

Sophia Plowden, Khanum Jan, and their Hindustani airs

Katherine Butler Schofield

This guest post by [Katherine Butler Schofield](#) was originally published on the [British Library Asian and African Studies blog](#) to accompany the podcast “[The Courtesan and the Memsahib](#)” produced by Chris Elcombe with music by harpsichordist Jane Chapman. It is part of a series of presentations at the British Library in 2018 for my British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship programme “[Histories of the Ephemeral: Writing on Music in Late Mughal India](#)” Special thanks to the [Fitzwilliam Museum](#), Cambridge, for permission to reproduce the images below from Sophia Plowden’s song collection, MS 380.



Mrs Sophia Elizabeth Plowden in middle age. MSS Eur F127/100.

Among the British Library’s extraordinary collection of materials relating to the history of Indian music in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries lie dozens of European accounts of the *nautch*—intimate musical parties at which troupes of high-status North Indian courtesans would sing, dance, recite poetry, and match wits with the assembled company, often to mark special occasions like marriages or festivals. In the late Mughal and early colonial period, *nautch* troupes were employed as enthusiastically by Europeans as by Indian gentlemen. This famous painting from the Library’s collections in Image 1 shows a man who is almost certainly Sir David Ochterlony, early nineteenth-century British Resident to the Mughal emperor, being entertained by his own personal *nautch* troupe at his home in Delhi.



Image 1: David Ochterlony (1758–1825) watching a nautch. Delhi, 1820. Add Or 2.

instances of colonial violence to Indian culture. But recently I have been investigating a number of sources from the Indian side for this and similar musical engagements with Europeans in the late eighteenth century. These suggest that the episode was more complex, mutually enjoyable, and less morally certain.

At a time of heightened debate over the ethics of empire, it is important to keep in mind that sharing a moment of musical harmony was not why Plowden and her compatriots were in Lucknow. The British were there to pursue a colonial project designed to benefit themselves; and less than seventy years later in 1856, the East India Company would use the last Nawab of Lucknow's attentions to exactly the same kind of music as their primary excuse to depose him—a major grievance that fed into the horrendous tragedy of the 1857 Indian Uprising. At the same time, viewing Plowden's efforts from the perspective of the Indian musicians who engaged with her and others like her in the 1780s reveals the Hindustani *Airs* episode to have been a two-way affair of mutual curiosity and delight in musical minutiae— an open exploration of affinities and possibilities through trained bodily proficiencies, rather than a closing of ears to offensive differences. The wider historical ramifications of the mutually pleasurable liminal space of the *nautch* are thus ambiguous and unsettled.

The most important of the Indian sources for the Hindustani *Airs* are the loose-leaf folios of poetry in Persian, Urdu (then called *rekhta*), Punjabi, and other Indian languages that Sophia Plowden brought back with her from India alongside the tunes she wrote down from live *nautch* performances. These are held together as MS 380 in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, and are an invaluable counterpart to her other papers in the British Library. Until recently, because of the exquisite illustrations garnishing each one, the loose-leaf folios were mischaracterised as a set of miniature paintings. But through painstaking detective work, I have identified them instead as the lyrics that go with the tunes. I have also managed to put about a quarter of them back together for the first time in over 200 years. The question then is—is it possible to bring them back to life?



Image 3: Urdu mukhammas “Kya kam kya dil ne” by Sauda (1713–81). Above—Plowden *Album* f. 12; below— *Tunebook* f. 21v. Lucknow, 1787–8. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 380.



Join me and harpsichordist Jane Chapman as we retell the story of the entangled lives of these two extraordinary women musicians, Khanum Jan and Sophia Plowden, in the “Courtesan and the Memsahib” [podcast](#)—of a world in which an Indian courtesan could be treated like a celebrity London opera singer and an Englishwoman made a Mughal Begum by none other than the Emperor Shah ‘Alam II

himself. Throughout, we explore the question—philosophically and practically through our own musical experiments—of whether it is possible to reconstruct the songs of the Lucknow court as both Sophia and Khanum may have performed them in the 1780s.

The images in this blogpost accompany the podcast, and will help guide you in your journey with us to the underworld of the Indian musical past, as we seek to discover whether or not it is ever possible for Orpheus to bring Eurydice back from the dead.

