

Female Transgression in Thomas Middleton's Women Beware Women

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ABSTRACT

Evil, sinful, weak, and lover of Satan are just a few adjectives used to describe women throughout history and the Jacobean age is no exception.

During the Jacobean age, a time in which women were thought to be incomplete human beings, soulless, and mere possessions of men, various women dare to challenge the idea of their inferiority in society's views. That matter leads to their transgression. The female issues and positions should have in a society convinced of her innate transgression are the chief among Thomas Middleton's concerns in his plays including Women Beware Women (1621).

The aim of the study is to trace the cases of female transgression with its relation to society's views and male supremacy in Thomas Middleton's Women Beware Women. The study deals with the definition of female transgression and the character of woman in the Jacobean age on the one hand, and in Middleton's Women Beware Women on the other hand. Then, it traces the female transgression which can be considered as a woman's refusal to submit to social norms and her attempt to achieve her goal by plotting and tricks. Finally, the study refers to the reasons behind women's transgressive acts in this play.

The study ends with Notes and a Bibliography.

تخطي الحدود عند المرأة في مسرحية (يا نساء احذرن النساء)) لتوماس مدلتن

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الخلاصة

الشريرة، و المذنبة، و الضعيفة، و حبيبة الشيطان هي مجرد صفات قليلة من صفات كثيرة مشابه لها اعتادت أن تنعت بها المرأة خلال التاريخ و لا يستثنى من ذلك العصر اليقوبي، وهي فترة حكم الملك جيمس الأول.

خلال العصر اليقوبي، حيث نظر إلى المرأة باحتقار على إنها كائن ناقص، خال من الروح، و مجرد جزء من ممتلكات الرجل، تجرأت بعض النساء من مختلف المستويات على تحدي فكرة كونهم اقل شأنًا من الرجال في نظر المجتمع. هذا الأمر دفعهم إلى تخطي الحدود. إن قضايا المرأة و المواقع التي يجب أن تحصل عليها في مجتمع يثق ثقة عمياء في قابليتها على تخطي الحدود بالفطرة هي إحدى مواضع اهتمام توماس مدلتن في مسرحياته و من ضمنها ((يا نساء احذرن النساء)) (1621).

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تتبع حالات تخطي الحدود عند المرأة و علاقته بوجهات نظر المجتمع و بسيادة الرجل في مسرحية ((يا نساء احذرن النساء)) لتوماس مدلتن. تتناول الدراسة تعريف تخطي الحدود عند المرأة، و شخصية المرأة في العصر اليقوبي من ناحية، و في مسرحية ((يا نساء احذرن النساء)) لمدلتن من ناحية أخرى. و من ثم تتبع تخطي الحدود عند المرأة الذي يمكن اعتباره رفض المرأة للخضوع للأعراف

الاجتماعية و محاولتها للحصول على أهدافها بالتآمر و الخدع. و أخيرا" تشير الدراسة إلى الأسباب التي أدت إلى تخطي النساء في هذه المسرحية. تنتهي الدراسة بقائمة الهوامش و قائمة المصادر.

Thomas Middleton believes that the Jacobean age is full of repression in which woman enjoys an inferior place to man. The humanist J. I. Vives describes woman in his book Instruction of a Christian Woman as "a frail thing, and of a weak discretion, that may be lightly deceived, which thing our first Mother Eve showeth whom the devil caught with a light argument".¹ Therefore, woman is given no right to lead an independent life in order to keep her chaste, obedient, silent, and shameful. That matter leads to her transgression which means a violation of social norms and moral codes. Female transgression is characterized by "resistance and aggressiveness in the struggle for life"² that leads to death in violence, i.e. the oppressed woman's attempt to look for more rights in order to control her own destiny results only in more oppression and unnaturalness because she must rely on a man to achieve her aims in life.

Jacobean women did not lead an independent life, outside of their obligations to their husbands and the running of their houses in general, i.e. "the woman is expressly formed to please the man".³ This is a reason behind their transgression which exposes their deteriorating state, and their hard struggle against the convictions of the society.

Middleton's plays, and the Jacobean drama as a whole, express their skepticism by questioning the existing moral order. Almost all Middleton's female characters seek to answer whether any moral limits do really exist. Female transgression can also be considered as a challenge to the persistent conception of the status of husband.

