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## The Communications Circuit of *Paradise Lost*

### Introduction

When Milton set out to write *Paradise Lost*, he did so in order to “justify the ways of God to man” (*Paradise Lost* 1.26), but what was the context of this within the political framework of the day? How did *Paradise Lost* seek to redefine the Christian tradition in more progressive terms? How was contemporary response gauged, and what were the results of Milton’s controversial text? By exploring *Paradise Lost* through Darnton’s communications circuit, one comes to understand the importance of this literary epic, and how Milton’s magnum opus was instrumental in fomenting socio-political revolution.

In Stanley Fish’s text *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, he identifies two primary interpretive traditions. 1: “Disobedience of God is the source of all evil and the content of all error; obedience to God brings happiness and the righteous life” (Fish ix). 2: “Disobedience of God is a positive act that rescues mankind from an unvarying routine of mindless genuflection and makes possible the glorious and distinctively human search for self-knowledge and knowledge of the truth” (Fish x). Variation depends on who the reader sees as the hero of the text, and debate has raged on for centuries as to Milton’s conception behind

this work. This essay seeks to define not only the contributing factors to Milton's work, but how public response was gauged and how *Paradise Lost* contributed to philosophical thinking throughout the centuries.

## Theoretical Focus and Rationale

I've recently divulged on the "Milton to Milton" exhibit, facilitated by the Rutgers Department of Special Collections and University Archives, which ran between the months of October through February of 2018. The collection encompassed the personal library of the late Dr. J. Milton French, and included personally-authored reference works as well as the rare manuscripts of John Milton and his contemporaries, including first through fifth editions of *Paradise Lost*. In past studies, I chose to focus on the fourth edition of *Paradise Lost* in particular, which was adorned with engraved illustrations and was the first folio print.

Milton scholars have often comprised the schools of theology and the humanities, and have together contributed to the analysis of one of the world's most heavily-annotated texts. However, scholars haven't reached a consensus on the specificity of Milton's characters and his thoughts behind the text's composition. Additionally, a concise and thorough circuit of communications has yet to emerge of *Paradise Lost*. In other words, there is a lack of sufficient evidence behind the legacy of *Paradise Lost*, which follows it from its initial transmission to the publisher to the present day. I believe my essay will service the society of Milton scholarship by providing the reader with an all-encompassing, albeit slightly-abridged retrospective.

## Historical Context

Milton's text can in many ways correlate with the political climate of the day, depending upon one's reflection on reading. Milton scholar Gabriel Roberts writes: "On the one hand, we can examine the stylistic and argumentative similarities between sections of *Paradise Lost* and Milton's more explicitly political writings," implying a Republican ideology behind the text's composition. The poem can also be read as allegory, "which is to say that events and characters in *Paradise Lost* can be aligned with aspects of the political context of the poem's creation" (Roberts).

Thus, many scholars consider the work to be a response to England's political climate, and the failing of the Commonwealth which Milton so greatly contributed to. The seventeenth century had been a period of vast turmoil for Britons. The English Civil War occurred about midway through the century, and King Charles' later break with Parliament led to a new response in thinking about governmental leaders. As Gabriel Roberts would write: "There were many factors contributing to the tension between the Crown and Parliament...But the most interesting were the ideological questions being raised about the nature of government and authority" (Roberts). The monarchy was fundamentally breaking down, and lending way toward democracy. Additionally, English citizens were brainstorming new methods of leadership.

Why is Charles generally assumed to be a poor leader? His marriage to the catholic Henrietta-Maria of France and subsequent urge to become involved in European affairs would increase tensions on an already strained relationship with Parliament. Add this to the diminished power Parliament held in running the country, and Charles' regular intervention into Parliament

affairs, including calling it to issue taxes when in need of money (Roberts), and you had a political powderkeg ready to explode.

In other words, the people were ready for a new ruler, but doing so required vast change, for Charles subscribed to the “divine right of kings,” and by this decree believed he was appointed by God in order to purport autonomous rule. However, humanistic objection arose over his method of ruling. “Much of Parliament believed that the king had a contractual obligation to the people to rule without tyranny” (Roberts). Contributing factors included his levying of “illegal taxes” and persistence in the reinstatement of Catholic rule. He was executed for treason in 1649.