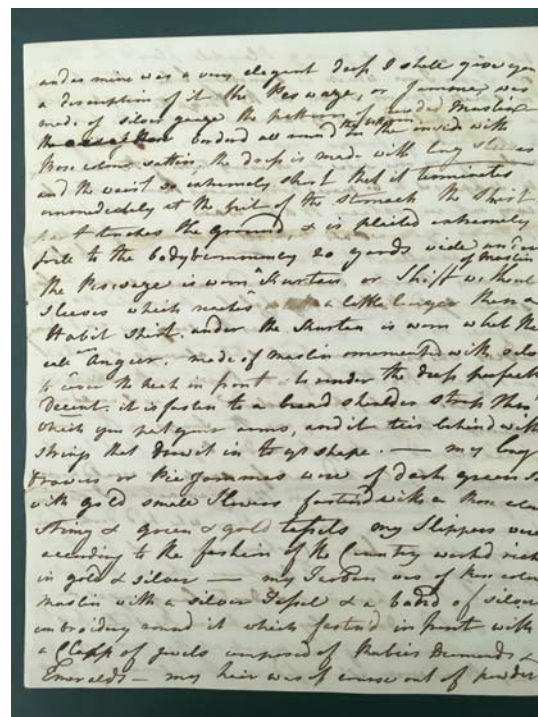
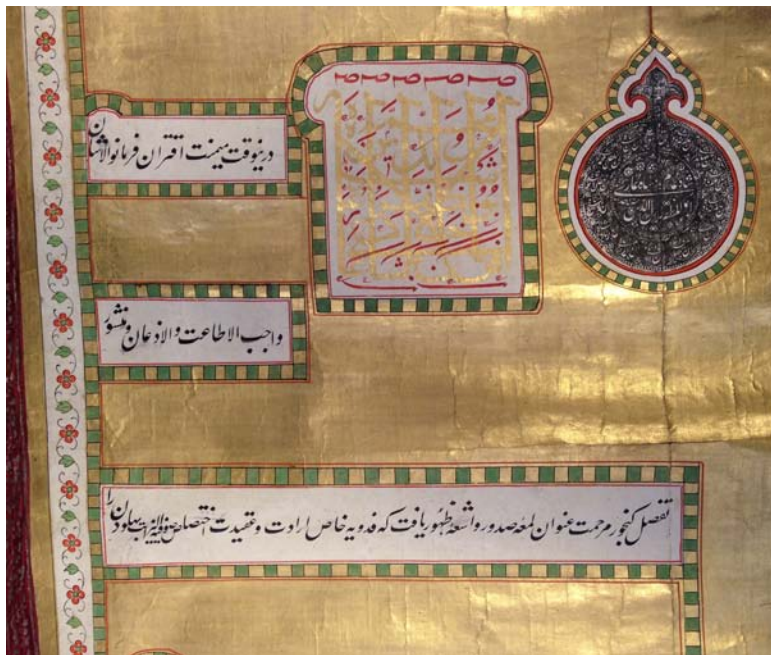


Image 4.1: The dress of a Lucknow courtesan. Plowden *Album* f. 25, detail. Lucknow, 1787–8. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 380.

Image 4.2: Sophia's letter to her sister Lucy describing in detail the dress made for her to appear as a courtesan in a Calcutta masquerade. Calcutta, 4/4/1783. MSS Eur B 187.



[This painting](#) by an anonymous Indian painter after Johan Zoffany is likely to be of Khanum Jan dancing before Colonial Antoine Polier, and is a beautiful depiction of a Lucknow courtesan's dress. Lucknow, 1786–88. Bequest Balthasar Reinhart, Museum Rietberg Zürich, 2005.83.

Image 5: Detail of the royal *farman* (order) from Emperor Shah 'Alam II making Mrs Plowden a Begum. I O 4439.



Image 6: Anonymous Persian *ruba'i* “*Saqi’a fasl-i bahar ast: mubarak bashad*” (see also Image 2 above). Above—Plowden *Album* f. 8; below—*Tunebook* f. 14v. Lucknow, 1787–8. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 380.