In the early seventeenth century, the husband was viewed as "the highest in the family, and has both authority over all and charge of all is committed to his charge; he is the king in his own house".⁴ This point was asserted by James I who encouraged husbands to have the whole control over their wives. Even after the reign of James I, the supremacy of man was dominant: "[a] man who is unchaste loses nothing in the eyes of the world. A woman who is unchaste is nothing".⁵

To study Women Beware Women (1621) is to focus on female transgression and its relation to male supremacy. Female transgression shapes the tenor of Middleton's world. It takes the form of rebellion against the patriarchal authority of man. Middleton frustrates the quest for male tragic transcendence through the transgression of his female characters and its consequences. As a result, there is a sort of female transcendence in the form of defiance. When Middleton's female characters transgress, they clearly violate a social norm and by no means violate a moral code. So, transgression, in his plays, is exhibited as an anti-moral. Moreover, Middleton's female characters show a lot of responsibility for their transgression.

Throughout the play, Middleton portrays a variety of female transgressions. One case of female transgression starts with Bianca's elopement with Leantio. Bianca transgresses by violating moral codes according to her society when she runs away from her parents and gets married to Leantio secretly. Leantio's mother is shocked by the news of her son's secret marriage to a rich girl. Leantio's mother foreshadows his fail marriage because it is an incompatible marriage. Bianca descends from a rich family and Leantio is poor.

Mother: Such a creature,
To draw her from her fortune, which no doubt,
At the full time, might have proved rich and noble:
You know not what you have done.
(I. i. 58-61)⁶

For Leantio, fortune is not an obstacle if the wife loves her husband. He goes on reproaching his mother not to teach Bianca to rebel:

Leantio: I pray do not you teach her to rebel,
When she's in a good way to obedience;
To rise with other women in commotion
Against their husbands,...
(I. i. 74-77)

Leantio's words show that woman is one of the reasons for the transgression of women.

Leantio's treatment to Bianca as one of his possessions leads to her transgression.

LeantioWithdraw you, Bianca,
Thou art a gem no stranger's eye must see,
Howev'r thou please now to look dull on me.
(III. i. 174-76)

Bianca is neglected by her husband who does not understand her needs.

Another case of female transgression Middleton shows in this play is through the character of Livia.

Livia represents a type of a transgressive woman. She is not obedient, silent, or shameful. Her disobedience and boldness are discovered through the conversation between Fabritio, her brother, and Guardiano who wants Fabritio's daughter, Isabella, to marry his nephew the foolish Ward. Fabritio's reply: "No matter — she shall love him" (I. ii.2) to Guardiano's question whether Isabella has ever known or seen the Ward before is fearlessly rejected by his sister Livia:

I must offend you then, if truth will do't,
And take my niece's part, and call't injustice
To force her love to one she never saw.
(I. ii. 29-31)

Livia is fearless enough to call her brother's reply "injustice"; whereas Isabella does not dare say a word except "Good father!" (I. ii. 79). Then she obeys silently. Her father does not even ask her whether she likes this proposal of marriage: he does not need to ask her about her opinion. Since she is a woman, she must obey her father. Since Fabritio likes the Ward because the latter is rich, Isabella must like him and marry him. This subjection is one of the reasons for Isabella's transgression: "Like him or like him not, wench, you shall have him, / And you shall love him." (I. ii. 131-132). Fabritio views love as something that

can be created to fit the need and if Isabella does not love the Ward now, perhaps she will do later. The money the Ward will bring to Fabritio is more important than love. In this case, love is replaced by money.