During this time, Milton’s political tract “On the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce” received much public disdain. In 1644, a sermon condemned the tract before Parliament which resulted in a petition by the Stationers’ Company against Milton’s work. He would publish “Concerning Divorce” after these proceedings. Milton himself was summoned before the House of Lords but dismissed. All of Milton’s political tracts were seen as extremely controversial and readily fought by religious factions. Subsequent tracts included *Areopagitica* and *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, among others, and many scholars believe his tracts are crucial to the understanding of the relationship between Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* (Roberts).

The following years saw the construction of the English Commonwealth, a period of Republican rule. Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector in 1653, and his son succeeded him in 1658, who ruled until Charles II was declared King during the Restoration of 1660. During the English Commonwealth, Milton was appointed as Secretary for the Foreign Tongues, a position which distinguished him with some prestige. The Restoration, however, saw him retreat into

hiding. On June 16th, 1660, the reformed Parliament sought to arrest Milton and burn his tracts *Defensio pro populo Anglicano* and *Eikonoklastes*. The Act of Indemnity would pardon Milton's past treason, but still placated him until his defense by Andrew Marvell in December of that same year.

This would all culminate in Milton's 1667 publication of *Paradise Lost*. Milton's narrow escape from the tendrils of Charles II's "justice system" would provide the foundation for readers of *Paradise Lost*. Within the text, Satan is a political refugee recently fled from the nepotistic ruling class in Heaven. Some see *Paradise Lost* as Milton's apology for past infractions; however, "at a slightly more general level he [Satan] can even be seen to represent the failure of any political discourse in this period, and of religious culture which attempts to exist apart from divine authority and biblical revelation" (Roberts). Despite the failed revolution, Milton's text is firmly rooted in politics and encouraged sophic political meditation.

## Methods of Data Collection

I employed various modes of research in order to divulge on the communications circuit of *Paradise Lost*. I've included introductions from various editions authored by Milton scholars. I've included reviews of Milton's works, both fiction and nonfiction. I've included analyses on the implications of *Paradise Lost*, both in a religious and political context. I've included analysis of Milton's style, which helps us to understand the significance of his language. I've included the historiography of *Paradise Lost*'s transmission; or how the publishing rights were acquired and in what ways this influenced perception of the text.

Perhaps what's most surprising about *Paradise Lost* is its relatively slow rise to fame. *Paradise Lost* initially didn't see much success until its reprinting by publisher Jacob Tonson as a folio edition, nearly twenty years after first being published. Mr. Tonson was instrumental in *Paradise Lost*'s rise to a national epic. Tonson and other publishers contributed to the analysis and annotation which supplements Milton's works. I would use the estate of Milton and the legacy of *Paradise Lost* in order to develop the foundation for this research.

## Historiography of Transmission

In understanding more about Milton's masterwork, I tracked the literary epic between the period of its first publication as well as those exchanges of copyright which occurred some years later. It was initially published by London-based Samuel Simmons in 1667. As many as six specialists were used to set the type for the first edition. The contract stipulated Milton be paid five pounds upon receipt of the manuscript, followed by another five pounds for the first thirteen hundred copies sold, and an additional 5 pounds after the sale of a second edition. During this period, the title pages were changed as many as five times (Kerrigan).

John Dryden sought to amend the text into a heroic opera in 1674, which William Kerrigan believes prompted an octavo edition in July of that same year. This work included prefatory poems by Samuel Barrow and Andrew Marvell and also involved a shift from ten to twelve books. The second edition was the last over which Milton exerted control. Kerrigan asserts there are 37 substantive differences between the first and second edition, but this number is increased to over 800 when including issues of spelling and punctuation.

A third edition was published in 1678, but printing rights were sold to Brabazon Aylmer in 1680, who then distributed these rights to a publisher in Dryden's firm named Jacob Tonson. Tonson was *Paradise Lost's* chief innovator, who spurred the text to the position of national epic, and included in his 4th edition illustrations, a frontispiece portrait of Milton, and an epigram by John Dryden. Later editions would see explanatory notes, and *Paradise Lost* would see status as the most heavily-annotated English language poem.

