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Iconoclasm and Witchcraft in *The Tragedy of Ovid*

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7. Iconoclasm and Witchcraft in *The Tragedy of Ovid*

Although the first complete English version of the Don Juan legend is *The Libertine* (1675) by Thomas Shadwell, the central incident in the legend occurs in the subplot of an earlier play — three years earlier, even, than Molière's *Dom Juan — The Tragedy of Ovid* (1662), by Sir Aston Cokain (1608-84). This incident is the double invitation, in which Don Juan mockingly invites a statue to dinner, the statue returns the invitation, and ends up taking Don Juan to hell.

Cokain can claim to be a forgotten poet, possibly because he spent most of his adult life fighting the Puritans, imprisoned by them, or quietly drinking up what their expropriations had left of his estate. As a young man, however, he knew Donne, Drayton, Massinger, Suckling, and Sandys the translator of Ovid (Morton 4). He published a masque, three plays, and a book of poems. Since he travelled to Italy in 1632-33 and took enough of an interest in the commedia dell'arte to write a play in the style (Lea; Morton 20, 22-23), he probably saw one of the commedia dell'arte versions of the Don Juan legend that were being performed in Italy as early as 1625 (Mandel 100).

Whatever his source, Cokain places the double invitation in an unexpected context. His Don Juan character, a Roman captain incongruously named Hannibal, has been exiled, like Ovid — and for equally mysterious reasons — to Tomos, in Pontus. The being that Hannibal invites to dinner is not the statue of one of his victims but a man he finds hanging from a gibbet outside the city walls. The motive for the invitation is not blasphemous defiance, but fellow-feeling. Hannibal's servant, Cacala, draws his master's attention to the hanged man's condition:

Yon man hangs in a pitiful cold corner;
The north wind shakes his legs as he were dancing.
Of wine and women, and of all good meats,
He hath for ever took his leave.

Hannibal agrees: 'I'm sorry for's hard fate.' And although he delivers his invitation in a skeptical tone that anticipates Molière's Dom Juan and Shadwell's Don John, he ends courteously:

Some lying people
Report some of the dead have walk'd. If thou
Canst such a piece of fine activity show,
Come sup with me to-night; thou shalt be welcome.
(*Dramatic Works* 271; IV.iv)

Hannibal is certainly surprised when the hanged man accepts his invitation, but the evening passes genially, and when the spectre issues its return invitation, Hannibal accepts it without misgivings. The next evening, over a ghostly dinner of black meat and black wine, they become quite confidential. Hannibal asks the spectre, whose name is Helvidius, why he was hanged. Helvidius explains that he committed a crime against culture, the destruction of a statue:

The lords and gentry of
This city Tomos gave order to a statuary
To make the image of the poet Ovid
In beaten massy gold, for the honour he
Had done them by writing an excellent poem
I' the Getick language in Tiberius' praise.
When it was ready to have been presented,
I got into the house and stole it thence,
Melted it privately, and put it off
By little parcels — spent it on wanton wenches
And among boon companions. (290; V.iii)¹

In most versions of the Don Juan legend, the hero commits an offense against a statue. Cokain inverts the legend by ascribing the crime to the character corresponding to the traditional statue.

In return, Hannibal explains that he was exiled for committing a crime against nature, an act of witchcraft:

A poor old woman, and a witch, a friend
Of mine, pretended an occasion to make use
Of a live infant, ripp'd out of the belly
Of's mother; and th' enchantment she was hammering
Was for my service. I stole into a cottage
That stood alone, where such a woman liv'd then;
Found her alone, and had so laid my plot

That I might undisturbed proceed; cut up
 Her belly, took her infant thence, and sew'd
 A cat up in the place. So she enjoin'd me. (290-91; V.iii)

After treating Hannibal to a masque of infernal spirits, Helvidius takes him to hell. In another twist on the legend, the Don Juan character is punished by a fellow-criminal, not by an agent of God.

