puppets "catch each other, play, joke, kill one another and take castles from each other" (10). On this matter see also Cali 21-34.

singers (*cuntisti* and *contastorie*) have also traditionally adopted the voices of their different characters, using rudimentary, symbolic props, such as a sword and a crown, as needed. And like Triunfo's play, the chivalric narratives in folk representations are noted to have sometimes staged politically charged critiques of those in power (Pasqualino 115-19).

### *Surveillance*

All is well until Piero delli Ubaldini, "unable to ascertain or even imagine how Triunfo was spending [his free time]" ("né potendo pensare né imaginare in che cosa Triunfo el spendesse" 16), decides to find out for himself and "secretly" ("secretamente") watches Triunfo through a crack in the wall of the room. Surveillance was certainly not unknown in Renaissance Italy. On the contrary, it was customary for a ruler to spy on political rivals and allies as well as those under his control. Noting that "the use of secret viewing and listening devices was common in the palaces of rulers," Randall Albury cites Paolo Cortesi's recommendation of this practice in the residences of cardinals, the architect Francesco di Giorgio's design of a listening tube for use in the palaces of princes, and Pope Julius II's peephole in the wall of the Sistine Chapel (330). Piero, however, is not a suspicious ruler spying on subordinates to discover machinations against him or surreptitiously supervising the output of his workers. He is more akin to a *voyeur* eager to catch a glimpse of actions that are outside his jurisdiction. Additionally, given that the detailed description of the scene is recounted prior to the act of surveillance, readers are not made to look through the peephole along with Piero, as it were, and are thus distanced from his questionable action.

Yet in his obsession to discover Triunfo's personal business, Piero does more than display unruly curiosity. Using Henry Sumner Maine's distinction between a "society of contract" — where free agreements made between individuals are to be respected — and a "society of status" — where a hereditary position grants one a privilege over the lives of those beneath one's social rank — one could say that Piero here illicitly steps from the former to the latter.<sup>24</sup> His infringement of the contract is a denial of Triunfo's negotiated right to privacy, even a negation of his personhood. Indeed, it seems to be the very fact of his servant's privacy that is so disturbing to him.

It may therefore not be a coincidence that at the moment in which the

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<sup>24</sup> Or perhaps, using Kant's distinction between "*citizen (citoyen)*" and "servant," we might say that Triunfo considers himself the former, being "*his own master (sui iuris)*" in that "he own[s] some sort of property — among which may be counted any skill, craft, fine art, or science that supports him," whereas Piero here reveals that he treats his domestic employees as the latter, "mere *operarii*" or providers of "services (*operam*)" (emphasis in the original, 63).

nobleman spies on the stable boy, the latter is referred to as *his* ("il suo") Triunfo for the first time in the novella. The confirmation that Piero views the groom as his possession comes with the first words that he speaks after witnessing the spectacle: "O Triunfo mio" (16).<sup>25</sup> In addition, while Piero is still looking through the peephole, he calls "some of his familiars" ("alcuni suoi domestici") to share the vision. And although the tale's narrator had hitherto not indicated any personal relation to Piero, he now discloses that his own father was among those called to witness the scene. This would make his father a subordinate within Piero's intimate circle, asked to share his point of view while joining in the fun at Triunfo's expense. This stated personal connection may also alert the reader to a possible bias in the storyteller's opinions or judgments regarding the action.

When Piero has "taken enough pleasure" ("preso assai piacere" 16) from Triunfo, his interruption of the play confirms that he is laughing at his servant rather than appreciating his biting wit. The only aspect of the performance that Piero perceived, it seems, was Triunfo's transformation from his everyday domestic role in the household to that of his stage character in the privacy of his chamber. He subsequently ridicules the notion of social mobility — the very possibility that a groom could rise to the rank of a ruler, even in his imagination — by mockingly declaring his great happiness ("io me alegro summamente" 16) over Triunfo's advancement from stable boy to the emperor of Christendom. Perhaps Piero's skewered interpretation of the performance implies a latent insecurity. Although in a society of status such social ascension would in fact be inconceivable, it was perhaps not theoretically impossible at the time if one recalls Machiavelli's attention in *Il principe* to the ways in which private citizens (*privati*) could become rulers (*principi*) (especially chapters 6-8).<sup>26</sup>

#### *The Voided Contract*

Piero delli Ubaldini reveals that he does not think of Triunfo as an individual, moreover, but rather as part of a category when he comments that the servant's ascent from stable boy to emperor has brought about not his own personal happiness, but rather the "consolation of your family and your homeland" ("consolazione di tuoi e della tua patria" 16). In attempting to spread the taint of Triunfo's supposed folly to his relatives and birthplace, the aristocratic employer

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<sup>25</sup> Although the possessive adjective in these cases may also denote familiarity or affection, the possessive quality nevertheless fits well with Piero's invasion of Triunfo's privacy.