Fabritio: Tell me not of tongues and rumours!
You'll say the gentleman is somewhat simple___
The better for a husband, were you wise:
For those that marry fools, live ladies' lives.
On with the mask, I'll hear no more; he's rich:
The fool's hid under bushels.
(I. ii. 80-85)

Isabella can do nothing except complaining to her aunt:
How can I, being born with that obedience
That must submit unto a father's will?
If he command, I must of force consent.
(II. i. 86-88)

Livia, in return, motivates Isabella to revolt against her father:

Let it suffice, you may refuse this fool,
Or you may take him, as you see occasion
For your advantage: the best wits will do't.
Y' have liberty enough in your own will;
You cannot be enforced___ there grows the flowers,
If you could pick it out, makes whole life sweet to you.
That which you call your father's command's nothing:
Then your obedience must needs be as little.
If you can make shift here to taste your happiness,
Or pick out aught that likes you, much good do you.
You see your cheer, I'll make you no set dinner.
(II. i. 113-123)

Middleton clearly depicts Livia's transgression when she terribly lies to Isabella. Livia releases Isabella from blood relation that binds Isabella with Fabritio and his relatives: "You are no more allied to any of us" (II. i. 135). As a result, Isabella is encouraged to do what she likes without being afraid of Fabritio or paying attention to him.

Livia: How weak his commands now, whom you call father?
How vain all his enforcements, your obedience?
And what a largeness in your will and liberty
To take or to reject___ or to do both?
(II. i. 158-161)

What is worse is that Livia knows that Isabella and Hippolito love each other:

Livia: While you have called uncle;
And though you love him dearly, as I know
His deserts claim as much ev'n from a stranger,

(II. i. 171-173)

So, Livia's lie drives Isabella towards transgression (incest). It widens the love relationship between Isabella and Hippolito to be sexual.

Thus, Isabella's incest displays another case of female transgression in this play. Isabella goes to Hippolito's bed which is religiously forbidden even if Hippolito were not her uncle. And Isabella knows that. Yet, she follows the dictate of her own instinct with complete disregard to tradition and rank, and makes an incestuous relationship with Hippolito instead of avoiding this relationship; especially that she is the Ward's wife.

Isabella's exploitation of the Ward's foolishness is a case of female transgression Middleton shows in Women Beware Women. Isabella rebels against the restrictions of law and tradition, and allows herself to undermine marriage which binds her with the Ward when she makes use of his foolishness: "But that I have th' advantage of the fool/ As much as woman's heart can wish and joy at," (III. iii. 32-33) and uses her marriage to him as a cover for her relationship with Hippolito as it is illustrated by Hippolito:

This marriage now must of necessity forward:
It is only veil wit can devise
To keep our acts hid from sin- piercing eyes.
(II. i. 236-238)

Unknown to Isabella, Livia is plotting the affair and sees Isabella's virginity as an inconvenient obstacle: " __Who shows more craft t'undo a maiden,/I'll resign my part to her." (II. i. 176-179).

Once more and through the character of Livia, Middleton makes woman one of the reasons for the transgression of women. Livia "sees herself as the provider of all needs."⁷ This time, she plans for Bianca's seduction by the Duke in order to content the Duke. Hence, Bianca's seduction represents another case of Livia's transgression (immorality).

The idea of sin in blood can be applied to Livia who is "the agent of younger women's seduction".⁸ She uses a personal advancement and deceives the Mother in order to extend her bawdy activities. She invites the Mother to her house and uses this invitation as a means to bring Bianca to the Duke who is waiting for Bianca in Livia's house. The Mother makes a mistake when she accepts Livia's invitation and leaves Bianca alone at home. She makes another mistake when she brings Bianca to Livia's house. And she miscalculates a third time, though she is old enough to know better, when she allows Bianca to wonder around the house alone with Guardiano whom she does not know to see the monument of Livia's house. The Mother is deceived. She trusts Livia and Livia is not trustworthy. Livia's sentence: "Alas, poor widow, I shall be too hard for thee" (II. ii. 295), immediately after the departure of Bianca with Guardiano, gives the impression that she really means the Mother since it is she who deceives her whereas apparently Livia seems to talk about the chess game she is playing with the Mother.

