

# THE PRE-MODERN STRINDBERG. SEX, GENDER, SEXUALITY

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## Abstract

In this article the claim is made that some of the representations of “sex”, “gender”, and “sexuality” in Strindberg’s authorship point to the influence of pre-modern discourses rather than modern ones. First, there is a discussion about the pre-modern influences on the sex-gender distinction in *Creditors* (1888) and *There Are Crimes and Crimes* (1899), an analysis which shows that in these texts, “sex” is perceived as one rather than two, and, moreover, organized hierarchically rather than dichotomously. Furthermore, it is argued that in these texts, “gender”, in fact, supersedes “sex”, something that is understood within the theoretical frameworks provided by, for example, Thomas Laqueur, Maja Bondestam and Carol Clover. Secondly, it is argued that in *Playing with Fire* (1892) and other texts, the definition of gender is intimately linked to the sexual desires represented in Strindberg’s authorship. This points to influences from what, for example, R.A. Nye has claimed to be pre-modern understandings of gender and sexuality as a unit rather than two distinct concepts, adding a historical perspective to the play between norm and subversion in the fictional texts. Also on a more general level, for example, in *Getting Married, Parts I and II* (1894, 1896), “sexuality” seems to be phrased according to the difference previously pointed out by Michel Foucault, as acts (pre-modern discourse) rather than identity (modern discourse). In addition, it is argued that when discussing the (for Strindberg) burning question of feminism, pre-modern and modern discourses are simultaneously employed. Finally, it is concluded that the co-existence, collision, conflict, and merge of different paradigms concerning sex, gender and sexuality are part of the complexity and enigmatic attraction in Strindberg’s authorship. It is also noted that the interest in the relationship between body, matter and discourse that motivates this article is in line with not only contemporary perspectives in posthumanism, transgender studies and new feminist materialism but also with Strindberg’s own concerns.

## Keywords

Strindberg, queer theory, history, erotic triangles

## Introduction

“August Strindberg. The founder of modern Swedish literature.” This is the message that greets visitors arriving by plane at Arlanda airport in Stockholm, Sweden. Indeed, “modern” is a stock epithet without which it seems hard to even speak about Strindberg, just as it would be difficult to imagine a discussion about Homer’s

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Achilles that does not account for him as a “swift-footed hero”. In this article I want to challenge the general view of Strindberg as an author who is exclusively influenced by and employing modern discourses in his literary and dramatic productions. Against the background of analyses conducted in my doctoral thesis from 2007, *Att röra en värld. En queerteoretisk analys av erotiska trianglar i sex verk av August Strindberg*,<sup>3</sup> I expand on the idea that the qualities of and relationship between “sex”, “gender”, and “sexuality” in Strindberg’s authorship are structured not only by modern discourses but also by previously only marginally acknowledged pre-modern ones.<sup>4</sup>

### **The sex-gender distinction**

Let’s start with a rather striking quote from the play *There Are Crimes and Crimes* (1899). The course of events takes place among bohemian artists in Paris, focusing two good friends, Maurice and Adolphe, and the beautiful Henriette. Henriette is Adolphe’s mistress, but she and Maurice fall helplessly in love the first time they see each other and soon engage in a romantic relationship. After a passionate night with champagne in the Boulogne forest, they watch the sunrise together, at which point Maurice starts to feel cold. This encourages Henriette to enshroud him in her pelisse,<sup>5</sup> a move that triggers the following remark from Maurice:

That’s nice. It is as if I were inside of your skin, as if my body had been melted up by lack of sleep and were being remoulded in your shape. I can feel the moulding process going on. But I am also growing a new soul, new thoughts, and here, where your bosom has left an impression, I can feel my own beginning to bulge. (Strindberg, 2006, 21)<sup>6</sup>

In this quote, Maurice not only expresses the experience of a renewed inner self but also of somatic change, to the point where he feels that he is about to develop breasts. How has this somatic “remoulding”, this transgression of the divide between the sexes in a turn-of-the-twentieth-century dramatic text, been understood in previous research? In Barry Jacobs’ discussion of this play, he notes that in this quote, Maurice moves from a male gender position towards a female (Jacobs, 1991,

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<sup>3</sup> This dissertation is written in Swedish with an English summary. However, part of the introduction and the first chapter of the analysis about *A Madman’s Manifesto* was restructured, translated into English and published in *Contagion* in 2010.