<sup>26</sup> In *Discorsi* 2.2, moreover, Machiavelli muses that in a society in which "a man has children in the confidence that he can rear them and feels sure that his patrimony will not be taken away" (280; "ciascuno procrea volentieri quegli figliuoli che crede potere nutrire, non dubitando che il patrimonio gli sia tolto" 1: 750), his children could even become rulers (*principi*) through their virtue (*virtù*).

apparently cannot go beyond a collectivist mindset which groups people according to their circumstances of birth rather than their individual identity and merit. Triunfo does not even deign to reply to this jibe on social mobility. What he does instead is to immediately demonstrate his *physical* mobility: “[...] having quickly taken his curtain from the wall and folded it, without taking leave he departs from the house and the territory” (“[...] tolto prestamente la sua cortina dal muro e quella piegata, senza prendere licenzia se partì de casa e della terra” 17).

Although the summary introducing the novella anticipated that Triunfo “in the end would be shamed” (“alfin se trova vergognato”), the narrative at this point does not depict him as experiencing any shame at all. The only reference to his state of mind is his utter bewilderment (“se smaritte oltra modo” 17). By underscoring the immediacy of Triunfo’s departure, Arienti highlights above all his decisiveness in asserting his rights even in a state of shock. A crucial phrase in the account of his departure is “without taking leave” (“senza prendere licenzia”), which echoes the earlier statement that nobody was authorized to enter his room “without his permission” (“senza sua licenzia”). Indeed, as Triunfo was earlier free to establish a relationship with his employer by mutual consent, he is now free to depart when the latter has broken his side of the agreement. Through this demonstration of unobstructed autonomy, Triunfo acts out — indeed, for real this time — the concept of self-ownership.

Even though Piero makes fun of Triunfo for impersonating the emperor, it is he who loses out in the end. His unauthorized surveillance violates the only condition that Triunfo had imposed upon him, thus rendering the contract null and void. His punishment is to be deprived of a marvelously capable employee, one that, as noted earlier, he would not have wanted to lose for the whole world (“che per cosa del mondo non l’averebbe lassato da sé partire” 13). And just as no information is provided about Triunfo’s activities before he establishes an employment contract with Messer Piero, neither the reader nor the nobleman shall ever know what becomes of him after his exit: “And where he may have gone it seems that nobody ever knew” (“e dove s’andasse pare non se sapesse mai” 17). If knowledge is power, Arienti does not allow anyone to gain even this kind of implicit power over his protagonist. This refusal to indulge the reader’s potential curiosity at the novella’s conclusion reaffirms Triunfo’s absolute right to privacy.

If Dennis Romano’s study of household contracts in Venetian account book entries is any indication, Triunfo’s early departure would not have been that unusual. On average men servants stayed only 1.5 years of the contracted period of 5.4 years, while women remained 3.5 years of a stipulated 7.6 years.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The contracts examined were numerically very few (eighteen in the course of two centuries), but the results are telling as a point of comparison for Arienti’s novella. La

Moreover, servants moved back and forth between service and other occupations. Romano further points out that servitude as a contractual relationship was at odds with the paternalistic standards of loyalty and obedience masters expected. In Arienti's novella, the nobleman forgets that their relationship is a contractual one and behaves as though he had ownership over his employee's privacy. Triunfo's instantaneous departure exposes Piero's error.