Each of these crimes brings to a focus a series of incidents and images scattered throughout the play, both in the subplot and in the main plot, a tragedy of jealousy. It is these images that provide the crimes with the erotic context characteristic of a Don Juan story. Helvidius's iconoclasm, for example, recalls the protest of Pyrontus, the hero of the tragic plot, to his beloved, the married and virtuous Clorina, that he is unable to 'Efface [her] image in [his] soul' (246; II.iii). More generally, it recalls the trope of love as idolatry. Pyrontus repeatedly describes Clorina as his 'goddess' (218, 220; I.i), and he warns Ovid, who is trying to warn *him* against his obsession with a married woman, that such a warning is tantamount to iconoclasm: 'Peace, gentle Ovid! this is blasphemy / Against the divinity of her fair soul, / And that rich heaven of happiness, her body' (218; I.i). Ovid himself, though he says he is too old for love, gallantly describes Clorina's sister Armelina as a 'deity' (249; III.i).

If skepticism is also a kind of iconoclasm, then Hannibal himself is guilty of it. His invitation to Helvidius is skeptical, as we have seen, and even his account of his witchcraft is marked with skepticism: his friend the witch only '*pretended* an occasion to make use / Of a live infant, ripp'd out of the belly / Of's mother.' The song the infernal spirits sing before they take him to hell suggests that he is damned primarily for atheism, not witchcraft:

The atheist is the greatest fool,
 Who only aims to please his senses,
 Thinking in heaven no gods bear rule,
 And tipples, murders, swears, and wenches. (292; V.iii)

Witchcraft and skepticism were, of course, popularly associated; Marlowe's Faustus, for example, allows himself to sign his pact with Mephistophilis because he does not believe in the Christian hell (I.iii.59-60). Spinella, a courtesan who is part of Cokain's subplot, is called a 'pretty atheist' by her lover Captain Dacus, who is trying to persuade her to give up her wicked ways and marry him (264; IV.i). These raffish characters are not the only skeptics in the play. Ovid, who warns Pyrontus against his idolatrous passion for Clorina, warns another character against putting too much faith in oracles (248 [III.i]; 282 [V.i]).² Cokain

may be suggesting that Ovid's skepticism has led to his exile, just as Hannibal's more serious offenses of witchcraft and atheism lead to his damnation.

If idolatry is the play's trope for the obsessive desires of men, Hannibal's act of witchcraft recalls the way a number of the characters, mostly men, use witchcraft as a trope for erotic power, mostly that of women. Hannibal himself is conquered by the 'Too potent charms' of Ovid's cousin Caralinda (236; II.i). Pyrontus is so 'charmed' by Clorina that he is unable to listen to good advice (260; III.v). Her jealous husband, Bassanes, describes her not just as the beneficiary of a pact with the powers of darkness but as possessed by them: 'A gallant palace, to do her beauty right, / Where all the devils of lust inhabited' (284; V.ii). Since Clorina is completely innocent, the behaviour of Pyrontus and Bassanes provokes her to issue a general warning to virgins 'Against the charms of [men's] bewitching tongues' (268; IV.ii).

Hannibal's witchcraft also recalls a more vivid pair of images, of threatened or actual mutilations. In another of Cokain's inversions of the legend, the Don Juan figure Hannibal is one of the few male characters not to engage in actual or attempted seduction. His servant Cacala, however, attempts to seduce Hannibal's mistress Floretta. Since Floretta is almost as virtuous, in her fashion, as Clorina, she threatens indignantly to 'scratch [his] heart out with [her] nails, / And stuff a cushion with 't.' Cacala, unfazed, only hopes that she will 'sit and fart upon 't, and keep it warm' (266; IV.i).³ In the very next scene, Bassanes, who has murdered Pyrontus and cut out his heart, binds Clorina in a chair with it in her hands: 'Now, foul adultress!' he tells her, 'thou may'st contemplate / Of the affection it did bear thee once' (267; IV.ii).⁴ Instead, she dies of a broken heart (279; IV.vii).