Other editions of note include an unusually notorious edition by Richard Bentley in 1732, which he believes had "purified textual corruption" (Kerrigan xii). Thomas Newton would issue a two-volume variorum in 1749 with "copious and often unequaled annotations." The Reverend Henry Todd issued Milton's entire poetic works in 1826. The 20th century saw the "sustained elucidation" of A.W. Verity due to his excellence in commentary, and William Kerrigan also credits Alastair Fowler, John Leonard, Merritt Hughes, Douglas Bush, Scott Elledge, and Roy Flanagan for sustaining Miltonic history.

## Analysis

### The Nature of Reason Within the Text

Perhaps what's most striking about Milton's masterwork is his adherence to logic and reason when divulging upon the Judeo-Christian theological tradition. William Walker would write in "On Reason, Faith, and Freedom in *Paradise Lost*," that Milton "grounds these freedoms [human freedoms to believe and to act as illustrated by Adam and Eve] in reason and the way this understanding of freedom, reason, and faith conforms with rationalist as opposed to

voluntarist theological tradition” (Walker 143). Milton’s God is seen as unconcerned with intervening on man, or with beholding His legacy in their eyes. This marks a shift in theological thinking, and a support of Milton’s argument.

Thus Walker would posit that revelation, or regaining paradise, is a matter of confronting reason and bridging the gap between inner freedoms. “These [17th century] theologians discuss human faith in general and wish to see, to use the title of Richard Baxter's work on the subject, "The arrogancy of Reason against Divine Revelations repressed” (Walker 146). In many ways, *Paradise Lost* is concerned with man’s obedience to God, or lack thereof, and how that figures within the context of free will: “the will is free on the condition that it obeys reason, but that obedience itself is either a voluntary act of faith in reason or an involuntary act” (Walker 149). In other words, Milton is more concerned with how we choose to use our free will.

Former Harvard Professor Ernest Bernbaum finds Milton to be a 17th century prophet, comparable to Isaiah, for those themes which he expressed in *Paradise Lost*, and purports that belief in Satan as the epic’s hero would convey a human belief in “personal devils,” and in the work’s composition was expressing themes of “moral significance” He asks readers not to focus on Satan, or God, but on humanity. “In short, the subject is not theology but religion -- not the nature of God and of Satan, but the relation of the powers of good and evil to ourselves” (Bernbaum 79). This is evidence of *Paradise Lost* as being analogous to psychoanalysis, wherein Heaven and Hell directly correspond with the reader’s “notions of the states of bliss and of misery.”



## Milton's Style

In *Reading Paradise Lost*, David Hopkins illustrates Milton's master work as being mere fiction: *Paradise Lost* is a narrative poem, not a work of theology, or philosophy, or political polemic, and that it works on readers' minds according to the laws and procedures of narrative poetry" (Hopkins 1). Instead he praises the work for its subtle attention to verse and other poetic factors, insisting the epic functions on a higher plane of narrative than ordinary works. This is supported by Milton's invocation to the muse of Urania in the beginning of Books I and VII, for his dedication to what Hopkins deems a "meticulous and painstaking exercise of verbal artistry" (Hopkins 2).

Dr. Ernest Bernbaum in his lecture "The Poems of John Milton," which exists in volume 1 of Harvard Classics Five-Foot Shelf of Books, would state that the reader must have prior Biblical knowledge in order to accurately assess Milton's works, and as a prerequisite should read those biblical passages which also inspired Milton, all of which are brief in nature. "...But when one turns from the few chapters that contain it [the story of Adam and Eve] and follows the course of the great epic, one begins to realize how sublimely Milton's imagination enlarges our conceptions of the past, the distant, and the unseen" (Bernbaum 77).

With that being said, it is evident that Milton drew most of his inspiration from the Old Testament. But Bernbaum would also attest that Milton's texts ought to be read out loud, in order to recapture the style in which it was composed, by the blind poet."Only thus can the artistic sense that slumers within us be aroused to feel responsively the grandest rhythm and resonance that ever proceeded from an English tongue" (Bernbaum 77). Despite this, many contemporary

readers were unfamiliar with the character of blank verse, which encouraged Milton's amendment of the text to include a note on the verse.