Triunfo's freedom of movement is not only in opposition to servitude, which binds individuals to the land and to others without their consent, but is also beyond the mobility allowed within the courtier system that pertained in Renaissance Italian courts. Indeed, Triunfo's utter autonomy would have been the envy of many of the author's contemporaries of higher social standing. A few decades later Baldassare Castiglione risked being seized by agents of the Marquis Francesco Gonzaga of Mantova, incensed that the courtier had left his entourage to serve Guidobaldo da Montefeltro in Urbino.<sup>28</sup> The Estense in nearby Ferrara had instituted laws prohibiting those in their service from seeking employment elsewhere without their permission. From his prison cell, where he was detained indefinitely, Torquato Tasso compared the Estense ruler to Nero, complaining that his fault was simply to have made statements that courtiers make when they aim to seek employment elsewhere (*Prose* 852 and 846).

#### *The Fictional Frame*

The terms for pleasure (*piacere*) and fun (*solazzo*) are used in conjunction with both Triunfo's daily performances in themselves and the experience of the frame's viewers — even if the nature of the pleasure and the fun differs significantly in each case. Initially, Triunfo is said to spend his customary hour “in this pleasure” (“in questo piacere”), signalling the performance as an enjoyable activity associated with leisure.<sup>29</sup> At the moment of Piero's eavesdropping, the scene he witnesses is initially referred to as “this amusement” (“questo solazzo”), and the nobleman subsequently calls his familiars to share with him “so much pleasure” (“tanto piacere”). At this point the storyteller's own father also hears and sees Triunfo “to his very great amusement” (“cum suo grandissimo solazzo” 16). In this final instance, with the

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Roncière also notes the frequency with which masters changed servants (and vice versa): “Of thirty engagements mentioned in the fifteenth-century memoirs of three Florentine families, only four were for more than one year” (232).

<sup>28</sup> For references to Castiglione's letters regarding this incident and further reading on the character of Francesco II Gonzaga, see Barberis XXIXn65.

<sup>29</sup> Pleasure takes on a different connotation in the scene reported to the reader when the emperor's summary of the hedonistic life-style he seeks includes “triumph” in the impersonal usage of the verb (“se li triunfa” “one triumphs there”) along with the phrase “dasse piacere, buon tempo e chiara vita” (“one enjoys pleasure, a good time, and a happy life” 15).

shift from a single spectator to additional privileged onlookers, the magnitude of the enjoyment reaches the absolute superlative. Yet the delight associated with Triunfo's performance is quite distinct from the kind of satisfaction the aristocratic employer and his immediate subordinates derive from their prying.

Those comprising the *nobile brigata* also clearly derive pleasure from the tale since they are said to have been listening with "festive laughter" ("festevo[r] riso"). Is theirs the complicit enjoyment of an ideal audience or the derogatory amusement shown by the frame's eavesdroppers? Arienti does not make this immediately apparent; indeed, the group's reaction offers two very different ways of reading the novella. Claiming without any basis that Triunfo was a crazy person who lacked self-understanding, their first *sententia* is that the "defect of the madman is that he believes himself wise (whereas, were he to recognize his madness, he would commit suicide)" ("defecto del pazzo sì è ch'el crede essere savio ove, se la sua pacia [pazzia] cognoscesse, se occidirebbe" 17). The second moral expounds the exact opposite, i.e., that Triunfo was indeed happy with his status:

In this world there is no greater repose than to be content with one's own state, as was Triunfo, who according to his empty pumpkin-head led himself to believe he was the emperor, not worrying any further about himself, since to him it was as though this was his own status.

In questo mondo non è maggior riposo che contentarse del stato suo, come faceva Triunfo, il quale secundo la sua zuca vota se dava a intendere essere imperatore, non più oltra curandose, ché tanto a lui valeva come proprio fusse stato.

(17)

Yet even a mildly attentive reader could notice the contradiction between first praising Triunfo as an illustration of the peace of mind derived from accepting one's station in life and then immediately afterward deriding him for believing he was an emperor. With his role-playing dubbed as subjective illusion, Triunfo is thus transformed into a Don Quixote *avant la lettre*, a predecessor of the poor *hidalgo* who fancied himself a great knight, forsaking reality to live within his own fantasy world. In addition to not corresponding to the actual details related in the story, this conclusion is a clear example of double-talk.