Image 7: Anonymous Urdu *khayal* “of the snake charmers” “*Sun re ma’shuqa be-wafa*” (see also Image 2 above). Above—Plowden *Album* f. 8; below—*Tunebook* f. 14v. Lucknow, 1787–8. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 380.



Image 8: Asafuddaula is entertained by musicians at court. Lucknow, c.1812. Add Or 2600.

Possibly the most famous image of Europeans in Asafuddaula's Lucknow is Zoffany's painting of [Colonel Mordaunt's Cock Match](#), now in Tate Britain. Note the courtesans in the back left.



Image 9.1: Two Punjabi *tappas*. Plowden *Album* f. 25. Lucknow, 1787–8. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 380.

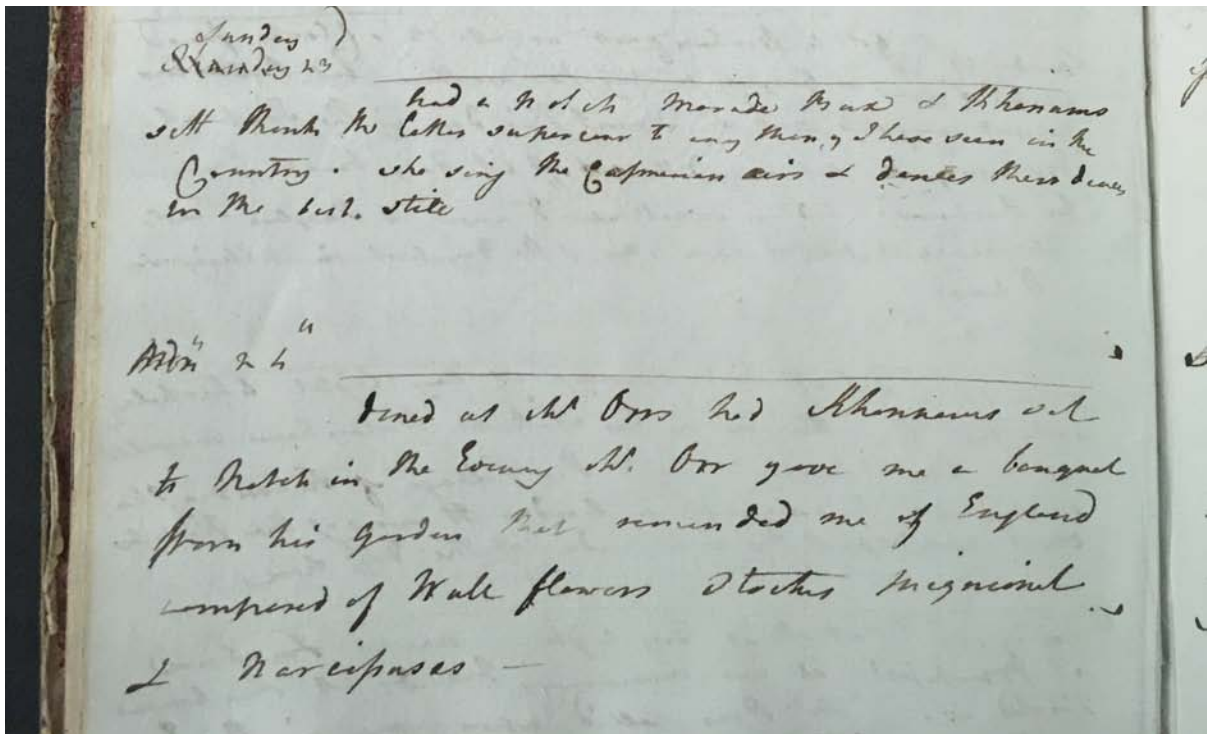


Image 9.2: Entry in Sophia's diary for 23rd December 1787: her first encounter with Khanum Jan. Mss Eur F127.94



Image 10. Painting of Colonel James Skinner's *nautch* troupe, given as a souvenir to a European visitor. Delhi, c. 1838. Add Or 2598.

Image 11. [Colonel William Blair](#) and his family in India with his daughter Jane at the pianoforte. Johan Zoffany, 1786. Tate Britain.

