

# CALLIMACHUS' SINGING SEA (HYMN 2.106)

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ὁ Φθόνος Ἀπόλλωνος ἐπ' οὐατα λάθριος εἶπεν 105  
 “οὐκ ἄγαμαι τὸν αἰοδὸν ὃς οὐδ' ὅσα πόντος αἰεῖδει.”  
 τὸν Φθόνον ὠπόλλων ποδὶ τ' ἤλασεν ὅδε τ' εἶπεν·  
 “Ἀσσυρίου ποταμοῖο μέγας ῥόος, ἀλλὰ τὰ πολλὰ  
 λύματα γῆς καὶ πολλὸν ἐφ' ὕδατι συρφετὸν ἔλκει.  
 Δηοῖ δ' οὐκ ἀπὸ παντὸς ὕδωρ φορέουσι μέλισσαι, 110  
 ἀλλ' ἥτις καθαρὴ τε καὶ ἀχράαντος ἀνέρπει  
 πίδακος ἐξ ἱερῆς ὀλίγη λιβάς ἄκρον ἄωτον.”

Phthonos (Envy) whispered in Apollo's ear: “I do not admire the poet who does not sing even as much as the sea.” But Apollo kicked Phthonos and said. “The Assyrian river's flow is great but it carries a great deal of silt and refuse in its waters. But to Demeter bees carry water culled not from just any source; they take the very choicest—the tiny trickle that wells up pure and unsullied from a sacred spring.”

THESE LINES AT THE END of Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo* form an epilogue or coda to the hymn proper, which ends at l. 104.<sup>1</sup> Most scholars have understood Apollo's remarks about big rivers and drops of spring water to be really about the relative merits of long and short poems. The whole passage in fact is seen as a poetic reformulation of the contemporary debate we find detailed in the prologue to the *Aetia*.<sup>2</sup> Here Apollo is depicted as sharing Callimachus' predilection for the small and refined. F. Williams (1978, 86) has called the epilogue “possibly the most controversial passage in the extant works of Callimachus.” Line 106, which contains Phthonos' whispered remark to Apollo, lies at the center of the controversy. The goal of this paper is to make sense of these enigmatic words.

Since the point of Apollo's reply is that what is big is not necessarily attractive, one would expect Phthonos' remarks to advocate bigness or length over all other considerations, and that is exactly what they appear to do. But there are two difficulties: the significance of πόντος and the point of οὐδ'. The scholiast's comment is not particularly helpful:

1. See Wimmel 1960, 70 and Bundy 1972, 44. Wimmel calls the coda a *sphragis* and Bundy refers to it as an *envoi*.

2. There are no firm grounds for dating this hymn either absolutely or in relation to the *Aetia*. It is widely supposed that the hymn was probably composed about the same time as the prologue to the *Aetia*; see, for example, Bulloch 1989, 20 and Cameron 1995, 407–9.

ἐγκαλεῖ διὰ τούτων τοὺς σκώπτοντας αὐτὸν μὴ δύνασθαι ποιῆσαι μέγα ποίημα, ὅθεν ἠναγκάσθη ποιῆσαι τὴν Ἑκάλην.

With these words he [i.e., Callimachus] attacks those who were ridiculing him as incapable of writing a big poem. As a result of this ridicule he was compelled to write the *Hecale*.<sup>3</sup>

Taking their cue from the scholiast, modern scholars have tried to make sense of the line by identifying the “sea” with Apollonius. Justification for this has been, to say the least, difficult, and this line of interpretation has now been generally abandoned.<sup>4</sup>

In 1972 E. Bundy published a penetrating analysis of the hymnic conventions that articulate this poem. This led him to the conclusion that the criticism in l. 106 could not be about poetry in general, as most scholars had assumed, but must be directed against the hymn just completed. Phthonos, in short, is pointing out that Callimachus has failed to exhaust the possibilities for praising Apollo: “The clause οὐδ’ ὅσα πόντος ἀεῖδει would seem then to provide a measure both of Kallimachos’s theme and of his failure to exhaust it.”<sup>5</sup> Bundy’s article represents a major step forward. It was not, however, as influential as it should have been, partly because, as with his other work, it is dense and rather difficult to read, but partly also because Bundy avoided offering either analysis or even translation of the crucial l. 106. Clearly, he could not see how it could mean what he was convinced it must.<sup>6</sup>