The formal balance between Helvidius's crime against culture and Hannibal's crime against nature is appropriate to the setting of the play, Pontus, which the exiled Ovid characterizes as the frontier between culture and untamed nature.⁵ The inhabitants, he complains, are 'a people rude and almost barbarous, / Except,' the Royalist Cokain makes him add, 'a few of th' gentry and nobility' (269; IV.iii). In an Olympian masque which Ovid writes to celebrate the ill-fated marriage of Bassanes and Clorina (and which parallels the infernal masque with which Helvidius entertains the ill-fated Hannibal), Paris complains about being summoned to 'so remote a town' to re-enact his judgment among the goddesses (228; I.iii).⁶

The more refined among the Tomians agree with Ovid's strictures. Clorina describes the obsessed Pyrontus as 'a companion fit for such wild people, / As never heard the name of virtue' (247; II.iii). Later, when Bassanes takes his unjust revenge, she exclaims:

I wish my parents had,
 As soon as I was born, expos'd me to
 The open fields, unto the cruelty
 Of the most savage beasts; or, in a small
 Unguided boat, left me unto the fury
 Of an enraged sea. Would any mischief
 Had fallen upon me but this fatal marriage! (268; IV.ii)

After she dies, her sister Armelina tells Bassanes that he is worse than 'Th' Anthropophagians, that devour man's flesh' (279; IV.vii).⁷ Armelina has already described Tomos as 'a solitude, / Retir'd, in a manner, from the world' (250; III.i).

This kind of formal patterning is important in a play whose three plots (the damnation of Hannibal, the jealousy of Bassanes, and the exile of Ovid) are so different (Morton 41-42): Cokain needs all the formal patterning he can devise to tie his tragedy together.⁸ But the significance of the crimes is not only formal. Helvidius's crime recalls the iconoclasm of the Puritan revolutionaries, the last spasm of the fantastic orgy of vandalism that destroyed so much of Britain's cultural heritage between 1535 and 1660. In 1644, for example, at Cambridge, Cokain's alma mater, a government commission 'brake down 1000 Pictures superstitious' in a single chapel (Phillips 186). Since, as Ernest B. Gilman has shown, the Puritans' hostility towards sacred images extended to secular ones and even to poetry (42-43), Cokain's audience might well imagine it as extending to the image of a poet.

Iconoclasm is one of the offenses Cokain charges the Puritans with (along with their hostility to plays, wakes, and may-poles) in his numerous epigrams against them. In one, he laments that 'this age is against Crosses set' (*Poems* 222; 2.62). In another, 'To Mr. *John Young*, of the Bear in *Powlesworth*' (which is also one of numerous epigrams addressed to tavern-keepers), he urges:

Though Puritans on in their grumblings go,
 Be merry Master *Young*, whil'st you are so.
 What though their senseless zeal bark at your Bear?
 If the Bandogs venture to come so near,
 Keep such strong drink shall take them by the Crown,
 And pluck the hypocrites of Piety down.
 Making them do homage unto your sign,
 And think it (though an Image 'tis) divine. (*Poems* 211; 2.28)

Trappolin Supposed a Prince (1658), Cokain's pastiche of the commedia dell'arte, includes a Puritan character, Mr. Calfshead, who is accused of

iconoclasm among other things: 'he is a fellow of strange opinions, and hath sent his son to Geneva to hear Jack Calvin preach. He stole a surplice to make his amorosa a smock of; and hath writ a paltry book against the bishops' (*Dramatic Works* 170; IV.i).⁹ Mr. Calfshead and Helvidius, like the Puritans of the epigram, are both 'hypocrites of Piety.' Mr. Calfshead steals a surplice to give it to his amorosa, and Helvidius melts down the statue for drinking money, not out of righteous indignation. Cokain is recalling that iconoclasm under Cromwell, as earlier under the Tudors, was an important source of state revenue, as well as of personal profit for individual iconoclasts (Phillips 98, 198-99). In 1542, the French ambassador had reported that the English government was 'coin[ing] money days and night of the silver plate obtained from the spoil of the abbeys' (Phillips 68); such coining was less constant under Cromwell only because comparatively little plate was left.

Ultimately, the leader of the iconoclasts met with a fate much like that of Helvidius: at the Restoration, two years after Cromwell's death, his embalmed remains were taken from his tomb and hanged at Tyburn.