<sup>4</sup> The difference between “sex” and “gender” has been much debated, particularly by Judith Butler (1990), who is critical of the ways in which “gender” has come to signify a non-somatic enactment of what is seen as a pre-given, pre-discursive, materially stable “sex”. In this article I am inspired by Butler’s criticism and thus question the sex/gender distinction in Strindberg’s texts from a historical perspective, and, moreover, relate it to sexuality.

<sup>5</sup> The English translation says “opera cloak”, but I prefer to keep the wording from the original text, since it exists in English as well and I do not see the need to change it.

<sup>6</sup> I chose this translation from 2006 rather than the new edition of Evert Sprinchorn’s 1986 translation of this play (*Crimes and Crimes*, 2012b) since I find it more true to the original text.

181). Hans-Göran Ekman has discussed this sequence in *There Are Crimes and Crimes* at greater length and claims that it means that Maurice's very self dissolves and that he assumes Henriette's shape, both spiritually and bodily. Ekman understands this within the context of previous dressing scenes in Strindberg's authorship, where a woman by the act of dressing a man wants to take control over him. After the Inferno crisis,<sup>7</sup> this motif is widened to include the act of taking someone's clothes off, which has a ritual function. The circumstance under which Henriette dresses Maurice in her pelisse would thus connect this scene to the battle between the sexes in Strindberg's earlier productions and can be seen as a sequel to similar themes in, for example, *Playing with Fire* (1892) (Ekman 1991, 86, 101).

Ekman's argument suggests that the somatic change (sex) is a consequence of the act of dressing someone (gender), which in its turn is understood within the context of other texts and motifs in Strindberg's authorship as well as the ongoing battle between man and woman. When I discuss this sequence in *There Are Crimes and Crimes* in my doctoral dissertation, I agree with Ekman that the motif of dressing someone is reoccurring in Strindberg's authorship and also that this act is possible to relate to a discussion regarding gender. Moreover, I add to this way of understanding Maurice's somatic change by employing the perspective offered in Butler's concept "materialization", according to which matter comes to matter as an effect of performative processes (Butler, 1993, 1-23; Lönngren, 2007, 149f.; see also Lönngren, 2004).<sup>8</sup>

However, another understanding of this quote is made possible by turning to the history of the concept "sex". In *Tvåkönad* (2010), Maja Bondestam claims that there are two different medical traditions crystallizing from ancient times and forwards: the Hippocratic-Galenian and the Aristotelian. According to the former, sex was a continuum, where each person is somewhere on a sliding scale between male and female. This view contrasts sharply with Aristotle's view of sex, where the male and female categories are understood as dichotomous, clearly separated units, a view that has become dominant in modern, Western societies. But the pre-modern, Hippocratic-Galenian view of sex was competing with the Aristotelian concept at least until the seventeenth century, and medical theories regarding the "nature" of men and women continue to refer to the older tradition well into modern days (Bondestam, 2010, 39-44; see also Schiebinger, 1989).

Similar discussions have been presented by Thomas Laqueur in *Making Sex* (1990), where he claims that Western society before enlightenment looked upon sex

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<sup>7</sup> Strindberg's authorship is often divided into two distinct phases, divided by the author's existential and psychological so-called Inferno crisis in the beginning of the 1890's.

<sup>8</sup> In returning to this analysis today, I see that also the piece of clothing that generates the change in *There Are Crimes and Crimes* underscores this understanding. The pelisse was created during the seventeenth century for usage within the military but started during the early-nineteenth century to be designed for elegant ladies from the higher social classes in Europe (Myerly, 1996). Thus, from having been a piece of garment that was intended for exclusively male uses, it has come to be regarded as female – just as is happening to Maurice in the quote discussed in this article.