In 1978 F. Williams’ commentary offered a new approach. He pointed to a familiar motif, whereby Homer is compared to a great sea or fountain, from which later poets drew draughts of inspiration. Behind this image, Williams argues, lies Homer’s own description of Ocean as the source of all rivers and springs (*Il.* 21.193–97):

ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἔστι Διὶ Κρονίωνι μάχεσθαι,  
τῷ οὐδὲ κρείων Ἀχελώϊος ἰσοφαρίζει,  
οὐδὲ βαθυρρέϊται μέγα σθένος Ὠκεανοῖο,  
ἐξ οὗ περ πάντες ποταμοὶ καὶ πᾶσα θάλασσα  
καὶ πᾶσαι κρῆναι καὶ φρεῖατα μακρὰ νάουσιν.

It is not possible to fight against Zeus, son of Cronus.  
even mighty Achelous is a match for him, or the great  
strength of deep-flowing Ocean, from whom flow all  
rivers and every sea, all springs and deep wells.

Williams (1978, 88) maintains that this passage was the source for later poets’ comparison of Homer to the sea. He finds support for this interpretation in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De Compositione Verborum* 24, κορυφή

3. Pfeiffer 1949–53, 2:53.

4. See Erbse 1955, 424–28 and, for a general discussion of early interpretations, Bundy 1972, 39–44. More recently, scholars have even come to doubt the story of a quarrel between Callimachus and Apollonius, but Green 1997, 8–13 offers a spirited defense of the traditional view.

5. Bundy 1972, 49.

6. His chief difficulty lay with οὐδ’, which he called “recalcitrant” (1972, 41).

μὲν οὖν ἀπάντων καὶ σκοπὸς “ἐξ οὗ περ πάντες ποταμοὶ καὶ πᾶσα θάλασσα / καὶ πᾶσαι κρῆναι” δικαίως ἂν “Ὅμηρος λέγοιτο and in Quintilian 10.1.46, “hic enim [i.e., Homer], quem ad modum ex Oceano dicit ipse amnium fontiumque cursus initium capere, omnibus eloquentiae partibus exemplum et ortum dedit.” Among the many instances of the comparison cited by Brink (1972, 553–56) and Williams (1978, 87–89, 98–99), one will here suffice. It is found in a papyrus fragment variously dated from ca. 170 B.C. to the first century A.D. After giving a long list of the regions of Greece, the text continues:

σῶν πάντες, “Ὅμηρ’, αἰνετὸν ὕμνων  
φύσιν ἡρώϊων λογάσιν μερόπων  
παραδεξάμενοι μεγαλύνουσιν  
τὴν τ’ ἀπὸ Μουσῶν ἄφθιτον αὐδὴν  
ἦν σὺ μερίμναις ταῖσιν ἀτρύτοις  
καθυφηνάμενος πόντος τις ὅπως  
ἔπτυσας ἄλλοις . . .  
φωσὶν ἐπ’ ἅκτάς . . .

All these, Homer, inherit and exalt the nature of your heroic song, praised by the chosen among men; and praise too your deathless voice, gift of the Muses, which with such unwearying labour you wove to a pattern; then like the sea you spewed it forth upon the shore for other men. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no extant example of the Homer-sea comparison that can be certainly dated to the third century, but it is highly probable that the motif was familiar in Callimachus' day. Even A. Cameron, who vigorously denies that the sea can stand for Homer in l. 106, concedes that the literary motif was “common” and “surely Hellenistic in origin” (1995, 273–74). Moreover, an interesting passage in Aelian seems to indicate that the Homereion at Alexandria, established in the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator (221–205 B.C.), contained a picture relevant to the history of the motif: “Ptolemy Philopator established a temple to Homer, in which he set up a noble, seated statue of him in a noble setting. The statue was encircled by all the cities which lay claim to Homer. Galaton the painter depicted Homer himself vomiting (ἐμοῦντα) and the other poets drawing off the vomit.”<sup>8</sup> The passage has been variously interpreted. Many think that Galaton's painting depicted Homer throwing up and conclude that it must therefore have been a mocking caricature or parody of the motif. They argue that Aelian mentions it here as a counterpoint to the honorific setting of the Homereion and that no such picture could have been found in the Homereion itself.<sup>9</sup> Others have interpreted the words simply to describe a picture in which poets fill their jars from a fountain where water is spewing forth from a decorative