The fictional frame thus provides Arienti with the cover for speaking against the power elite in a way that would not otherwise be permitted in polite discourse. Triunfo's brazen condemnation of the pope (and, to a lesser extent, the emperor) can be registered by the reader, while the fictitious inner circle of listeners, both within the novella and in the frame story, shift the focus back

onto the protagonist.<sup>30</sup> Given the danger of openly critiquing the pope and other powerful figures, the brigata's off-the-cuff comments following the novella may not indicate their incapacity for understanding, but rather offer a way to draw attention away from the provocative content of Triunfo's discourse by alleging his insanity.<sup>31</sup> The claim of insanity, after all, was a strategy contemplated by Torquato Tasso to protect himself from the Inquisition, although it was subsequently used against him by the Estense state to keep him confined to prison (*Gigante*).

We may recall that the first novella of the *Decameron* likewise involves multiple audiences whose understanding depends upon their greater or lesser knowledge of the protagonist. Ser Ciappelletto's deathbed performance — in which he retroactively refashions his life from the most sinful to the most saintly — holds a different meaning for the unwary priest who hears his confession, the two brothers who host Ciappelletto, the credulous people of the village, and ultimately those in the frame story and beyond. Although we know that the unscrupulous notary was sent to collect unpaid debts in Burgundy, Boccaccio's narrator refuses to tell us his whereabouts after his departure from the world, i.e., whether he ended up in heaven or hell. Even if the two *novelle* are dissimilar in fundamental ways, they both point to issues involving contractual relationships, the withholding of knowledge regarding the protagonist's ultimate destination, and varying degrees of readerly competence. What is most relevant for Arienti's first novella is how Boccaccio devised diametrically opposed interpretations of Ciappelletto's staged confession based on differing knowledge of the situation.

#### *Historical Context*

Regarding specifically the political content in Triunfo's staged scene, historians point out that throughout this period the European sovereigns, including the popes, tended to pay lip service to combating the Turks while they were mostly intent on aggressing against each other (Housley 124–25). It would be difficult,

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<sup>30</sup> Such prohibition did not completely stop writers from voicing critiques of papal abuses, from Dante's and Boccaccio's condemnation of the popes and the Roman curia to Castiglione's jokes about the violence and ineptitude of previous popes and the general state of corruption in Rome.

<sup>31</sup> Using the same words to convey a range of meanings to distinct members of an audience was a skill expected of the diplomat and courtier. A few decades later Castiglione would assert that at the court of Urbino "fine questions would sometimes be proposed, and sometimes ingenious games [...] in which, under various concealments, those present revealed their thoughts allegorically to whomever they chose" ("talor si proponeano belle questioni, talor si faceano alcuni giochi ingenuosi [...] ne' quali sotto varii velami spesso scoprivano i circostanti allegoricamente i pensier sui a chi più loro piaceva" *Book of the Courtier* 1.5).

however, to find any writings openly speaking against the crusades because of the possible repercussions. As James Hankins notes, “The arguments in favor of a policy of crusade could be stated, the arguments against it could not. Nevertheless,” as he goes on to point out, “there are numerous hints and indirect evidence that many humanists, like other members of the public, had deep reservations about the feasibility and utility of crusading” (“Renaissance Crusaders” 124). It would be more likely to encounter critiques voiced through dissimulation, the technique that Baldassar Castiglione (1478-1529) defines as saying one thing and tacitly meaning another (*Book of the Courtier* 2.72).

Directly condemning a current pope or ruler for any reason, moreover, could have been deemed “verbal violence,” a crime sometimes punished with gruesome measures. In noting that, “generally speaking, insults by inferiors to superiors were taken very seriously,” Peter Burke relates that “in fourteenth-century Venice, ‘verbal violence’ against the doge or lesser officials of the commune was severely punished (sometimes by cutting off the offender’s tongue)” (*Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* 99). Unofficial forms of censorship were also at work well before the first Index of Prohibited Books was put into place in 1557. Ludovico Ariosto (1473-1533), for example, wrote his comedy *Il Negromante* at the invitation of Leo X, to be performed in Rome during the carnival of 1520. But it was not staged at that time, Dennis Looney notes, most likely because comments in the prologue about ecclesiastical abuses upset the pope so much that he blocked its performance. When it was finally staged for the carnival in Ferrara in 1529, it had been substantially rewritten with a new prologue in which the offensive comments about the papacy had been removed (Looney 33-34).