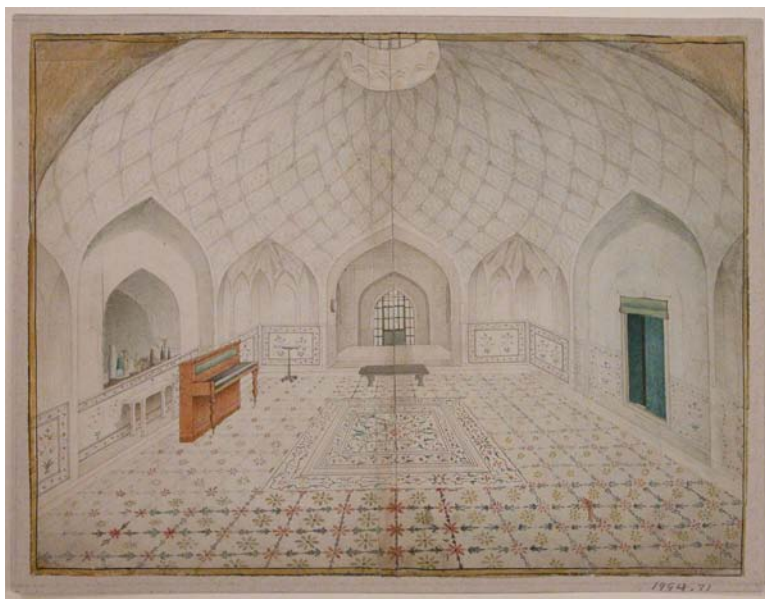


Image 12: An upright piano in the *ghusal-khana* (hammam) in the Red Fort, Delhi, c. 1830–40.

Traditionally, the *ghusal-khana* was where the Mughal emperors held their most intimate musical gatherings. Louis E and Theresa S Seley Purchase Fund for Islamic Art, 1994. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC, 1994. 71.



Image 13.1: Illustration for James Skinner's entry on the "bazigar" or conjurors. *Tashrih al-Aqwam*. Delhi, 1825. Add 27,255. Compare with Image 7.

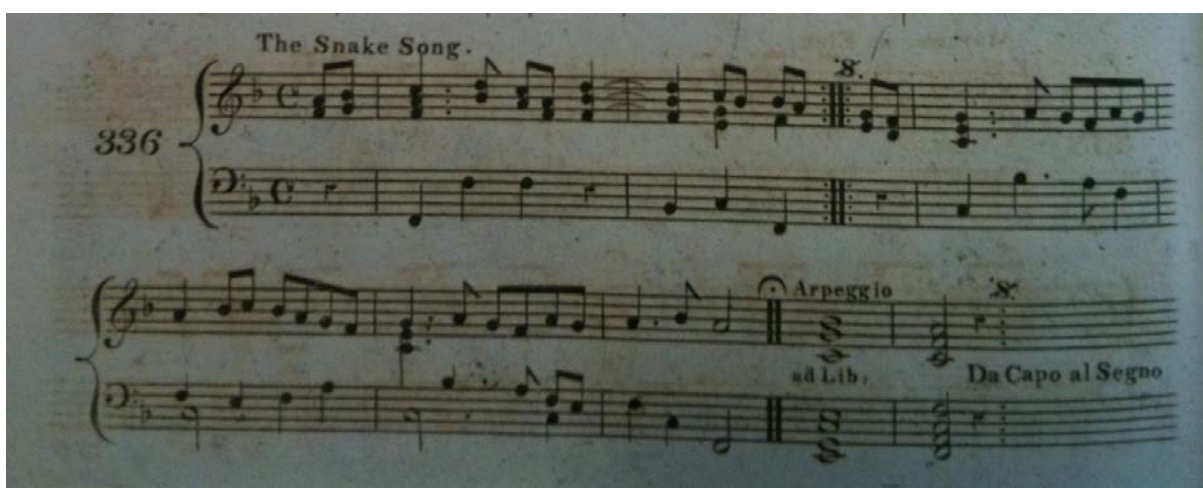


Image 13.2: Crotch's specimen no. 336, "the song with which the natives charm the snakes." Published London, 1807. Music Collections h.344.