7. Greek text in Powell 1925, 187–88 and Page 1950, 414; translation from Page, slightly modified.

8. *Variae Historiae* 13.22: Πτολεμαῖος ὁ Φιλοπάτωρ κατασκευάσας Ὅμηρον νεῶν, αὐτὸν μὲν καλὸν καλῶς ἐκάθισε, κύκλῳ δὲ τὰς πόλεις περιέστησε τοῦ ἀγάλματος, ὅσαι ἀντιπιοῦνται τοῦ Ὁμήρου. Γαλάτων δὲ ὁ ζωγράφος ἔγραψε τὸν μὲν Ὅμηρον αὐτὸν ἐμοῦντα, τοὺς δ' ἄλλους ποιητὰς τὰ ἐμνησμένα ἀρυομένους.

9. So Schubart and Wilamowitz 1907, 138; Rossbach 1910, 559; Brink 1972, 555.

waterspout in the form of Homer's head.<sup>10</sup> In this case the word ἐμοῦντα simply means "spewing forth."<sup>11</sup> If this interpretation is correct, then there is no need to banish Galaton's painting from the Homereion, and a near-contemporary (and very conspicuous) instance of the Homer-sea motif has been established.<sup>12</sup> If, on the other hand, the painting is viewed as a contemporary parody of the Homer-sea motif, then this implies that the motif was sufficiently familiar in Callimachus' day to merit parody. It is possible, of course, that the painting and the founding of the Homereion are not to be thought of as contemporary, but this is an unnatural reading of the passage.<sup>13</sup>

The sequence of sea, river, and spring in Callimachus' hymn is a clear allusion to *Iliad* 21.193–97. Given that the context is indisputably about poets and poetry, the implication that πόντος (106) is here to be understood as Homer would not have been difficult to grasp for readers familiar with the Homer-sea metaphor. But Williams was still confronted with the other difficulty the line presents: Bundy's "recalcitrant οὐδ'" (1972, 41). Phthonos is not only stating that he does not like the poet who does not sing as much as Homer, but is also implying that even what Homer sang was on the short side. Given that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the longest poems in the language, both statement and implication seem absurd. Williams accordingly shied away from the natural interpretation. He argued that in complaining that Callimachus did not match Homer even in quantity, Phthonos was implying a further criticism of quality. But it is a strange procedure to resort to an argument that is rhetorically ineffective to imply an unstated argument that is more effective. Besides, it would blur the distinction, clearly intended to be sharp, between Phthonos and Apollo if Phthonos were allowed to exhibit any concern for quality. A. Köhnken and Cameron are right to insist that it is Apollo who first introduces (111–12) the concept of quality.<sup>14</sup> Williams' attempts to extricate himself from the difficulties posed by οὐδ' led him into

10. So Marx 1927, 446–48, Webster 1964, 144–45, and H. D. Jocelyn (cited by Brink 1972, p. 555, n. 32). The Homer-sea motif as we find it articulated in Manilius 2.8–11 ("cuiusque <sc. Homeri> ex ore profusus / omnis posteritas latices in carmina duxit / amnemque in tenues ausa est deducere rivos / unius fecunda bonis") and Ovid *Am.* 3.9. 25–26 ("adice Maioniden, a quo ceu fonte perenni / vatium Pieriis ora rigantur aquis") comes close to this picture.

11. I would further suggest that ἐμοῦντα may well have been chosen to indicate that Homer's mouth on the waterspout is wide open (as in vomiting) with a large amount of water gushing forth. πτόοντα, on the other hand, which Page (1950, 415 n.) considers less coarse, would suggest a mouth pursed up, with its lips pushed forward (as in spitting), and with only a thin jet coming out.

