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Baubles on the Water: Sea Travel in Shakespeare's Time*

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ABSTRACT

The technical features of travel by water, on sea and up rivers, are not registered as strongly as it should be in studies of the Shakespearean period. In his great edition of *The Spanish Tragedy* Philip Edwards mocked the author's assumption that the Portuguese Viceroy would have travelled to Spain by sea rather than overland, since the play also notes that the two countries have contiguous boundaries. He did not know how tortuous travel overland from Badajoz to Lisbon could be. A similar ignorance of the routine use of travel by boat around the coast of England and up its main rivers is evident in the studies of playing company travels in the many *Records of Early English Drama*. Its editors take too little notice of the likelihood that the professional playing companies used London's shipping to carry their personnel and properties on their journeys round the country. The official records of the Privy Council and other state papers show how important access by river was for all bulk transport through England's rivers. Shakespeare could well have travelled from London home to Stratford upon Avon by water. John Taylor the Water Poet wrote several verses about his own travels from London by water that amply demonstrate the ease and the familiarity to travellers of going anywhere by sea and river. But it was never an easy business. Shakespeare himself twice used the word "bauble" or "bubble" in different plays to describe the fragile nature of the vessels used for sea travel.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare, Kyd, water, sea, REED, Taylor.

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Shakespeare's familiar use of sea-images, his exploitation of mariners' language in places like the opening scene of *The Tempest*, provoked some scholars in the last century to speculate that he was so familiar with seamen's terms that he must have been a shipman, or at least a voyager far beyond the shores of England. I think that unlikely, but I do believe that he had ample experience of travelling by water. Such an idea is hardly surprising, considering that he worked in London, the country's biggest port, that for fourteen years he owned part of a theatre built alongside the river Thames, and that the simplest if not the quickest form of transport between London and his home in Stratford upon Avon was by river rather than on horseback. We need to watch out for travel by water everywhere in these early texts.

In his magisterial Revels edition of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Philip Edwards noted in a footnote to line 11 in Act 3 scene 14 that the Spanish King's welcome to the Portuguese Viceroy, when he says he had "crossed the seas" to reach Spain, must be what he called "an amusing howler" on Kyd's part (1959:91). Edwards pointed out that at 1.2.22 the Spanish General had made the comment that "Spain and Portingale do jointly knit / Their Frontiers," and concluded that overland travel was the obvious form of access for the Portuguese to get to Spain. The idea that the Viceroy might have chosen to go by ship from Lisbon to Spain did not occur to Edwards, nor for that matter to any other of the play's editors and critics over the centuries. But I think that Kyd, like Shakespeare, knew far more about travel in those days than did any of their critics.

In June 1580, when following the disaster to the Portuguese court of the Battle of Alcázar in Morocco Phillip II decided to take over the crown of Portugal, the Duke of Alba's army took a long time to get from Badajoz on the Spanish border to Lisbon, simply because the roads were so appallingly bad, even for horses. Travel round the coast by sea was the standard means of access for large parties, especially royalty. Alba rode on horseback with his army of 40,000 pedestrians through Elvas, Borba, Estremoz, Vimeiro and Montemor, and then on to a rendezvous with a fleet sent by sea at Setubal. One of his main aims on this last of Alba's many great military expeditions was to control his troops firmly enough so that they would not alienate the population of the areas they were

marching through. For this purpose he equipped them with all the necessary provisions, so that they would not pillage the now allegedly Spanish countryside. Badajoz, where he started from, was a small town in a largely barren region, so he had to gather his provisions from far and wide, levying them all the way from Andalusia to as far as Ibiza –in fact he gathered so much he was able to sell a lot off to the ecstatic locals in Llerena and Badajoz. His equipment for this journey was much what a royal court would have travelled with overland.