## Inspiration

So what inspired Milton to compose this text? "Milton...sought to extend and enrich - a tradition of narrative poetry stretching back to the great classical epics of Homer and Virgil" (Hopkins 3). Using classical texts as his framework, Milton established a modern Christian epic, pursuing the very same routes frequented by classicists. "Such powers...allowed readers of narrative verse a vivid emotional entanglement with, rather than a mere intellectual comprehension of, the actions they depicted" (Hopkins 3). In other words, *Paradise Lost* represented Milton's foray into mythic work; work often attributed to some unknown other who exists on an extralunary plane.

What was Milton's attitude in the process of composing *Paradise Lost*? According to historical accounts, the work was completed as early as 1663, but would go unpublished until 1667. Historians associate this delay with Milton's political sympathies. During the 1660s, Milton awaited his status in terms of the Act of Oblivion. Researcher Nicholas Von Maltzahn asserts *Paradise Lost* was at least partially autobiographical: "Milton describes himself as fallen 'on evil dayes ... and evil tongues; In darkness, and with dangers compast round'" (Von Maltzahn 480). Milton would himself testify of his narrow escape from the regicides' fate in 1660 (Von Maltzahn 480). Add this to the already-controversial nature of his polemical tracts published sometime before, and Milton makes for the perfect blend of political revolutionary.

## Initial Speculation

With that being said, the exact reasons behind the date of publication are speculative at best. England suffered from a number of major obstacles during the latter part of the 1660s: the Plague of 1665-1666, the Great Fire of London of September 1666, to name two of the period's major mishaps. Von Maltzahn incorporates the political climate of the day into his theory: "The fluctuating power and purpose of the Crown determined a less consistent pattern of repression than has often been supposed" (Von Maltzahn 481). Thus, *Paradise Lost's* eventual appearance is a marked result of several factors focused in political and religious ideology.

Von Maltzahn would attest that *Paradise Lost* may have initially functioned as a vehicle of repentance for the greater part of society. He writes: "This followed from the need to cure the sins that had brought calamity on the nation, a reformation Milton sought to promote" (Von Maltzahn 481). By reiterating the story of Genesis with contemporary speculation, *Paradise Lost* may have been Milton's attempt to renegotiate the political terms of Reformation England after the failed Commonwealth of the 1560s.

Additionally, the epic would arrive as an incidental response to a growing thirst for speculative religious literature: "There was now a broader and more receptive audience for his Christian teaching than for many years" (Von Maltzahn 481). Thus, the Reformation can in many ways be seen as a Judeo-Christian Renaissance, which inspired momentous literature and a renewal in religious rhetoric. Matthew Arnold writes in his *Culture and Anarchy*: "The Reformation has often been called a Hebraising revival, a return to the ardour and sincerity of

primitive Christianity” (Shoulson 2). Jeffrey Shoulson would go on to place Milton as the movement’s primary inspirant, due to the novelty of his writings.

## Milton and Religion

Despite being a Christian literary force of nature, Milton was reluctant to adopt a formalized creed in his theological views; evidence, however, is speculative. In Erin Henriksen’s *Milton and the Reformation Aesthetics of the Passion*, she posits that Milton had developed his own religious subcategory outside of a traditionalized creed, and that the themes depicted throughout his body of work encompass an overarching religious theme. “Milton did not adopt any single theory of representing the sacred. Rather, he entered into an extended exploration, across his prose and poetry and throughout his authorial career, seeking to work out a difficult poetics of the passion” (Henriksen 123).

David Parry in his essay “Milton’s Religious Context” defines the inseparable relationship the Church played in 17th century political spheres. “Sixteenth and seventeenth century writers used ‘religious’ arguments and quotations from the Bible to defend ideas about politics and literature” (Parry). As for Milton, his abject theological training contributed to his religio political views. He was brought up with canonical values which were reinforced by Cambridge University, through which he initially saw to aspire to the Church of England. In *The Reason of Church-Government*, however, Milton writes that “tyranny had invaded the church” (Parry), and abandons his theological pursuit.