Confronted by the Duke, Bianca is shocked and terrified because she is rational enough to realize that the Duke wants to seduce her: "Oh treachery to honour!" (II. ii. 321). It is a turning point in Bianca's life when "the supposed 'monument' (II. ii. 227) turns out to be a living duke"⁹, and in this art place her seduction takes place. Middleton wants to point out that even art, beauty, and

nature are usurped by man's greed and selfishness. His greed and selfishness are also the reasons behind female transgression. The Duke promises Bianca of wealth, honour, power, and pleasure:

Duke: But I give better in exchange__ wealth, honour.
She that is fortunate in a duke's favour
Lights on a tree that bears all women's wishes.
(II. ii. 370-372)

The most striking thing is Bianca's "eventual appeal to him".¹⁰ This means that love is replaced by money for the second time, and this is another case of female transgression. It is shown through Bianca's relationship with the Duke. Her seduction by the Duke may or may not be rape, but she certainly has very little control over her situation. The Duke leads her a way through talking of the riches he will give her for her compliance: "But I give better in exchange__ wealth, honour" (II. i. 370). Bianca likes not only the Duke's promises of wealth and pleasure which she lacks in Leantio's house or i.e. in Leantio's incarceration, but also the shelter that the Duke offers after collapsing Leantio's shelter under the Duke's greater power since the Duke's shelter seems stronger than Leantio's.¹¹

After seduction, Bianca's transgression increases. She is bold now as she says: "I'm made bold now," (II. ii. 440) and she grumbles about everything in the house: "This is the strangest house" (III. i. 16) as if it were not the same house. Even her demands increase. Bianca's acceptance to go with the Duke's messenger to the Duke's banquet at Livia's home represents the slow corruption working within her individual. Leantio is shocked how, when, and where the Duke sees and knows Bianca though he warns his mother not to let Bianca be seen by anyone. He looks at Bianca as an "unvalued'st purchase" (I. i. 13) and her chastity and virtues as "jewels kept in cabinets" (I. i. 56). This objectification is another reason for Bianca's transgression (going too far in her ambition). Unfortunately, "in spite of his care for her, Leantio's jewel is stolen by characters who are provided with a much witter sense of the real relations involved in sexual exchanged".¹²

Another case of Bianca's transgression is that when Bianca not only disobeys her husband and goes to the banquet but also when she sits beside the Duke without paying attention to Leantio, the Mother, and all those who are invited to the banquet. She is proud that she is the Duke's new mistress. She even allows him to kiss her before her husband: "A kissing too? / I see 'tis plain lust now, adultery boldened." (III. ii. 37-38).

Bianca goes too far in her transgression to the extent that she leaves her husband's house to live in the Duke's house (adultery). By doing so, she "cuts her ties to morality of her youth".¹³ She is happy there: "How strangely woman's fortune comes about! / This was the farthest way to come to me," (IV. i. 23-24) with money, power, and servants to serve her. She also "pride of her promiscuous sexual life, which she regards as freedom".¹⁴ Her happiness does not last for she sees Leantio as rich as herself. He is Livia's lover in exchange for her financial support. He also accepts to be Livia's lover as "a kind of revenge, and an attempt to live a more sophisticated life and to keep up with Bianca".¹⁵ Livia gives him what he likes: money, the finest clothes,...etc. and makes him a

gentleman. Once more, love is replaced by money. And by that Middleton's aim in "connect[ing] the world of money with the world of love, and ...demonstrating how they interpenetrate, so that love becomes mercenary lust",¹⁶ is made more explicit in this play.

Though Bianca is not afraid of Leantio: "Get you gone first, and then I fear no greater___/ Nor thee will I fear long!" (IV. i. 104-105), Leantio's relationship with Livia arouses her envy and jealousy. So Bianca, motivated by hatred and jealousy towards Livia, complains to the Duke against Leantio:

Bianca: Cry you mercy, sir.

.....

He [Leantio] comes vaunting here of his new love
And the new clothes she gave him___ Lady Livia,
Who but she now his mistress!

(IV. i. 110, 114-116)

Bianca's complaint to the Duke against Leantio which leads to the latter's death is a typical example of female transgression (corruption morally and religiously) in this play. The Duke who finds in Leantio's relationship with Livia his chance to get rid of Leantio tells Hippolito about it in order to provoke Hippolito to do what is good to save the honour of his family. In this way, the Duke will indirectly get rid of Leantio to be able to marry Bianca and to content the Cardinal; his brother who rebukes him severely for the moral wrong he has done which is staying with Bianca without marriage.