12. For the representation of Homer as a divinity, compare the Archelaus relief known as the Apotheosis of Homer. It shows Homer enthroned with allegorical figures (Myth and History) standing at an altar before him and attending to a sacrifice. Behind them various other allegorical figures (Poetry, Comedy, Tragedy) raise their arms in salutation. The relief has often been dated ca. 125 B.C., but Pollitt suggests that the scene depicted may be the Homereion itself and that a third-century date is more likely. For photographs and discussion see Havelock 1968, 202 (fig. 170) and Pollitt 1986, 15–16.

13. The relative obscurity of Galaton, who is not mentioned by any other ancient source, argues against this possibility. Consider the following sentence: "When Scrovegni built the Arena chapel in 1305, he had it decorated with scenes from the life of Christ; Picasso treated some of the same scenes in a satirical manner." The chronological jump may strike us as odd but it poses no serious difficulty because Picasso is a well-known name. However, if we substitute "Pinario" for Picasso, it becomes very difficult not to think of Pinario as an early fourteenth-century artist.

14. Köhnken 1981, 414–15; Cameron 1995, 406.

a highly complex interpretation that G. O. Hutchinson finds "impossibly devious" and Cameron "hopelessly complicated and unconvincing."<sup>15</sup>

In an article exploring the question of the quarrel between Callimachus and Apollonius, M. Lefkowitz quotes the closing lines of Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo* and offers a brief interpretation. She observes:

Envy says to the subject of [Callimachus'] hymn, Apollo, "I don't like the bard whose song is not even as great as the sea" (106). Frederick Williams in his new commentary suggests that the sea signifies Homer; in other words, Envy disapproves of the poet who can't write a *Homeric Hymn*. Apollo responds with a gesture of contempt, assuming that no one can match Homer . . . Since Pindar refers to his poetry as "the holy water of Dirce" (Isth. 6.74), it is natural to assume that by the "pure and undefiled" spring Callimachus means his own Hymn to Apollo—I am assuming that like Thuc. (iii. 104.4–5) he regarded *h. Hom. Ap.* as one hymn, by the author of the *Iliad*.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, Lefkowitz offers no further discussion of the passage. Her interpretation is based on Williams', and like him she seems to see l. 106 as implying a judgment of quality ("Apollo responds . . . assuming that no one can match Homer."). I shall return to Lefkowitz's interesting remarks later.

Köhnken and Cameron offer virtually identical interpretations of *πόντος* and *οὐδ'* (106). Both deny that *πόντος* can denote Homer. Cameron argues that in none of the other passages where the comparison is made "does *πόντος* or *ὠκεανός* by itself directly denote Homer, without some other help or indication in the context."<sup>17</sup> They interpret *πόντος* as simply the sea. On this view, Phthonos criticizes Callimachus for failing to live up to the challenge of his theme, for Apollo deserves praise that is endless, like the song of the sea. However, if the sea's song is endless, then "sings not even as much as the sea" makes no sense. So both critics take *οὐδ'* not in its usual sense of "not even" but rather as an "emphatic negative." Cameron translates rather awkwardly: "I do not admire the poet who positively refuses to sing as much as the sea." He cites Denniston's discussion of this rare usage.<sup>18</sup> Denniston, however, seems to have considered the usage confined to Herodotus. None of the passages cited by either Köhnken or Cameron provides a convincing parallel.<sup>19</sup>

The meaning of *οὐδ' ὅσον* in l. 106 needs to be determined by its use elsewhere in Callimachus and other Hellenistic poets, where it is a surprisingly common locution. It always seems to bear its normal sense of "not even as much as." Moreover, often what follows *ὅσον* is something small. For example, in Callimachus: *Epigram* 3.9, *οὐδ' ὅσον ἀττάραγόν τυ δεδοίκαμες*:

15. Hutchinson 1988, p. 68, n. 85; Cameron 1995, 404.

16. Lefkowitz 1980, 5–6; repeated at Lefkowitz 1981, 121–22.

17. Cameron 1995, 404; cf. Köhnken 1981, 415.

18. Denniston 1954, 197–98, 583. Some indication of the rarity of this usage can be inferred from Denniston's note (583) that he has "not seen the possibility of this sense discussed anywhere."