as one rather than two, organized hierarchically rather than dichotomized. Furthermore, this view presented gender as primary rather than sex, and identity was subjected to acts rather than notions of essence (Laqueur, 1990, 1-62). Also Carol Clover makes a very convincing case for similar lines of thought in a discussion about medieval Norse literature, where she notes that regarding gender, the cultural context to these narratives appears to be one “that simply does not make a clear distinction but holds what we imagine to be two as one and the same thing” (Clover, 1993, 370f.).<sup>9</sup>

According to these arguments, it would be possible to claim that when Maurice’s body alters in *There are Crimes and Crimes*, this scene is structured by a pre-modern discourse in which “sex” is understood as “a sociological and not an ontological category” (Laqueur, 1990, 8). Crucial to this argument is the above-mentioned hierarchical structure according to which this earlier model was organized, namely as really only one sex – the male – in relationship to which the female body was seen a less developed, less perfect copy. Thus, during certain circumstances women were believed to be able to take sudden leaps in development – like the young girl who, while chasing her swine, suddenly sprung an external penis, as Laqueur claims was reported by Montaigne in the sixteenth century. But development was also believed to possibly go backwards, in such a way that “men who associated too extensively with women could lose the hardness and definition of their more perfect bodies and regress into effeminacy” (Laqueur, 1990, 7). Indeed, this quote seems to entail an almost perfect depiction of what is happening to Maurice in the quote above: in socializing intimately all night with Henriette and even letting her dress him in her pelisse, his very body assumes a female shape. Moreover, this understanding is supported by Clover’s findings that the possibility to “slip into the territory of the other” was, especially for men, intimately bound up with taking what was seen as the female role in relationships and acts (Clover, 1993, 375-377).

A similar hierarchical view of the organization of sex can also be seen in other places in Strindberg’s authorship, most notably, perhaps, in one scene in *Creditors* (1888). The course of events takes place at a resort, where Tekla has come to spend the vacation together with her weak and sick husband Adolph. But Tekla’s former husband Gustav has followed them there and initiates a friendship with Adolph without Tekla knowing it. Adolph does not know who Gustav is, nor that his presence at the resort is motivated by a desire for revenge for something that took place between him and Tekla before the story proper begins. In his urge to cause marital problems between Adolph and Tekla, Gustav tries to make Adolph detest the female body: “Have you ever seen a naked woman? Sorry! Of course you have. A teenager with tits, an undeveloped man, a kid who shot up and stopped short.” (Strindberg, 2012a, 298). In regard to this quote, Ronny Ambjörnsson notes that it points to the idea that Strindberg was influenced by the traditional pre-Rousseau, vertical organization of gender (Ambjörnsson, 1987, 20f.). This suggests the

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<sup>9</sup> However, as Clover notes, this does not mean that the previous system was more equal or less oppressive than the modern one, neither regarding gender nor sexuality.

paradigm that Bondestam refers to as the Hippocratic-Galenian view on sex, which implies that a pre-modern understanding of sex as a continuum and hierarchy, rather than an essence and dichotomy, structures Strindberg's text. Indeed, making claims like this about texts written at the turn of the twentieth century is altogether possible, since Clover argues that the view of sex as one is still during the twenty-first century alive and well in both psychoanalysis and popular culture (Clover, 1993, 378, n. 55; see also Clover, 1992).

### **The impact of sexuality**

Yet another aspect to consider when discussing pre-modern discourses regarding sex and gender in Strindberg's authorship is the significance of sexuality and sexual desire. It is not irrelevant, I claim, that Maurice's bodily transformation happens within the context of an erotic triangle consisting of himself, his friend Adolphe and their joint object of desire Henriette. In *Att röra en värld*, I conducted readings of this constellation in not only *There Are Crimes and Crimes*, but also in the novel *A Madman's Manifesto* (1887-1888) and the plays *Creditors* (1888), *Playing with Fire* (1892), *Dance of Death I* (1900) and *To Damascus I-III* (1898-1901). With inspiration from René Girard's term "triangular desire" (1961), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion about "homosocial desire" (1985), Judith Butler's performative perspective on gender and sexuality (1990, 1993, 1997), and other lines of thoughts put forward in the field of queer theory, my aim was to display and discuss the literary performatives through which gender and sexuality are enacted in the erotic triangle, with special attention given to the representations that serve to undermine and subvert the notion of heteronormativity as a structuring principle in these texts.<sup>10</sup> In these analyses I noted, for example, the significance of female literary agency in this constellation<sup>11</sup> and the fact that the erotic triangle consisting of two men and one woman is a continuum in Strindberg's authorship, yet it always dissolves in the text's end (and thus never turns into a *ménage à trois*).<sup>12</sup> Apart from