Hippolito, motivated by anger, fights Leantio and strikes him to death. Livia, in revenge for Leantio, reveals the incestuous relationship between Isabella and Hippolito. Livia confesses that she deceives Isabella: "'T was I betrayed thy honour subtilly to him/ Under a false tale;" (IV. ii. 73-74). Though she does not mention the motivations that drive her to do so, Livia's words: "it lights upon me now!" (IV. ii. 74) suggest that she takes advantage of it now to have her vengeance for Leantio's death. As for her real intention, it is as Mel Gussow interprets: "victimized in a male_dominated society, women act as their own enemies. Livia,..., allows herself to become a procuress for her brother and for the Duke of Florence."¹⁷

Livia's vengeance for Leantio's death against Hippolito leads to Isabella's vengeance against Livia:

Isabella: If the least means but favour my revenge,
That I may practice the like cruel cunning,
Upon her life, as she has on mine honour,
I'll act it without pity.

(IV. ii. 144-147)

Both of them make use of the masque performed for the marriage of the Duke and Bianca and kill each other. Livia is killed by Isabella with poisoned fumes and Isabella is killed by Livia with poisoned darts. Livia's and Isabella's vengeance and murder to each other represent another typical case of female transgression in Women Beware Women.

Bianca makes no difference in vengeance and murder. Her plan to poison an innocent person, the Cardinal whose accusation is that he wants her to repent and live gracefully can also be described as a great transgression: "Cardinal, you die this night; the plot's laid surely:/ In time of sports death may steal in securely." (V. ii. 21-22). For her misfortune and by mistake, the poisoned cup is drunk by the Duke. While she is waiting for the Cardinal's death: "Not yet? no change? when falls he to the earth?" (V. ii. 173), Bianca is shocked by the Duke's dying of poison instead of the Cardinal. With the Duke's death, all Bianca's expectations die as well. All people are strangers to her except Leantio and the Duke, and both of them are dead now. Consequently, she chooses death as her refuge to end her agony. Raising the poisoned "cup of love" (V. ii. 219) to her lips and drinks from it as a means to end her life is a decisive moment in which she admits that she deserves what happens to her. It is the result of her transgression (going too far in her ambition). She regrets her transgression and she is penitent now: "Leantio, now I feel the breach of marriage/ At my heart-breaking!" (V. ii. 208-209). For Bianca, suicide represents her expiation, but in reality it does not acquit her of her crimes. Nevertheless, in her acceptance of death as the punishment she deserves, Bianca represents a yearning of human spirit for peace, completion, and freedom from mortal flaws.

Middleton's major female characters may indeed repeat the historic transgression of Eve. They are frequently manipulative and scheme to achieve their goals. They express uninhibitedly affections as part of their own independent will, and they attempt to escape a hierarchical authority. They are no longer the silent, chaste, and obedient women of the earlier drama. But their transgression does not bring the downfalls of humanity. It rather discloses the limitations of moral and social codes. For this reason, their transgression is more a violation of man's convention than of God's laws.

Hence, Middleton's sensitivity to issues about women is reflected in his plays which show that the treatment of women as objectifications and possessions is a main reason for female transgression. This is due to the fact that this treatment allows fathers to limit their daughters' choice of husbands as in the case with Fabritio when he obliges his young beautiful daughter to marry a foolish and grotesque man, the Ward. Sometimes, in a marriage like that "adultery is one way for a woman to preserve her self-respect"¹⁸ and that exactly what happens to Isabella.

Leantio also treats Bianca as his own treasure: "As often as I look upon that treasure, /And know it to be mine__ there lies the blessing__" (I. i. 14-15) and keeps her at home. Because he marries her, Leantio thinks of her as a possession. He thinks that he can forget about her to some extent and leaves her in the house as one might leave a purchase in the cupboard until it is needed. It is this disregard for her as a complete human being with a soul and feelings that leads to her infidelity and their eventual downfall. Bianca finds in adultery her only weapon of vengeance against the wrongs of Leantio.¹⁹

Also, the notion that women are just pawns for the advancement of those who can manipulate them and exist as objects for the gratification of men which is plainly mirrored in this play, is another main reason for female transgression.