If Helvidius's iconoclasm recalls these recent events, Hannibal's witchcraft alludes to the witch hunts that were still going on: the last English execution for witchcraft occurred in 1684, and King James's Witchcraft Act of 1604 was not repealed until 1736 (Harris 176). Although I have found no precise parallel to Hannibal's crime, witches were often accused of abortion and infanticide. The Catholic Cokain may be thinking of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), whose authors were especially obsessed with midwives, considering practically all of them to be witches and declaring that 'it is witchcraft, not only when anyone is unable to perform the carnal act, ... but also when a woman is prevented from conceiving, or is made to miscarry after she has conceived. A third and fourth method of witchcraft is when they have failed to procure an abortion, and then either devour the child or offer it to a devil' (Krämer 66). The witch-midwives do these things, according to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, because it prevents the souls of the children from entering heaven, and because they can 'confect from the limbs of such children an unguent which is very useful for their spells,' though the authors are no more informative than Hannibal is about what the spells are for (141). In *Macbeth* (1606), as Garry Wills notes (38, 177n.13), the Weird Sisters make use of a 'birth-strangled babe / Ditch-delivered by a drab' (IV.i.30-1). In connection with the untimely and unnatural birth of Macduff (V.viii.15-16), Wills also draws attention (142) to the spell of the witch Erichtho, from Lucan's *Civil War* — 'she pierces the pregnant womb and delivers the child by an unnatural birth' (VI.557-8) — which Ben Jonson alludes to in *The Masque of Queenes* (1609; n. 6 to 175-6).¹⁰

It is unclear why the witch tells Hannibal to replace the fetus with a cat, but cats often featured in accusations of witchcraft, either as familiar spirits or as material for magic.¹¹ In 1591, for example, Agnes Tompson, one of the witches of North Berwick, confessed that in order to wreck a ship carrying King James VI, she 'took a cat and christened it, and afterward bound to each part of that cat the chiefest parts of a dead man, and several joints of his body; and that in the night following, the said cat was conveyed into the midst of the sea by all these witches sailing in their riddles or sieves,' and drowned there (Rosen 196-97). Hannibal's whole procedure is reminiscent of a story in the *Malleus Maleficarum*: a woman offended a midwife by not employing her, on the grounds that she was a witch. A week after she had given birth, the woman reported, the witch came into her bedroom: 'she came up and touched my belly with her hands; and it seemed to me that she took out my entrails, and put in something which, however, I could not see.' Six months later, 'such a terrible pain came into her belly that she could not help disturbing everybody with her cries day and night,' but after she had fasted and prayed to the Virgin, 'all those unclean things fell from her body' (140).

More generally, one might say that the misogyny articulated in Cokain's Don Juan story, as in many of them, is reminiscent of the misogyny of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Cokain does not, however, entirely endorse the misogyny he articulates.¹² Hannibal, the real, male witch, is sent to hell; Clorina, the female character accused of erotic witchery, is clearly innocent. Moreover, Cokain consistently draws critical attention to the double standard. Bassanes is murderously jealous, but he is himself unfaithful to Clorina. The female use of make-up is denounced, in terms that make it sound like witchcraft: 'I should be sick to daub my face with ointments / Made of the spawn of snakes, spittle of Jews, / And mire of infants!' (255; III.ii); but one of the male characters actually spends most of the play in drag, a practice also associated with witchcraft, as in the case of Jeanne d'Arc.

The motifs of iconoclasm and witchcraft are linked not only by the association of witchcraft and skepticism but also, for a Catholic Royalist like Cokain, by the popular belief that Oliver Cromwell had sold himself to the devil, who in return had given him a familiar spirit named Grimoald, conferred with him on the morning of the battle of Worcester (3 September 1651), and helped him to win the battle (Holmes 144).¹³ Since the battle took place on the same day of the year as the opening of the siege of Drogheda (1649) and the battle of Dunbar (1650), and since Cromwell also died on 3 September (1658), Royalists were tempted to assume that on the final occasion the devil had come to collect the debt Cromwell owed him for the three earlier ones (Holmes 154; cf. Potter 132). Even Parliamentarians made similar accusations, at least rhetori-

cally. In 1648, during the split between Parliament and the Army, Denzil Holles apostrophized Cromwell and his ally Oliver St. John on the difficulty of fully understanding them:

He can only do that whose eyes and hand have been with you at your meetings, your Sabbaths, when you have laid by your assumed shapes (with which you have cozened the world) and resumed your own; imparting to each other, and both of you to your Fellow-Witches, the bottom of your designs. ... All I will say to you is no more than what St. Peter said to Simon the Sorcerer, 'Repent therefore this your wickedness'. (Holmes 146; Acts 8: 22)