19. Cameron calls the usage "well documented" but cites in support only Plato, *Symp.* 202C πῶς ἂν . . . ὁμολογοῖτο μέγας θεὸς εἶναι παρὰ τούτων, οἱ φασιν αὐτὸν οὐδὲ θεὸν εἶναι. This is an example of an emphatic form of the "not even" usage ("... who say that he is not even a god at all") and is cited as such by Denniston 1954, 196. Köhnken's examples (1981, p. 416, n. 30) all appear to be special cases that can be otherwise explained. None is with *ὅσον* or in a context even remotely similar to the case at hand.

("I'm not even a little bit frightened of you"); frag. 784 (Pfeiffer), οὐδ' ὅσον μύτης στυγαρῶν ἐμπάετο μύθων ("He didn't care a fly for the hateful stories"). So common was this kind of expression that it was a natural step to omit the measure of smallness and use οὐδ' ὅσον alone to mean "not even a little bit," "not at all." For example, Apollonius Rhodius *Argonautica* 2.189–90: ἐλείπετο δ' ἄλλοτε φορβῆς / οὐδ' ὅσον ("at times there was no food left at all").<sup>20</sup> The closest parallel to our line occurs at *Argonautica* 3.932, where the crow chides Mopsus for accompanying Jason to his rendez-vous with Medea: ἀκλείης ὅδε μάντις ὅς οὐδ' ὅσα παῖδες ἴσασιν / οἶδε νόφ φράσσασθαι ("A worthless prophet is this who cannot figure out even what children know . . ."). A close but inexact parallel is found at Theocritus 7.9: οἶδεν Ἄριστις, / ἐσθλὸς ἀνὴρ, μέγ' ἄριστος, ὃν οὐδέ κεν αὐτὸς ἀεΐδειν / Φοῖβος σὺν φόρμιγγι παρὰ τριπόδεσσι μεγάροι ("Aristis knows—a good man, an excellent man, whom not even Phoebus himself would begrudge to sing to the lyre beside his tripods"). Besides their remarkable similarity in structure to our passage, these last two parallels share an equally remarkable similarity in theme. All three utterances are judgments of professional ability (two of poets and one of a prophet). As Bundy's large collection (1972, 94) of similar passages shows, it is a mistake to suppose that *Argonautica* 3.932 is some kind of response to our passage. The similarity in structure and language is determined by third-century poetic convention. The conventional nature of the lines makes it very unlikely that οὐδ' ὅσα in the Callimachus passage should be interpreted differently from the same words in a virtually identical context in Apollonius.

What then is the meaning of l. 106? "I do not admire X who sings not even as much as Y" implies not only that X sings less than Y but also that in the speaker's judgment Y's song is not as long as it might have been. If we accept the identification of the sea with Homer, is there any interpretation that makes sense? At this point it is useful to recall Bundy's important insight (which both Köhnken and Cameron endorse) that Phthonos' comment is a criticism of the hymn just finished. Now if he is passing judgment on a hymn to Apollo and comparing Callimachus' performance to Homer's, it is natural to suppose, as Lefkowitz has suggested, that his standard of comparison is a *Homeric Hymn*, specifically the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*.<sup>21</sup> The ancients were divided on the question whether the poet of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was also the author of the *Homeric Hymns*. Many believed that he was.<sup>22</sup> The hymn that has come down to us may originally have been two

20. Cf. Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 2.181; Callim. *Ap.* 37; and (οὐδ' ὅσον ὅσον) Philetas 7.2 (Powell 1925, 92).

21. Presumably, Lefkowitz sees a specific comparison with the *Hymn. Hom.* Ap. though she does not explicitly say so. Her words ("... can't write a *Homeric Hymn*") do not suggest that she sees Phthonos as complaining that Callimachus' poem is not even as long as the *Hymn. Hom. Ap.*