His engineer, Gian Battista Antonelli, however, gave him ominous reports about the state of the roads, and when they set out in June his army was mostly foot-soldiers, accompanied by 136 large cannon and food and baggage hauled in an endless line of ox carts. It was a dreadfully bad journey, taking nearly a month to cover 170 kilometers. In the dry areas of the Alentejo water was in dreadfully short supply, and a plague of influenza was ravaging the local populations. The road was so bad that Alba reported the ox carts kept breaking down, “as if they were made of twigs.” “Since I was born,” he added, “I have never seen country so rough. The road has ruts so broad and so deep and so hard they seem to be frozen like at Christmas.”¹ You can see why it would have been entirely routine for the Portuguese Viceroy in Kyd’s play to journey to the Spanish court by sea rather than by land. When Alba, after all the troubles and losses of this long journey finally confronted the Portuguese enemy under Don Antonio on the outskirts of Lisbon, his professional expertise easily outflanked them in the battle of 25 August 1580. The aftermath of that battle was the occasion when the story told in Kyd’s celebrated play begins.

In this context we might wish to register the implications of what a friend and schoolmate of Kyd’s, Thomas Lodge, wrote in 1590. Lodge is known to us chiefly as a playwright and poet, author of *Rosalynde*, source for Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. But in his epistle to “the Gentlemen Readers” he described himself as not a poet but “a souldier, and a sailer, that gives you the fruits of his labors that he wrought in the Ocean, when everie line was wet with a surge, & everie humorous passion countercheckt with a storme.” In 1585 Lodge had sailed to the Azores as part of the English and French

¹ My account of this trek is taken from Maltby (1983).

attempts to sustain Don Antonio as the Portuguese Pretender against the Spanish, an expedition from which his friend Kyd must have learned a lot for *The Spanish Tragedy*. *Rosalynde's* dedication to Henry Carey, Lord Chamberlain, soon to be patron of the Shakespeare company, specifies that it came about while making "a voyage to the Islands of Terceras & the Canaries, to beguile the time with labour, I writ this book; rough, as hatcht in the stormes of the Ocean, and feathered in the surges of many perillous seas" (Lodge 1590:A2v,A4). Later in 1590 Lodge joined the second Cavendish expedition to sail round the world. His first expedition lasted from 1586 till 1588, and I shall shortly quote something from it. Londoners were familiar with multitudes of ocean-going ships on their riverbanks, and many citizens travelled in them. Even those who did not sail off knew what the seafarers' gossip was. It is a minor but distinctive feature of Marlowe's 2 *Tamburlaine* that he should have his hero propose to cut a version of what later became the Suez Canal between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. The knowledge that voyagers like Lodge took from their travels spread easily amongst their land-bound friends and contacts.

I will quote from Cavendish's own summary account of his first voyage in his dedicatory letter to Henry Carey, which appeared in Hakluyt in 1589, chiefly because it says a lot about the main issue that stimulated the writing of Kyd's play about the Spanish takeover of the Portuguese crown. In his preliminary remarks Cavendish wrote

It hath pleased the Almightye to suffer me to circumpasse the whole Globe of the world, entring in at the streight of Magelan, and returning by the cape Bona Sperança. In which voyage I have either discovered or brought certeine intelligence of al the rich places of the world that ever were knowne or discovered by any Christian. I navigated amongst the coast of Chili, Peru, and Nova Spagna [Mexico], where I made great spoyles: I burnt and sunke 19. sayles of shippes small and great. All the villages and townes that ever I landed at, I burnt and spoyled: And had I not bene discovered upon the coast, I had taken great quantitie of treasure. The matter of most profit unto me was a great ship of the Kings [of Spain] which I tooke at California, which ship came from the Philippinas, being one of the richest of Marchandise, that ever passed those Seas, as the kings Register and Marchants accompts did shew, for it did amount in value to * [Hakluyt left the amount to be filled in later] in Mexico to be sold: which goods (for that my

shippes were not able to contayne the least part of them,) I was inforced to set on fire. From the Cape of California, being the uttermost part of all Nova Hispania, I navigated to the Ilandes of Philippinas hard upon the coast of China, of which Countreie I have brought such Intelligence as hath not bene heard of in these parts. The statelines and riches of which countreie I feare to make report of, least I should not be credited. For if I had not knowne sufficiently the incomparable welth of that countrey, I should have ben as incredulous thereof, as others will be that have not had the like experience. I sayled along the Islands of Maluccas, where among some of the heathen people I was well intreated, where our country men may have trade as well as the Portingals, if they will themselves. From thence I passed by the cape of Bona Sperança, and found out by the way homeward the Iland of Saint Helena, where the Portingals use to releeveth themselves: And from that Iland God hath suffred me to returne into England.² (Hakluyt 1589:Dddd2)

What he could not capture, he had broken and ruined. This account on its own would be enough to explain why the Spanish were so concerned to uphold Pope Alexander VI's famous diktat of 1493 about the division of the world outside Europe between the sea-powers of Spain and Portugal, especially once Portugal became a part of Spain in 1580. The now omnivorous world power of the Iberian peninsula had to fight to keep the anti-Catholic English and Dutch explorers out of it all.