The problems of female transgression in Middleton's world cannot be blamed entirely on the oppressive patriarchal society, however; they fail on the major moral decision that is allowed to them, namely, choosing marriage and remaining faithful to it. In Women Beware Women, the female characters are

unhesitatingly and obdurately uncompromising, and impulsively lead a life of their own. They display a trust in human instinct as opposed to vain religious ceremonies, and rigid social strictures.

Bianca, Livia, and Isabella suffer from inordinate passions that lead to their transgressive acts. Their refusal to accept the dictates of their society results in scathing and outbursts of defiance.

Bianca's beauty, which is supposed to be a source of spiritual refinement and virtue, turns to be the prime motive for temptation and evil.

Moved by her beauty, the Duke corrupts Bianca playing on her passion for love, ambition, and pride.

Middleton explores the impact of passionate love on a deeper level, showing how even an essentially virtuous and noble lady is instinctively led by passion to irresponsible social conducts. Isabella flouts social decorum by deceiving her husband, the Ward. Moreover, she stands defiantly against the power of religion when she makes an incestuous relationship with her uncle, Hippolito.

Middleton also reveals through Livia, the effect of irrepressible passions to subvert the deepest and most natural bonds which are paramount in the rational and ethical law of nature.

Private revenge is also central to the motivations that lead to female transgression in Women Beware women. Isabella and Livia seek revenge against each other, the matter which leads to their death. Bianca wreaks vengeance on Leantio and the Cardinal which leads to her death in despair.

The female characters in Middleton's Women Beware women are no longer bystanders in a world run by men. Their power is derived mainly from their individual detachment from that world, but their little control over their passions and lives lead to their transgression morally and religiously.

NOTES

¹J. I. Vived as cited in William G. Dwyer, A Study of John Webster's Use of Renaissance Natural and Moral Philosophy. Jacobean Drama Studies, no. 18 (Salzburge University, 1973), p. 29.

²Helena Deutsch, The Psychology of Women (London: Research Books Ltd., 1947), p. 194.

³John Langdon-Davies, A Short History of Women (New York: The Viking Press, 1927), p.338.

⁴Kathleen Davis, "The Sacred Condition of Equality-how original were Puritan doctrines of marriage," Social History, 15, 1977), p. 566.

⁵Juliet Dusinberre, Shakespeare and the Nature of Women (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p. 53.

⁶Thomas Middleton, Women Beware Women, ed. Roma Gill (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1968). All subsequent quotations from this play are taken from this edition and enclosed within the text in parentheses.

⁷Liza Hopkins, "Middleton's Women Beware Women and the Mothering

Principle," (March 1998. [URL:http://www.geocities.com/katacheson/middle-hop.htm](http://www.geocities.com/katacheson/middle-hop.htm).) April 28, 2004, p. 10 of 13.

⁸Una Ellis-Fermor, The Jacobean Drama (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1936; 2nd edition 1947), p. 140.

⁹Liza Hopkins, "Art and Nature in Women Beware Women," (1996. URL: [http://www.renaissance %forum htm](http://www.renaissance%forum.htm).) April 28, 2004, p. 1 of 8.

¹⁰John D. Jump, "Middleton's Tragedies, in The Pelican Guide to English Literature. Vol. 2: The Age of Shakespeare, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 359.

¹¹Leonardo Leet Brodwin, Elizabethan Love Tragedy (1587-1625) (University of London Press, 1972), p. 323.

¹²Kathleen Mcluskie, Renaissance Dramatists (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 128.

¹³Richard A. Levin, "If Women Should Beware Women, Bianca Should Beware Mother," (1997. [URL:http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=O&se=gglsc&d5000G1377.htm](http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=O&se=gglsc&d5000G1377.htm).) April 1, 2008, p. 7 of 9.

¹⁴Helena Deutsch, p. 292.

¹⁵Nicholas Brooke, Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy (London: Open Books Publishing Limited, 1979), p. 104.

¹⁶Christopher Ricks, "Word-Play in Women Beware Women," The Review of English Studies, Vol. XII (1961), p. 238.

¹⁷Mel Gussow, "Stage: Women Beware Women, Update of Jacobean Play," (March 1987. URL: <http://www.theater2.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.htm>) April 1, 2008, p. 1 of 2.

¹⁸Juliet Dusinberre, p. 124.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 303.

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