Cokain confirms the link between usurpation and witchcraft by making his Hannibal a follower of the would-be usurper Sejanus (291; V.iii). In *Trappolin Supposed a Prince*, the link is not only confirmed but expanded, for it is witchcraft that allows Trappolin to be supposed a prince.¹⁴ He has been banished from Florence for pimping when he meets a friendly sorcerer named Mago, who gives him three familiar spirits, Eo, Meo, and Areo, which collectively enable him to change his shape — in a literal version of Holles' accusation against Cromwell — and to pass himself off as Lavinio, the Great Duke of Tuscany, who is in Milan getting married. The transformed Trappolin is a radical democrat; when addressed as 'Your Highness,' he exclaims: 'Away with Highness! I say away with it! Call me Lavin Duke, plain Medicis; I cannot abide your Highness, your Excellency, your Worship — I hate such idle flim-flams' (*Dramatic Works* 153; III.i). He announces a diabolical policy of turning the world upside down: 'Hell's broke loose again! I do what the Duke undoes, and he undoes what I do' (190; V.iii). When the real Duke returns from his honeymoon, he finds Florence 'Possess'd with a strange unheard-of madness' (178; IV.ii). The comic ending is brought about when Mago reappears, exposes Trappolin, and renounces witchcraft, and the Duke pardons everybody.¹⁵

If the formal aspect of the crimes of Helvidius and Hannibal suggests that Cokain's Don Juan play deserves to be treated as a work of literature, their historical context suggests that it is a significant one. Together, they make it about as different as one can imagine from Shadwell's bourgeois, Hobbesian version of the legend.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 In *Tristia*, his poem of exile, the historical Ovid ruefully predicts that that as he loses his Latin he will come to write poems in Getic (III.xiv.45-50, V.vii.55-60, V.xii.57-58).
- 2 Ovid expresses some skepticism about oracles in *Tristia* (IV.viii.43-44). The facetious tone of much of the *Metamorphoses* has also been taken to suggest skepticism. Cokain himself had misgivings about astrology, to judge from his epigram 'To Astrologers' (*Poems* 224; 2.70). In the context of the play, however, the oracle is part of orthodox Roman religion, and it does come true.
- 3 Ernest Jones argues that the nearly universal association of breath with the principle of life can be traced to an infantile belief that 'the mysterious act performed by the parents consists in the passage of gas from the father to the mother' (2: 278). Warmth is prominent among the vivifying properties 'common to the upper and the lower breaths' (306). For Jones, flatulence is associated exclusively with male sexual potency (351); if he is right, Cacala's fantasy may be fundamentally homosexual or transsexual (354-55). In turning the heart into a sexual organ, it brings the mutilation threatened by Floretta into close correspondence with the one carried out by Hannibal.
- 4 Cokain uses the same motif in his comedy *The Obstinate Lady* (1657), in which Falorus, finding himself in love with the same obstinate lady as his friend Carionil, begs his friend to stab him: 'And, when I'm dead, rip out my heart, and in't / Survey my fault' (*Dramatic Works* 98; V.iv). He seems to have borrowed it from *The Mad Lover* (1616) by John Fletcher, which he had read in manuscript (*Poems* 75, 132, 144-45). He may also have found it in Jonson's *Sejanus* (1603), to which he alludes later in the play (291; V.iii): 'there be two / Know more than honest counsels; whose close breasts, / Were they ripped up to light, it would be found / A poor and idle sin to which their trunks / Had not been made fit organs' (I.23-27). It also occurs in Marston's *Sophonisba* (1606; V.ii.25-7).
- 5 Cokain's first dramatic work was a masque presented at Brethie, the country seat of the author's uncle the Earl of Chesterfield, in 1639. Much of it is devoted to a debate between the *Lar Familiaris* of Brethie, representing culture, and a Satyr, representing nature. The *Lar Familiaris* wins (*Dramatic Works* 8-10).
- 6 Ovid makes a similar complaint in *Tristia*: 'I live in a barbarous country at the uttermost end of the wide world / In a place ringed around and begirdled by the most savage enemies' (V.ii.31-32). Ovid also associates the place of his exile with mutilation. He derives *Tomis* (the correct spelling of the name of the city) from the Greek *temno*, cut, assuming that it was in Tomis that Medea dismembered her brother Absyrtus, in order to frustrate her father's pursuit of Jason and herself by forcing him to pause to collect the scattered limbs of his son (*Tristia* III.ix). Hannibal does not, of course, commit his act of mutilation in Tomos, but the reader or playgoer learns about it there.
- 7 Ovid says the Tomians are 'men who are scarcely worthy the name of humans, / They are more cruel and savage than even the wolves that roam. / They do not fear laws but justice yields to brute force in their customs' (*Tristia* V.vii.45-47).
- 8 As A. Owen Aldridge shows, the figure of Ovid is also important in tying the three plots together (220-21).