There was also a series of conflictual relations between the Papal See and the Bentivoglio rulership that forms a specific historical background to the play within the novella. During the 1460s, Pope Paul II engaged in a power struggle to “secure more revenue from Bologna and to impose more control by the Apostolic Camera” (Robertson 206). It was generally believed that the pope’s goal in his dealings with Bologna “was to establish there direct Papal rule” (Robertson 207). Although, ironically, Paul II’s interference in Bolognese affairs actually enabled the tyrant Giovanni Bentivoglio to gain greater political power over the city, a later pope, Pope Julius II, would succeed in overthrowing Bentivoglio’s regime militarily in 1506, an occasion commemorated at the opening of Castiglione’s *Cortegiano*.<sup>32</sup> Papal pressure on Bologna, moreover,

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<sup>32</sup> Robertson notes: “Although there are ways in which Julius II can be seen as thereby carrying further the programme of Paul II for Bologna, it needs to be remembered that the ‘tyranny’ from which Julius liberated Bologna was not so much the one that Paul II had in his sights from the beginning of the pontificate, as the new ‘tyranny’ which Paul II himself, probably inadvertently, created through his intervention in Bolognese affairs”



was not an isolated case. As David S. Peterson writes, "Renaissance popes became obsessed with creating a temporal state in central Italy that drew them ever deeper into secular politics, thereby diminishing their spiritual credibility" (60).<sup>33</sup>

*Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's Life and Other Works*

Arienti's own personal history, moreover, suggests an affinity with Triunfo's situation. The son of a barber and student of contract law ("notaria") at the University of Bologna, he was employed as secretary to Andrea Bentivoglio, the central figure in *Le porretane's* frame story, until the latter's death in 1491. When Bologna's despot Giovanni Bentivoglio refused to renew his position in 1495, Arienti sought and obtained for a couple of years the patronage of Ercole I d'Este, at whose court he had been temporarily employed as "cameriero secondo" during the festivities accompanying Alfonso d'Este and Anna Sforza's 1491 wedding (James, *Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti* 35). It is during this latter period that Arienti published *Le porretane*, dedicating the volume to Ercole d'Este. If Triunfo seems to have been a voluntary free-lance stable boy, Arienti was forced by circumstances to become a free-lance courtier.

Throughout his career as a courtier serving different patrons, in fact, Arienti directed his attention to the uses (and obliquely, abuses) of political power. In an early work meant for very limited circulation, the warm praise of Andrea Bentivoglio's father Ludovico implicitly harbored strong criticism of the current ruler Giovanni Bentivoglio (*De civica salute*).<sup>34</sup> In his *Vita del conte e senatore Andrea Bentivoglio*, Sabadino degli Arienti maintains that although Andrea could have become a *condottiere*, Ludovico explicitly wanted to keep his son away from a position of power ("volle lui urbanamente vivesse senza mormorazione di alcuno; conciofossecché sempre egli aveva fuggito tale stato e quello gli andava dietro" 13). A later encomiastic work commissioned by Giovanni Bentivoglio, the description of the wedding celebration of Giovanni's son Annibale to Ercole d'Este's daughter Lucrezia, may denote an implicit critique of the ruler's politically motivated courtly display through its dry, unenthusiastic rendering (*Hymeneo Bentivoglio*). Characterizing the work as a "modulated and rather impassive, if faithfully observed, account of the wedding," James wonders whether Giovanni's dissatisfaction with it may have

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(225). See Robertson for a detailed history of the vicissitudes between Pope Paul II and Bologna, especially the chapter "The Impact of Paul II's Intervention in Bolognese Affairs" (205-25). See Ady for the Bentivoglio's regime in Bologna.

<sup>33</sup> On the political power of popes during the Renaissance, see also Jong and Prodi.

<sup>34</sup> James finds Arienti's early tributes to Ludovico and Andrea Bentivoglio to be, like those in the contemporary *Le porretane*, "a regretful and nostalgic acknowledgement of the greater wisdom of their political values" (*Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti* 51). For the *De civica salute*, see also Robertson 118-20.

influenced his refusal to reverse the decision to discontinue Arienti's stipend (*Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti* 50). And even Arienti's volume of women's biographies, *Gynevera de le clare donne*, often expresses "concern that power be exercised within a moral context," clearly acknowledging that his powerful female addressees "could be instruments of more positive political values" (James, *Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti* 79).