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<sup>10</sup> Erotic triangles consisting of two women and one man remain to be discussed, including, for example, the one between Julie, Jean and Kristin in *Miss Julie* (1888), which besides gender and sexuality is also structured by differences in social class. Other notable examples are between mother, daughter and the daughter's husband in *The Pelican* (1907), where the course of events is potentially complicated by the Western incest taboo, and in the novel *Black Banners* (1904), where the triangle woman-woman-man contains the same lesbian motif as in *A Madman's Manifesto*.

<sup>11</sup> An agency that might, as is the case in *A Madman's Manifesto*, mean that the female character leaves the man-man-woman constellation altogether to instead live with another woman (cp. "lesbian counter-plot", Castle, 1993, 67-73), or forms a new triangle consisting of two women and one man but with one of the women as the joint object of desire ("shadow-triangles", see Lönngren, 2007, 72-77 and Lönngren, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Nor a heterosexual pairing. In *A Madman's Manifesto*, Maria leaves her husband Gustav and marries her lover Axel, then, at the end of the novel, leaves Axel to live with another woman. In *Playing with Fire* and *Dance of Death*, the lover is, eventually, given the chance to live with the woman he all along has claimed to love but instead chooses to leave the stage all together. In *Creditors* the husband dies, whereafter the courter chooses to leave the woman behind. In *There Are Crimes and Crimes* the woman is asked to leave, leaving behind two men who are relating very

this, the triangular conflict provides a textual space for male homosocial desire. In desiring the same women, the men involved in such scenes of jealousy are indirectly erotically connected to one another, and the woman in the triangle thus ultimately functions as a link between two men.<sup>13</sup> Of particular interest, in relation to the discussion I conduct in this article, was the observation that the non-normative desires in the erotic triangle have a strong impact on the men's enactments of gender.

A particularly clear example of how sexual desire is connected to gender in Strindberg's authorship can be found in *Playing with Fire*, where an erotic triangle forms as Knut and his wife Kerstin are visited in their summer house by their good friend Axel. Axel is courting Kerstin, and she apparently fancies him, which Knut comments upon in this dialogue with Kerstin:

God, how I hate him when he's out of my sight. But when I see him, and he looks at me with those big sad eyes, I love him like a brother, like a sister[, like a wife]... I can understand the effect he has on you. What I don't understand is what's going on with me. Evidently I've been living for such a long time alone with you and your skirts and petticoats that my senses have been effected – womanized – as if I had caught from you your affection for him... (Strindberg, 2012a, 376)<sup>14</sup>

In his dissertation about same-sex desires in Strindberg's authorship, *August Strindberg's Perversions*, Matthew M. Roy claims that it is a rule in Strindberg's

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homoerotically with each other. This manner of choosing men and homoeroticism over different-sex sexuality is fulfilled in *To Damascus I-III*, a trilogy which ends when the Stranger has left women and family life behind and is ready to start a life in a convent with only other men.

<sup>13</sup> Although obvious in all of the texts that were studied in the dissertation, the woman's role as a link between two men is unusually clearly stated in *To Damascus III* (1901), as the Tempter speaks in the first person in the defense of a man being accused of having murdered his wife. Infidelity is the cause of this crime:

Then I shot her; not out of revenge, but in order to free myself from the unhealthy thoughts her faithlessness had forced on me; for when I tried to tear her picture out of my heart, images of her lovers always rose and crept into my blood, so that at last I seemed to be living in unlawful relationship with three men – with a woman as the link between us! (Strindberg, 1939, 235)