Ultimately, it’s hard to pin down Milton’s beliefs, except to say that he was a “strong Protestant who emphasized the freedom of the individual” (Parry). As evidenced by such

writings as *On the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* and *Areopagitica*, Milton held fairly controversial views for his day. He may have held heretical views in regards to the Trinity (Parry). David Parry testifies that Abdiel is representative of the formerly Puritan society of England, a cause which was defeated with the institution of the Restoration. “We might see Abdiel in Books V and VI of *Paradise Lost* as representing this Puritan cause, standing for purity and truth in the midst of a corrupt society” (Parry). He believes that, given Milton’s political and religious isolation, Milton himself may have represented this Abdiel figure.

Throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton recounts narratives from the Bible in vivid detail, including the Story of Creation, the fall, redemption, and consummation. “Milton saw the fall...as leading to a corruption of human thinking as well as of human moral choices” (Parry), and attempted to justify these stories for a contemporary audience. Milton followed and elaborated on many of these interpretive traditions, such as the “fall of the angels” in order to produce his own theological philosophy. He also chronicles God’s covenant in order to save man, which would culminate in *Paradise Regained*. Taken together, Milton’s mythology would reinvigorate philosophical thinking.

## Summary

We’ve examined the sociopolitical context in which *Paradise Lost* was produced, and how it bridged the gap between two major political revolutions -- the Commonwealth and the Restoration. *Paradise Lost* in many ways reiterates Milton’s republican ideology, but also promotes new and innovative methods of interpreting political spheres. Ultimately, *Paradise*

*Lost* makes an important statement about the institution of the “divine right of kings” and from whose authority leadership is granted.

John Milton is a notable progressive figure, who sustained damage to his reputation defending his principles. During the Restoration, he nearly escaped execution, and witnessed as his new form of government came tumbling down. His magnum opus wouldn't see commercial success within his lifetime, and his verse was seen by contemporary critics as outmoded and confusing. Despite this, *Paradise Lost* emerged as perhaps the period's most well-known work, and would continue to see analysis and speculation for centuries to come.

We've navigated possible conceptions for the inspiration behind *Paradise Lost*. We know it was composed through narration by a blind and down-on-his-luck John Milton near the tail-end of his career. He consciously put himself into the position of classical poets such as Homer, Virgil, or Dante, in order to compose a new Christian epic. We've explored how the manuscript was initially conveyed to Samuel Simmons in London, and from there how it proliferated throughout the years into a literary institution.

Milton elaborates heavily on the nature of free will within his epic. Milton's Adam is seen as independent from Milton's God, or even Milton's angels, who intervene on earth in order to enact God's bidding. His elucidation on the nature of man and the cosmology of earth are heavily inspirational to the field of philosophy. His blank verse is credited for its literary aristocracy, and for pushing the limits of prose in order to develop a higher tongue and greater capacity for poetic expression. Ultimately, Milton elaborates on the Christian tradition, and formulates new ideas about man's relationship with a higher power.

Ultimately, we are tasked with identifying our own philosophy upon retrospection of the text. Milton's work could be seen as a boon to the Republican movement which sought to transition English rule from monarchical to democratic. In this way, Milton's Satan is a separatist hero, guiding angels past to a social revolution. On the other hand, we can reject Satan's repudiation of divine providence, and cast Satan away as a rebel and a worrywart, instead insisting on the longevity of divine providence. Whatever your views, one thing remains clear...Milton's epic evidenced a new tradition in sophic thought, and engendered new interest in religio philosophical writings.

## Conclusion

In order to fully understand the context in which *Paradise Lost* was created, we must consider a number of factors: the state of political affairs both during the poem's composition as well as the previous several decades; the position John Milton held as an aristocrat and contributing member to society; the controversiality of religious speculation within the state Church, particularly that of the Catholic creed; Milton's polemical themes, often in outright support of Republican issues; and the transitioning attitude of society towards a more self-governing system. While Satan is historically a deplorable character - responsible for the initial "fall" of mankind, perhaps Milton's Satan is more of a devil's advocate...since he lends voice to that often overlooked majority, and gives credence to the words that are hardest to hear.

I think it's safe to say that Milton's political goals didn't see realization within his lifetime. The simple truth is that Charles I was a tyrant, and while I do not have personal evidence of this nor was I alive during his life, I believe that what makes Charles I a tyrant was

his neglect of his people, his unwillingness to listen to the needs of his country, and his refusal to heed the advice of his Parliament, men elected and dedicated to the cause of furthering their nation. With that being said, I believe the overarching theme to observe in *Paradise Lost* is free will, for free will gives humanity an identity, and allows us the responsibility to govern ourselves: “He had of Me all he could have; I made him just and right, sufficient to have stood, though free to fall (Paradise Lost 3.95-9).