Image 14.1: Persian *ghazal* by Hafiz (1310–79) “*Mutrib-i khush-nava be-go: taza ba taza no ba no*”. Above—Plowden *Album* f. 1; below—*Tunebook* f. 12r. Lucknow, 1787–8. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 380.



R E K H T A H .

Matru be khoosh nuwa bego. —

Chanam.

O do not ask whence springs my sadness.

Air IV.

Andante

Soprano 1^{mo}
O do not ask whence springs my sadness, but let me still the

Soprano 2^{do}
O do not ask whence springs my sadness, but let me still the

Basso
O do not ask whence springs my sadness, but let me still the

Piano Forte

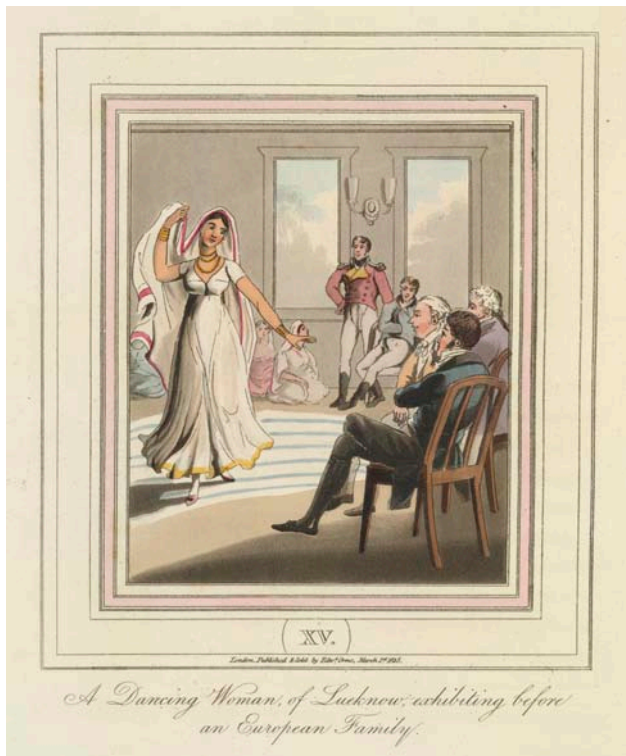
Andante

secret keep, Nor ask why I in restless madness, pass the long hours once

secret keep, Nor ask why I in restless madness, pass the long hours once

secret keep, Nor ask why I in restless madness, pass the long hours once

Image 14.2: Air IV from Biggs & Opie *A second set of Hindoo airs*. P/W 98.



A Dancing Woman, of Lucknow, exhibiting before an European Family.

Image 15. “A dancing woman of Lucknow, exhibiting before an European family,” by Charles D’Oyly. Plate from Thomas Williamson, *The costume and customs of modern India*, published London, c.1824. X 380.

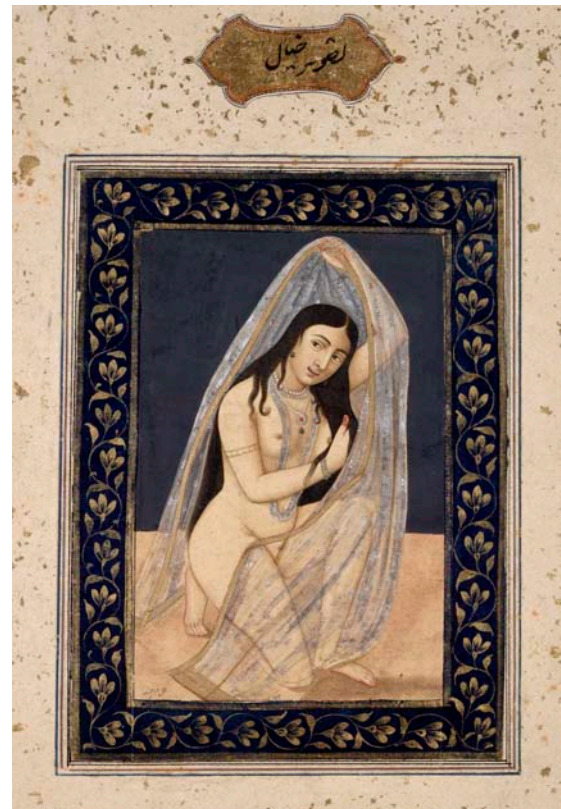


Image 16. Lucknow artist Mihr Chand’s painting of a fantasy courtesan, modelled on a European nude. Awadh, c. 1765–70. J. 66,2