- 9 Mr. Calfshead's name may be an allusion to the Elizabethan iconoclast James Calphill, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford (Phillips 122). For the iconoclasts' interest in surplices and other vestments, see Phillips (69, 130-31, 134, 176, 180).
- 10 Marston alludes to the same passage in Lucan, though not to these lines, in *Sophonisba*. Marston clearly associates witchcraft with seduction: his villain, Syphax, calls on the witch Erictho to use her powers to help him seduce Sophonisba (IV.i.126-8); instead, she uses them to disguise herself as Sophonisba in order to seduce Syphax (V.i.8-20).
- 11 Cokain also seems to have disliked cats, because 'they company so oft offend' (*Poems* 228; 2.81).
- 12 Raymond Conlon makes the same claim on behalf of Tirso de Molina.
- 13 Marston also links iconoclasm and witchcraft; Erictho tells Syphax that her cell is

hard by the reverend ruins
 Of a once glorious temple reared to Jove,
 Whose very rubbish (like the pitied fall
 Of virtue much unfortunate) yet bears
 A deathless majesty, though now quite rased,
 Hurl'd down by wrath and lust of impious kings,
 So that, where holy flamens wont to sing
 Sweet hymns to heaven, there the daw and crow,
 The ill-voiced raven, and still-chattering pie,
 Send out ungrateful sound and loathsome filth;
 Where statues and Jove's acts were vively limned
 Boys with black coals draw the veiled parts of nature,
 And lecherous actions of imagined lust;
 Where tombs and beauteous urns of well-dead men
 Stood in assurèd rest, the shepherd now
 Unloads his belly, corruption most abhorred
 Mingling itself with their renownèd ashes:
 Ourselves quakes at it. (*Sophonisba* IV.i.143-60)

Erictho's ascription of iconoclasm to the 'wrath and lust of impious kings' looks like a veiled reference to Henry VIII. The defilement of the temple closely anticipates Byron's account of the defilement of the monument to De Foix (*Don Juan* IV.103-5), and Walcott's account of the defilement of the conquistador's statue in Lisbon (*Omeros* 192; cf. 204). Byron concentrates on Marston's peasants; Walcott, on his birds. Welcoming her husband, Massinissa, to their bridal bed, Sophonisba makes a passing reference to 'Revenging gods, whose marble hands / Crush faithless men' (I.ii.51-2; cf. II.i.51). In this erotic context, the revenge of marble against the faithless looks strangely like an anticipation of Tirso's plot. Later, the calm implacability of the vengeful Massinissa makes the Roman general Scipio address him as 'Statue, not man!' (III.ii.22).

- 14 In his Prologue, Cokain says that he based his play on one that he saw in Venice in 1632; and in his Epilogue he says that he wrote it while on the same Continental trip (*Dramatic Works* 116, 204; Lea 47). These statements may be only prudent disclaimers; in any case, they cannot entirely undercut the political implications of the play as it was published in 1658. Helen A. Kaufman has suggested that it may also draw on *Measure for Measure*.

- 15 This benevolent act is in marked contrast to Cromwell's Act of General Pardon and Oblivion, which gave an amnesty to all his opponents except witches (Holmes 151), but it anticipates Charles II's Act of Indemnity and Oblivion, which included witches, though not regicides (Holmes 155).
- 16 In *The Lancashire Witches* (1681), the true-blue Protestant poet associates diabolism with Catholicism almost as insistently as Cokain associates it with Puritanism (e.g., 4: 101, 160, 162, 169).

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