22. Allen, Halliday, and Sikes 1936, lxxix, conclude from the fact that among ancient scholars there are relatively few quotations from the *Homeric Hymns* to exemplify Homeric usage "that the Alexandrines considered the *Hymns* non-Homeric." As the judgment of experts on the *Homeric Hymns*, this opinion merits our respect. However, it will be noted that this is an argument from silence, which always warrants skepticism, particularly when the issue concerns the Hellenistic period, for which our sources are so scanty. Besides, the last thing we expect from Alexandrian scholars is unanimity. In the preceding pages (lxv–lxxviii), Allen, Halliday, and Sikes cite passages which clearly demonstrate that Thucydides, Antigonos of Carystus

hymns, one to Delian (1–178) and one to Pythian Apollo (179–546).<sup>23</sup> But whether we understand Phthonos' basis of comparison to be one or other of the original hymns or the combined hymn, his observation that Callimachus has not even sung as much as "Homer" makes good sense. The 104 lines of his hymn fall short of the 178 lines of the shorter of the two hymns and far short of the combined poem. Also, on this interpretation, even the intractable οὐδ' finally makes sense. Whereas it would simply be inept for Phthonos to imply that Homer's complete poetic *oeuvre* was too short to do justice to the praise of Apollo—a criticism which, in any case, absurdly presupposes that praise of Apollo was the point of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—it is certainly not ridiculous for Phthonos to imply that the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* fails to exhaust its subject. In his attempt to flatter his superior Phthonos reveals the essential nature of his character, for not only does he criticize Callimachus' hymn for being too short, he even finds fault with an acknowledged standard of excellence. The phrase οὐδ' ὄσα, which usually introduces something small and worthless, is to be understood in the light of this characterization. Phthonos dismisses even the *Homeric Hymn* as an insignificant trifle.

There remains the objection of Cameron (1995, 404) that it is just too difficult to understand πόντος in l. 106 as a metaphor for Homer "without some other help or indication in the context." True, in most other instances of the motif, Homer is mentioned and explicitly compared to the sea. But three considerations are relevant here. First, Callimachus is a notoriously allusive poet who makes unusual demands on his readers. Second, Galaton's painting discussed above suggests that the Homer-sea motif was either enshrined in the Homereion itself or was so well known in Callimachus' day as to invite parody. Finally, there is in l. 106 itself a fairly obvious clue to help the thoughtful reader grasp the metaphor: αἰεῖδει, which serves as the verb for both clauses, characterizes the "sea" with the activity of an αἰοιδός. This "sea" sings.

A summary of the epilogue shows how well this interpretation fits its context. Phthonos whispers in Apollo's ear his negative judgment on Callimachus' hymn—that it is not even as long as Homer's. To show off his qualifications as a literary critic he refers to Homer allusively, using the voguish metaphor that compares him to the sea. In the hope of securing Apollo's agreement, he flatters the god by implying that even the much-admired

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(third century B.C.), Philodemus (first century B.C.), Diodorus Siculus (first century B.C.), Pausanias (second century A.D.) and Stephanus of Byzantium (date uncertain) all believed Homer to be the author of one or more of the *Homeric Hymns*. For a recent discussion of the tradition that Cynaethus was the author of this hymn, see Burkert 1979, 53–62.

23. For a good discussion of this issue see Allen, Halliday, and Sikes 1937, 183–200. The evidence adduced there suggests that if there ever were two separate hymns, they were already combined by the classical period. Since then the unitarian view has continued to hold sway; see, for example, Burkert 1979 and Miller 1986, 111–17. Miller's review of recent scholarship (*ibid.*), however, makes it clear that the issue is by no means settled. I am indebted to an anonymous reader of this article for the following suggestion. The fact that Callimachus composed a hymn to Apollo that partly echoes the *Homeric Hymn's* Pythian section (by "correcting" the aetiological explanation of the name "Pytho") and a hymn to Delos that echoes the earlier hymn's Delian section seems to imply that he knew those texts as separate hymns.

*Homeric Hymn* fails to do justice to its great theme, the praise of Apollo. But Apollo will have none of it. He kicks aside the flatterer and observes that a long poem, like a big river, may be disfigured with unseemly flotsam. Better to write a short, carefully crafted poem, which, like a droplet of clear spring water, can be admired for its perfection. By continuing the hydrological metaphor, Apollo caps Phthonos' remark. Also, in referring to long poems as large rivers and short poems as drops of spring water, he clearly echoes the passage in the *Iliad* that inspired the Homer-sea comparison in the first place, thereby confirming what the alert reader has already surmised about the identity of the "singing sea."

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