Cavendish's outlook and his account of his voyage provides the fullest possible context for Kyd's play, which is set at the takeover of Portugal by Spain. The riches to be got from sailing across the Atlantic were the most fundamental motivation for all the politics and wars of that period. Protestant opposition to Spain in Holland and England and above all on the high seas always had the desire for money behind it. Kyd and Lodge and everyone in London knew that at first hand, just as they knew the point of travelling between Spain and Portugal by ship rather than going overland.

At a far more banal level, a similar problem to that which made the critics of *The Spanish Tragedy* assume that travel between Spain

² The passage is also quoted (in modernized spelling) by, of all people, Philip Edwards (1988:51). Edwards also has a book, *Sea-Mark. The Metaphorical Voyage, Spenser to Milton* (1997) in which he examines references to the sea in three plays by Marlowe and eight by Shakespeare.

and Portugal must have been by land, exists with the editors of the Records of Early English Drama. We know that the touring companies in England used carts and horses to go by road from one town or country house to another, but almost none of the current *REED* editors has taken any notice of the fact that many of the towns the companies visited were sea ports. The great likelihood is that from the port of London they travelled to them by water, not by land. Far more ports were in use then than we have any idea of now. Elizabethan bureaucracy has left us some records, especially in the early 1590s, when the Privy Council was hotly pursuing the many secret landings of Jesuits and other recusants from France or Spain anywhere on the southern English coast and its many fishing villages, but sadly these records do not give us direct information of the kind that the *REED* editors need. Under Elizabeth a series of Port Books (National Archives E190) were issued in 1564. These were folio-sized volumes, sent to every major port which did any sort of trade, either coastal or overseas. The object was to get its local authorities to record whatever trade their and their neighbouring ports were engaged in. They were expected to make annual returns in those giant folios, registering the variety and the cost of each traded item. In the nature of bureaucracy, individual ports provided their own different ways of answering this demand, but the many surviving books do give us the best record we have of the great mass of trading activities conducted around England's coasts from the year 1564 onwards. Sadly for our purposes, they do not provide any evidence of human trade, the names or the kinds of people such as the acting companies who might choose to travel by water to any of the towns accessible round the coast.

The Port Books do reveal what an amazing variety of towns and villages there were engaged in sea trade in this period. Many of them were settlements that today we would not expect to have ever had any sea-going interests. The central Exchequer regulation of 1564 required small parishes along the coast to have their records grouped together at one central and adjacent port which was made responsible for recording the returns in the great folios. Newcastle upon Tyne, for instance, included records from more than twenty different parishes along the adjacent coastline, besides the substantial ports of Whitby (E190, 185/3), Hartlepool (E190, 185/2) and some other mainly fishing settlements. Chester as one of the official recipients of a Port Book had to include all the parishes along

the north Welsh coastline, plus Liverpool and other areas in Lancashire. The major towns with coastal or river access to the sea who were required to make these multivalent returns included, besides Newcastle and Chester, York, Ipswich, King's Lynn, Dover and its many adjacent towns such as Folkestone, Hyde and Rye, Southampton, Exeter, Barnstaple, Plymouth, Falmer, Bridgwater, Bristol, Gloucester, Milford, and Carlisle. London itself, easily England's biggest port, made regular returns, chiefly over sales of wool and leather, though a multitude of other goods occasionally make an appearance in those great folios.

It would have been easy for any of the London playing companies to have used coastal shipping for their travels, conceivably even hiring the one boat to carry them all the way round the coast from port to port. The sea gave them quick and simple transport to many towns easy of access. Given the loads of expensive costumes and properties they had to carry with them for their plays, carriage by water was probably more secure than by cart or coach and horseback. The *REED* records show how popular the coastline in particular of Sussex and Kent was for visiting companies, and with so much penetration by river inland to towns like Margate and Canterbury it is hard to see how often the London-based companies would have chosen instead to pack themselves up onto wagons and horses for their travels.