<sup>14</sup> Heteronormativity is apparently something that the translators of this play from Swedish to English also have struggled with. In the quote from *Playing with Fire* I have put in brackets a part of a sentence that is there in the original text, but was excluded when this play was translated into English: the part where Knut says that he loves Axel "som en hustru" ["like a wife"] (cp. Strindberg, 1984, 257). These words are excluded in both Michael Meyer's translation from 1964 (268), and the here quoted translation by Evert Sprinchorn, originally from 1986 but published in a second edition in 2012a. According to Nils Åke Nilsson (1995, 63), it was a common complaint against early translators that they censored depictions which they conceptualised as erotic or sexual. And as Kristina Sjögren claims, it is not rare that provocative aspects of Strindberg's texts have been censored when translated into other languages (Sjögren, 2010). In studying several different translations of sections from *A Madman's Manifesto*, Sjögren has discovered major differences between them, in particular with regard to gender and sexuality. I have also myself detected some omissions made in the translation of this novel, which I briefly discuss in an article from 2014.

authorship that the display of an ambivalent or homoerotic desire is always followed by a destabilization of the gender performance of the literary character involved (Roy, 2001, 12). The quote from *Playing with Fire* is certainly a display of this notification, and can, I claim, be seen as a making visible of the influence of pre-modern discourses regarding gender and sexuality in Strindberg's works. As R.A. Nye notes, the difference between gender and sexuality was not recognized until the field of sexology began to form by the end/at the beginning of the twentieth century; before this, these categories were seen as basically one and the same (Nye, 1991, 389, 400ff.). This view is clearly visible in the quote above, and, moreover, seems to be in conflict with a modern discourse regarding gender and sexuality. Knut's confusion is a result of the collision between modern heteronormative notions, according to which "man" is a stable, once and for all given category, partly defined by an attraction to a "woman", and pre-modern discourses according to which gender and sexuality are constructions made up of acts, utterances, emotions, and desires. Indeed, the fact that Knut blames Kerstin for what he feels suggests a pre-modern discourse operating in the text, a discourse according to which both sexual desire and gender are subject to change according to the social context. This argument adds a historical perspective to the play between norm and subversion in the literary text.

Based on this discussion, the erotic triangle consisting of two men and one woman can be seen as a space in which the modern, heteronormative connection between sex, gender and sexuality struggles to establish itself yet is constantly under threat by and conflicts with pre-modern discourses concerning the nature and quality of these categories. However, triangular constellations are not the only textual spaces in Strindberg's authorship in which it is possible to detect pre-modern discourses regarding sexual desire, nor concerning sexuality's relationship to sex and gender.

Although Strindberg wrote extensively about same-sex desires and relationships, he never used the modern term "homosexuality" (Roy, 2001, 11), which was coined within a medical context in 1868 (Katz, 1995, 52). Instead he employed, among other older terms, the word "sodomite" (Borgström, 2004, 217), which according to Michel Foucault differs from "homosexual" in that it defines sexuality in terms of acts, rather than identity (Foucault, 2002, 64f.; see also Johannisson, 1990, 134-138). This pre-modern notion of sexuality is clearly working in Strindberg's authorship, and not just concerning same-sex erotic desires but regarding sexuality as a whole. For example, Eva Borgström notes, in relation to the novel *Black Banners*, that although heterosexuality is the norm, in the case that such relationships do not succeed, same-sex desires can arise in both males and females (Borgström, 2004). This view on sexuality as a temporary construct, subject to change, is also put forward in the short story "Nature the Criminal" in *Getting Married, Part II* (1886), in which the variety of reasons for why non-normative sexual desires would arise are listed: incest in poor families that live in small spaces; bestiality among "herdsmen and troopers in the cavalry" (Strindberg, 1972, 253), same-sex desire with a lack of heterosexual contacts and in milieus where only representatives for one sex is present. Thus, in Strindberg's authorship, sexual preference is not essence, pre-

disposition and identity, but rather forms out of social circumstances that make individuals commit certain sexual *acts* (Lönngren, 2012).

One particularly interesting aspect of Strindberg's writing is the way in which he employs this pre-modern discourse in modern contexts. For example, basically all discussions about sexuality in Strindberg's work are connected to the burning question of female emancipation at the end of the twentieth century. In Strindberg's sexual universe, such emancipatory trudges are seen as possible causes for same-sex desires, since feminist women according to him become "de-sexed" and thus take very little interest in sex – at least with men. Therefore, the men become sexually frustrated and take their desire elsewhere, for example, to female prostitutes or to other men (Lönngren, 2012).