Yet the writing by Arienti that might have resonated most for Ercole d'Este and his entourage is the above-mentioned *De triumphis religionis*.<sup>35</sup> Likewise dedicated to Ercole, this treatise opens reflecting on the praise that would be due humankind if humans could only live by the following divine commandment of nature: "Let us not do to others that which we would not want done to us" ("Non facciamo noi ad altri quello che non vorebbero fusse facto a noi" 29). Adherence to this commandment — which readers can recognize as the Golden Rule that reverberates across centuries and cultures, from the *Analects* of Confucius to all major religions to the non-aggression principle at the basis of contemporary libertarian philosophy — is said to be especially important for "the princes of the earth, who, as is rightful and reasonable, must give a good example to others" ("li principi dela tera, li quali debeno dare non meno per debito che per rasone, felice exemplo al proximo" 29). In a panegyric that could also serve as positive reinforcement, Arienti celebrates Ercole precisely in this regard "for the excellent example that you give to your illustrious and distinguished progeny and to those who rule and govern realms, states, and empires, and to any mortal whether of noble or humble birth" ("per lo optimo exemplo che duoni al tuo illustre e preclaro sangue et a chi rege et governa regni, stati et imperi e a qualuncha mortale de alta e humile fortuna" 29). If in the encomiastic *De triumphis religionis* the Estense duke serves as a model for the kind of behavior to follow, in the novella the lowly stable boy Triunfo stages and critiques instead the kind of behavior to avoid.

### Conclusion

Regarding the staged scene, then, one might say that Triunfo da Camarino enacts a "Triumph from the Little Room" since it is within his small chamber that he stages a memorable drama that successfully speaks truth to power. Whereas the power structure of *raison d'état* requires absolute secrecy regarding a ruler's machinations but transparency regarding the most mundane activities of the subjects, Triunfo enacts a reversal in which he uses his right to privacy to lay

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<sup>35</sup> The *De triumphis religionis* was written in 1495. The dating of *Le porretane* is more problematic: although Arienti claimed to have completed *Le porretane* in 1478 and the incunabulum bears the fictitious date of 1483, James posits that some parts were written as late as 1489 and 1492, with its final completion dating between 1492 and 1495 (*Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti* 26).

bare the machinations of the pope, one of Europe's most powerful rulers. Assuming the guise of the emperor, the pope's secular counterpart, Triunfo soundly refutes the pope's argument and exposes his hypocrisy, exercising a freedom to chastise that would be dangerous if expressed by someone with less power than that of the emperor, whom he pretends to personify. At the same time, despite the verve with which Triunfo plays the part of the emperor, he nevertheless reveals a figure who similarly resorts to threats to coerce others to carry out his military aggression. As Mises writes with regard to "the Reich of the Nazis and the commonwealth of the Marxians," the emperor's plan requires nothing less than "the violent subjection of all those not ready to yield without resistance" (199).

In the end, Triunfo opposes the pope's and the emperor's coercive *modus operandi* not only through the scene he stages in his small room (his "triumfo da camerino"), but also through his own actions in the course of the novella. Whereas his performance draws attention to the *political means* used by those in power, his interactions with his employer illustrate instead the *economic means* underlying consensual exchange in the marketplace. According to sociologist Franz Oppenheimer, who coined the terms, there is a fundamental opposition between these two means of seeking to attain one's desires: the first, epitomized by the state, entails the dominion of a victorious group over the vanquished and the forced appropriation of the labor of others; the second, at work in society at large, rests on the voluntary exchange of goods and services among groups and individuals (24-27). In the first case, the pope and emperor resort to coercion and threats — concerning both this world and the next — in order to wage war and increase their power. By contrast, in the private space of Piero's household, the contractual parties freely negotiate mutually acceptable conditions. When the aristocratic employer violates the contract by invading the servant's privacy, the latter responds by exercising his unquestioned right to depart as a sovereign individual. His spontaneous and wordless action underscores the fact that his employer, despite his superior social status, does not hold any power over him. Whereas Piero had initially noted that Triunfo's *appearance* corresponded to his illustrious name, by the end of the tale one realizes that his *behavior* does so even more strikingly since he could be said to exemplify the triumph of self-ownership, complete with a lesson in consensual contracts, personal privacy, and the indisputable freedom of movement.

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