To take only one example of likely sea travel, the early Admiral's company, taking Tamburlaine and Faustus on tour in 1590 and 1591, played on successive days at Maidstone, Folkestone, Lydd, Rye, Canterbury, New Romney, and then Bristol and Gloucester, all easily accessible by water. On the few occasions when the local clerks supplied a precise date for the visits they seem to show the performers appearing at different ports on successive days, a speed of travel that suggests they might even have used their coastal transport to sleep on as well as for transport of their numbers and their properties.³ In all, their recorded stops around the south coast, either to seaports or upriver to major towns, included (starting from London) Maidstone, Faversham, Fordwich (the river halt for Canterbury), Sandwich, Dover, Hythe, Folkestone, New Romney,

³ The evidence for this company's travelling practices is assembled in Gurr (2009:76-79,289-292), with a map of their stops (74). This evidence for their tours has been assembled from the multiple volumes of the *Records of Early English Drama* (1979-).

Lydd, and Rye. Further round the south coast their stops included Southampton, Lyme Regis, Exeter and Plymouth. The Shakespeare company did rather less travelling, but their stops certainly included Faversham, Fordwich, Dover, Hythe, Folkestone, New Romney, and Rye (Gurr 2004:54-69). On round the coast and up the Bristol Channel both companies used to perform at Barnstaple, Bristol and Bath, all towns accessible by water, before stopping at Marlborough and Oxford on their way back to London.

The ease of travel by water not only on sea but inland by river, including to Stratford, is another case where our thinking is likely to go off course. Let me cite an instance with which anyone who has ever walked along a towpath by a river in England will be familiar. Paths alongside rivers originally made for horses hauling barges are still common features of the English landscape. The *Calendar of State Papers (CSP Domestic)* gives us an example from Elizabethan times of the legal issues that faced landowners who denied bargemen their right to such paths. The Privy Council was regularly occupied with keeping waterways navigable on all the major rivers of England. On 6 May 1594 two justices at Serjeant's Inn issued a report to the Council over a dispute about the River Lea, between Ware and the Thames in London. Amongst other points, it declared that the river, in a suit over ancient rights of way on the river and its banks, had legal status as a routeway for water traffic, and that in consequence international law required its routeways always to be kept clear for transport.

Where it was alleged that certain vessels called shutes had anciently passed down the river, and were of very small burden, it was proved by record that in Edw. III's time, three shutes passed down, carrying 12 loads of timber, which was four tons apiece, and in Hen. IV's time, another carried 12 tons of timber, at one time, down the river, and some of the barges lately passing are six or seven tons burthen.

It was also alleged by the defendants, that though the river was navigable, it was not lawful for the bargemen to go on land to tow their barges; to which it was answered, that the river, being one of the great rivers of the realm, has the same liberties as others have, and that bargemen and keelmen have always used to go along by the bankside to draw their vessels, by the rivers of Thames, Severn, Trent, and the river between Wisbech and Cambridge, and sometimes have the help of horses to tow up their vessels, and that the like liberty is always allowed to the navigable rivers

in Holland, Zealand, and all foreign parts. Bracton states that the use of the banks of rivers is public, by the law of nations, like the rivers themselves; as also fishermen may go upon any man's land to dry their nets, because it is good for the commonwealth.

In the time of Edw. IV. the owners of the ground on either side the river were ordered to take away all trees and hedges growing upon the banks, which could serve to no other end but that the bargemen might go upon the banks to tow their barges. The late Commissioners of Sewers have caused all the trees, bushes, &c. upon the banks to be taken away, and bridges to be made over the mouth of mill-streams, for the bargemen to go along the banks and tow their barges; also it is impossible to carry up barges or boats of any burden against the stream with oars only, and the bargemen, going on land and keeping one path, could do little or no hurt to the land. (Green 1867:501-502)