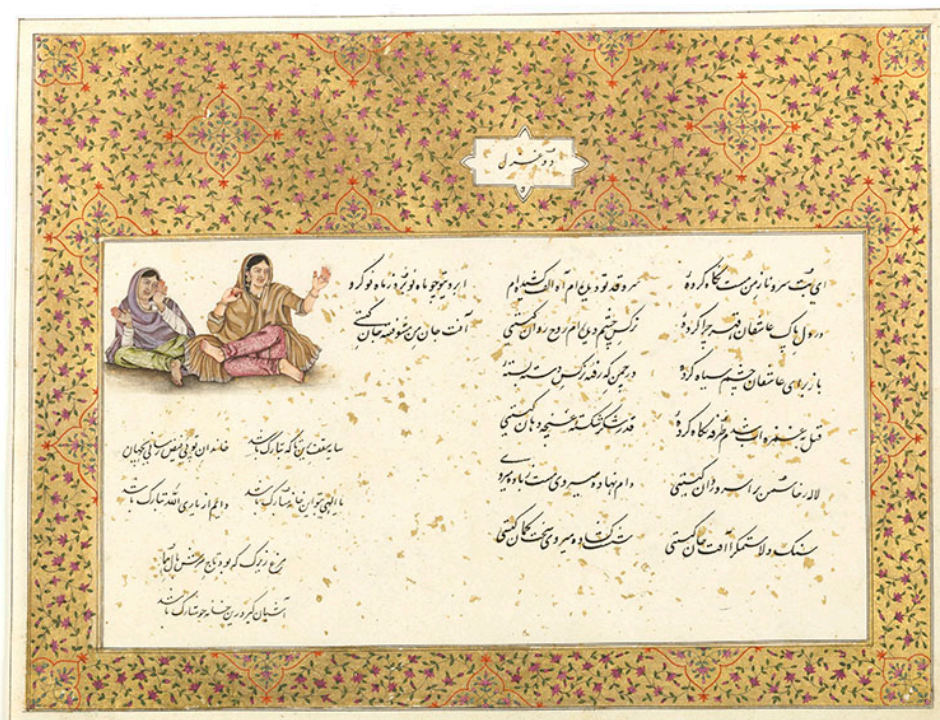


Image 17. Persian *ghazal* by or in homage to Khaqani (1122–90) “*Surwi ruwani kisti*”. Above—Plowden *Album* f. 11; below—*Tunebook* f. 19r. Lucknow, 1787–8. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, MS 380.



Credits:

This article was written by Katherine Butler Schofield in 2018. It, and the podcast it accompanies, are part of the project “Histories of the Ephemeral: Writing on Music in Late Mughal India,” sponsored by the British Academy in association with the British Library; for more episodes and information email katherine.schofield@kcl.ac.uk.

The Courtesan and the Memsahib was written and performed by Katherine Butler Schofield with harpsichordist [Jane Chapman](#) and produced by [Chris Elcombe](#) in 2018. Additional voices were Georgie Pope, Kanav Gupta, Priyanka Basu, and Michael Bywater.

Recordings of vocalists Kesarbai Kerkar and Gangubai Hangal, and sarangi player Hamid Hussain, are courtesy of the Archive of Indian Music and Vikram Sampath.

Selections from Jane Chapman’s studio recording “The Oriental Miscellany: Airs of Hindustan—William Bird” are found on Signum Classics: I. Ghat; II. Rekhtah: Sakia! Fusul beharust; III. Tuppah: Kia kam keea dil ne?

Santoor and Tabla at Assi Ghat, Varanasi by Samuel Corwin. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence CC BY 4.0.

Track 1 by Deep Singh and Ikhlāq Hussain Khan. Originally broadcast live on Rob Weisberg’s show, Transpacific Sound Paradise on WFMU. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial Share-alike 3.0 Licence.

[Image of Khanum Jan](#) illustrating the podcast. The original is Bequest Balthasar Reinhart, Museum Rietberg Zürich, 2005.83.

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