The co-existence of an older discourse, according to which sex, gender and sexuality are seen as a unit (or at least heavily relying on one another), and a newer discourse about female emancipation is made particularly visible in a quote from the introduction to *Getting Married, Part I* (1884). After a long discussion about the relationship between modern men and women, Strindberg draws the conclusion that "the ideal woman of today is consequently a horrible hermaphrodite, with a pretty close affinity to Greek practices." (Strindberg, 1972, 41) In a flash, this quote makes visible the way in which Strindberg works with several different discourses simultaneously: the modern one concerning female emancipation, and the pre-modern one according to which an emancipated woman is a "hermaphrodite", a term with clear material connotations, originating from the myth about the gods Hermes and Aphrodite, whose son Hermaphroditus during a bath was united somatically with the nymph Salmacis. As Bente Rosenbeck claims, within a Western context, the figure of the hermaphrodite was reoccurring up until the eighteenth century, when the urge to classify and categorize that followed Carl von Linné's studies resulted in the sexes coming out as two separate units, independent of each other. This meant that the era of the hermaphrodite was over (Rosenbeck, 1987, 99f.; see also Bondestam, 2010), which clearly situates parts of the discourses that influence Strindberg's texts in pre-modern times. Moreover, when Strindberg writes that this "hermaphrodite", who is the modern, feminist woman, likes to engage in "Greek practices" – of course, referring to same-sex sexual practices in Ancient Greece – he not only makes visible the pre-modern connection between sex, gender and sexuality but also gives a typical example of what I mentioned above: that Strindberg throughout his authorship refuses to employ the newer term "homosexuality" and, rather, makes use of an older one. Thus, the modern woman is, in Strindberg's authorship, understood with pre-modern concepts.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have made the claim that some of the representations of "sex", "gender", and "sexuality" in Strindberg's authorship point to the influence of pre-modern discourses rather than modern ones. I have also argued that these two different paradigms sometimes co-exist and sometimes conflict in the literary and dramatic texts. In extension, I would like to suggest that this previously to a large



extent un-acknowledged collision of paradigms in the authorship might be one of the reasons for Strindberg's enigmatic attraction: a clash that creates strong tensions, contradictions and paradoxes yet still makes the texts stand out as immensely relevant. However, viewing Strindberg exclusively through the firmly established lens of the "founder of modern Swedish literature", as discussed at the beginning of this article, probably has gotten in the way of these insights.

On a theoretical level I would, finally, like to point out the fact that at least part of my scope of interest in this article is in line with a more generally increased attention, in literary and other humanist studies, towards issues concerning matter and the body. Indeed, as Laqueur writes, the strategies of denying the very existence of transforming bodies in different kinds of cultural texts, of metaphorical understandings (according to which such representations *really* signify something else), and of individual explanations (such as diagnosing), means an "a-historical, and impoverished approach to a vast and complex literature about the body and culture" (Laqueur, 1990, 7). In another article published in 2014, I tried to account for this complexity in a reading of certain sequences in *A Madman's Manifesto* from the perspectives of queer theory, posthumanist performativity, transgender studies, and feminist materialism. And it is striking that such discussions are perfectly in line with Strindberg's own interests in the relationship between matter and discourse, "reality" and word. Besides the frustration he expresses at the "phenomena of materialization" the staging of his plays inevitably means (my transl.; orig. "materialisationsfenomen", quoted from Törnqvist, 2001, 21f.), his subversive view on the relationship between matter and discourse is explicitly stated in *To Damascus III*, as the Stranger receives the following information from the Confessor:

You're a child, who's lived in a childish world, where you've played with thoughts and words. You've lived in the erroneous belief that language, a material thing, can be a vehicle for anything so subtle as thoughts and feelings. We've discovered that error, and therefore speak as little as possible (Strindberg, 1939, 270).

For future studies, I propose that we do *not* take the Confessor's advice to "speak as little as possible" but, rather, intensify the discussion about different paradigms and discourses regarding matter, bodies, and reading practices in relation to Strindberg's and others' writings.

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