The importance of travel by river throughout Tudor and Stuart England is exemplified in some wonderful doggerel verses by, inevitably, John Taylor the Water Poet. On 25 July 1622, for instance, he started on a journey whose experiences he versified as "A Verry Merry Wherry-Ferry-Voyage: or Yorke for my money: sometimes perilous, sometimes quarrellous, performed with a paire of oares, by sea from London, by John Taylor and Job Pennell, and written by J. T." The two rowers set out from Gravesend in a wherry, described as "somewhat old, or strucke in age, / That had endur'd neere 4. yeares pilgrimage, / And caryed honest people, whores, and thieves, / Some sergeants, bayliffes, and some under-shrieves." Besides its pair of oars it had a single sail for propulsion through the deeper seas. Down the Thames beyond Colchester they put out to sea towards the Naze, but the wind began to blow hard ("Stiffe Eolus with Neptune went to cuffes," as Taylor put it), and while bigger ships had to strike their topsails, "Meane time (before the wind) we scudded brave, / Much like a duck, on top of every wave. / But" (mercifully) "nothing violent is permanent, / And in short space away the tempest went." They spent the night in Harwich, and then rowed past Aldeburgh to Yarmouth, where they spent a good night, and the next day, a Sunday, heard a sermon and ate a good cheese before rowing on through heavy waves to Cromer. There, at the most northern of the Cinqueports, they were arrested. Taylor is derisive:

As sheepe doe feare the wolfe, or geese the fox,
So all amazed were these sencelesse blockes:

That had the towne beene fir'd, it is a doubt,
But that the women there had pist it out,
And from the men reek'd such a fearefull sent,
That people three miles thence mus'd what it meant.

The local militia spent all day till 3 o'clock ransacking and smashing bits of the boat, until one of the local magistrates finally remembered Taylor's well-known writings and invited them to his house, four miles off. Taylor took care to name the four chief locals responsible for the uproar, who had cost them most of a good day for sea travel.

From Cromer they rowed on up the coast to the Wash, which they hurried through past perilous masses of low sand dunes and unmarked water with strong tide-rips, rowing a hundred miles in the one day, till they got to Boston in Lincolnshire, north of the Fens. The next day they rowed fifty miles up the River Witham to Lincoln, and then north again by shallow and muddy streams (it took them 8 hours to go 9 miles) to Gainsborough on the Trent, and on up to the river Humber, where the wind proved too strong for them and they were swept fifteen miles downriver to Hull instead of their intended upriver destination, York. Being another Sunday the mayor of Hull gave them welcome and food, and many others gave them help in getting to York, "Their loves (like Humber) over-flow'd the bankes, / And though I ebbe in worth, I'll flowe in thanks." They reached York, their destination, on 7 August, having rowed more than three hundred miles in thirteen days. In York they sold their boat (and lots of Taylor's books), and returned to London by horse. The verses that cover the return journey take 24 lines, against 820 for the first and more watery part of their epic. You can see Taylor's own priorities in that.

Ten years later, in 1632, following work he joined in that identified the need to improve the Thames's upriver route out of London, he offered a rhyming version of a voyage he made on the Thames between Oxford and London. His account listed its various impediments, notably over the forty miles from Oxford to Staines, plus a number of difficulties they endured through the last twenty miles to the city:

Neare Eaton College is a stop and weare (weir),
Whose absence well the river may forbear;
A stop, a weare, a dangerous sunke tree,
Not farre from Datchet Ferry are all three.

(That location on the Thames, incidentally, is where the 2012 Olympic rowing course is set). I particularly like his comment on Chertsey Bridge:

Tumbling 'twixt Middlesex and Surrey land,
We came where Chertseyes crooked bridge doth stand,
Which sure was made all by left-handed men,
The like of it was never in my ken.⁴

Taylor was an honest man, who used his own vast experience of life in London and England to tell many stories about life under the Stuart kings. His accounts cover land travel as well as his own water excursions. Among his many small pamphlets is a practical guide to the names of the great inns in the city which were used as bases from which the carriers who could transport people and goods to the remote towns in England set out, complete with their charges and which days they went and which they returned on.