## Limitations of My Study

Few remaining original manuscripts of Milton’s master work exist. I was lucky enough to see several this past fall, as University Librarian Michael Joseph with the Rutgers Department of Special Collections and University Archives (as previously mentioned) was kind enough to show one to me. The fourth edition has been magnificently bound, and has held up surprisingly well. The text has both navarre and fool’s cap water marks and, despite some expected erosion, has held up surprisingly well. These original manuscripts can tell us quite a good deal, from names of printers and other machinists to those of donors and solicitors.

However, usually when one is lucky enough to observe some of these invaluable texts, one does so behind a pane of glass. Oftentimes the book is open to the frontispiece portrait of Milton, which has become the industry standard Milton portrait, or one of the exquisitely detailed engraved illustrations which dot the text. Sometimes there are marginalia or other notes, but rarely does one uncover the true history of that particular work; in other words, how did it come to be in this collection at this place in time? The 4th edition manuscript that was donated to Rutgers University was unfortunately not one of J. Milton French’s, and its previous owner



remains a mystery. However, I believe that text's journey to this period of time (of which Milton may have envisioned) is a testament to his literary legacy.

## Charts and Tables

TIMELINE: Political Milton					
	1640	1645	1650	1655	1660
E V E N T S	1642 (May) Milton marries Mary Powell (July?) Mary returns to her parents (Oct?) Milton sends for her unsuccessfully	1643 While planning second marriage wife returns	1650 (8 Jan) Milton ordered by Council of State to respond to Salmasius	1653 (3 Sep) Salmasius dies	1660 (4 May) RESTORATION OF CHARLES II (May) Milton goes into hiding to escape retaliation (16 Jun) Parliament moves to arrest Milton and have copies of <i>Defensio pro populo Anglicano</i> and <i>Eikonoklastes</i> burned (29 Aug) Act of Indemnity pardoning past treason against crown does not exonerate Milton, but still leaves him vulnerable to arrest and assassination (Oct?) Milton arrested and imprisoned (15 Dec) Parliament orders Milton be released (17 Dec) Andrew Marvell defends Milton
	1644 (13 Aug) Divorce tracts attacked in a sermon before Parliament (24-26 Aug) Stationers' Company petition against divorce tracts (28 Dec) Milton summoned before House of Lords for examination but soon dismissed		1649 (31 Jan) KING CHARLES I EXECUTED BY PARLIAMENT IN AFTERMATH OF CIVIL WAR (9 Feb) <i>Eikon Basilike</i> published (13 Mar) Milton invited to be Secretary for the Foreign Tongues by the Council of State (15 Mar) Ordered to respond to <i>Eikon Basilike</i> (11 May) Salmasius' <i>Defensio Regia</i> appears	1655 Milton allowed to appoint a substitute to his Secretaryship in order to take up his studies again Works on <i>De Doctrina Christiana</i> 1658 (3 Sep) OLIVER CROMWELL DIES AND IS SUCCEEDED AS LORD PROTECTOR BY SON RICHARD	
P U B L I C A T I O N S	1641 (May) <i>Of Reformation</i> (July) <i>Animadversions</i>	1643 (Mar) <i>Tetrachordon and Colasterion</i>	1649 (13 Feb) <i>Tenure of Kings and Magistrates</i> (9 Oct) <i>Eikonoklastes</i>	1651 (24 Feb) <i>Defensio pro populo Anglicano</i>	1659 (16 Feb) <i>A Treatise of Civil Power</i> (Aug) <i>The Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church</i>
	1642 (Feb) <i>The Reason of Church-Government</i> (May?) <i>Apology for Smectymnus</i> 1643 (Aug) <i>Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce</i> 1644 (Aug) <i>Judgment of Martin Bucer Concerning Divorce</i> (Nov) <i>Areopagitica</i>				1654 (30 May) <i>Defensio Secunda</i> 1655 (8 Aug) <i>Defensio Pro Se</i>

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