Thomas Kyd's fascination in *The Spanish Tragedy* with the threat that the union of Spain with Portugal posed to English and Dutch adventuring on the high seas, and the way that King Phillip's takeover of Portugal disposed of Alexander VI's decree dividing the world outside Europe between Spain and Portugal, so intensifying the threat to English trade, has been well established. It is the vital frame for reading the play. Philip Edwards himself, the play's best editor, has written a splendid book on global expeditions by sea. I only wish that when he edited the play he had more knowledge of local conditions than his derision over Kyd's using the sea shows. It was in the 1580s, when the play was written, that Phillip II banned all ports on the Iberian peninsula to English and Dutch shipping. Such a local threat to London's many merchants immediately imposed itself as a political crisis on thinking in London. As I have said, Kyd's own schoolmate, Thomas Lodge, was on a ship in Terceira in the Azores when Don Antonio's struggle against the Spanish was still going in, and I suspect that most of the politics behind the play started with what Kyd learned from his discussions with Lodge about his experiences in there. But let us at the end turn back, as we so often do, to Shakespeare's own slim testimonies to his knowledge of sailing.

⁴ Quotations from Taylor's work are taken from Chandler's *Travels through Stuart Britain: the adventures of John Taylor, the water poet* (1999).

It is worth noting that six of his plays have shipwrecks in them. Disasters at sea were almost the classic means of launching a romantic story, as they do in *Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, *Pericles* and *The Tempest*.⁵ They show ample evidence of the poet's familiarity with ships at sea, and storms, not least in the vigorous and realistic opening scene of *The Tempest*. Here I offer just two quotations which suggest something of what Shakespeare thought about travel by sea. Neither of them is very complimentary about its perils. Both of them in fact employ a rather strange word for a boat. One comes from about 1602, *Troilus and Cressida* 1.3.34 (TLN 490-493), where Nestor is trying to soothe the angry Agamemnon with a metaphor about the changeable seas:

The Sea being smooth,
How many shallow bauble Boates dare saile
Upon her patient brest, making their way
With those of Nobler bulke?

Bauble boats? Or boats which are like bubbles on the froth of stormy seas? The adjective here sounds emphatic, a dismissive word. Whether Shakespeare gave it a Warwickshire pronunciation, or was merging it with the more common water-word bubble, we cannot easily tell. Baubles and bubbles, froth on the water, were of course as light as the bauble reputation that soldiers and seamen sought even in the cannon's mouth, according to Jacques's seven ages speech. Perhaps Shakespeare pronounced the two words as one, a bubble becoming in his Warwickshire accent the more emphatic bauble. More commonly, we know that the second pronunciation is also the term Petruchio uses to describe Katherine's cap in *The Taming of the Shrew*. More suggestively it was also the routine word for the fool's stick, the clownish and sometimes erotic instrument that Robert Armin used as his ventriloquist's dummy for his solo acts. I would prefer the idea that Nestor is thinking of a bubble rather than a clown's stick, but either or both meanings are possible.

⁵ In this paper I have avoided discussing the multiple niceties of Shakespeare's own sense of world geography, since it is not intrinsically dependent on his own likely experience of voyaging. John Gillies (1994) opens this subject out very clearly. More recently, Lorena Laureano Dominguez (2009) has augmented the scope of Gillies' account very impressively.

The other quotation is from *Cymbeline* 3.1.27 (TLN 1402-1408), when the Queen tells her son about how feeble is Rome's demand of tribute from England:

A kind of Conquest
Caesar made heere, but made not heere his bragge
Of Came, and Saw, and Over-came: with shame
(the first that ever touch'd him) he was carried
From off our Coast, twice beaten: and his Shipping
(Poore ignorant Baubles) on our terrible Seas
Like Egge-shells mov'd upon their Surges, crack'd
As easily 'gainst our Rockes.

Here the triviality of the word when applied to Caesar's Roman ships, their fragility as egg-shells when confronted with England's rocky coast, makes the Queen's contemptuous dismissal quite obvious. The word that both of these eloquent and dismissive passages share is "Baubles." It fascinates me that Shakespeare should use such a trivializing term in these quotations as a recognizable description of the small seagoing craft that he probably used himself on his travels round England. In these two speeches about sea voyages he makes it in complex ways the most apt word for the light vessels, as fragile as an eggshell, both literal and metaphorical, that any group such as a company of players would have to ride in when they travelled around England. Such baubles, frail as they are, are not to be ignored.

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