



The Myth of Ovid's Exile

Michael Fontaine
Cornell University
fontaine@cornell.edu

ABSTRACT: Ovid was not exiled; the evidence is massively against it. This is not a new idea, but it is a deeply unpopular, even heretical one. In this paper, I suggest reasons why scholars resist it, and I plead for a new understanding of what the “exile” poetry is.

KEYWORDS: Ovid, exile, Jonah, Holocaust, fake memoirs, Bible, the *Odyssey*, Juvenal, depression, isolation, Tomis

Heresy is being right when the right thing to do is to be wrong.

--Thomas Szasz¹

1. A clean break

Exactly two thousand years ago, in 17 AD, Ovid died in the city of Tomis, today called Constanța, in modern-day Romania. He had spent the last ten years of his life in exile there. That is what we are told, anyway, but I do not believe it. In this paper, I suggest we make a clean break with how Ovid's death and alleged exile have been viewed in the past. In my view, Ovid's alleged exile is not a mystery but a myth, a metaphor. It never happened.

¹ Szasz 1976, 1.

This is not a new idea but it is an unpopular one. It was first suggested almost 100 years ago and it has come up several times since, but it has never gotten any traction. Instead of tracing the history of skepticism about Ovid's exile², however, my purpose in this paper is to examine *why* the idea is so unpopular. I would like to begin by reminding readers that no one except Ovid himself ever mentions his exile: not Seneca, not Tacitus, not Suetonius, not Quintilian, not even the geographer Strabo, who was living in Rome and who was in the middle of revising his *Geography* during the very same years ~~Ovid~~ in which Ovid supposedly lived in Tomis.³

No: Ovid's exile poetry itself is our only source of information about his alleged exile. I will come back to that point. Meanwhile, I would like to begin with an unusual parallel to Ovid's predicament. It comes from the Bible.

2. A whale of a tale

According to the Book of Jonah, one day the prophet Jonah fell afoul of the Lord and was exiled to the belly of a "huge fish"—or rather, as tradition translates it, a whale (Jonah 1:17-2:4, New International Version):

17 Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. 1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. 2 He said:

"In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry.
3 You hurled me into the depths,
into the very heart of the seas,
and the currents swirled about me;
all your waves and breakers
swept over me.
4 I said, 'I have been banished
from your sight;
yet I will look again
toward your holy temple.'"

² Claassen 2008, 229-30 offers a cursory (but unsympathetic) overview in English; for more detail, see Bérchez Castaño 2015.

³ The first authorities to present Ovid's exile as historical fact are Aurelius Victor and Jerome's translation of Eusebius' *Chronicle* in 381 AD. For Statius (*Silvae* 1.2.254–255), the exile seems to be a metaphor; a mention in Pliny (*HN* 32.152) is probably a gloss (so Fitton-Brown 1985, accepted by Little 1990).

In my view, Jonah’s cry of distress sounds exactly like Ovid lamenting his fate in Tomis in the exile poetry. Jonah laments his “banishment,” his isolation, and his separation from the Lord’s holy temple.⁴ Unlike Augustus, however, the Lord forgives; and so, after Jonah finishes his prayer, the Bible says, “the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” Everything else, though, is the same: the isolation, and the separation from Augustus’ Rome.

In that light, it is worth asking: Was Jonah really swallowed by a whale? Did he *really* spend three days and nights in its belly? The answer depends on who you ask. Jesus believed that yes, he did (Matthew 12:39-40). So did Saint Jerome. In his commentary on the passage, he even makes a remarkable comparison to Ovid:

Nec ignoro, quosdam fore, quibus incredibile videatur, tribus diebus ac noctibus in utero ceti...hominem potuisse servari.... si fideles, multo maiora credere cogentur.... sin autem infideles erunt, legant quindecim libros Nasonis *Metamorphoseos*.... illis credunt...!

I realize some people will find it hard to believe a man could survive three days and nights in the belly of a whale.... If they have faith, they will have to believe in much greater miracles.... If they don’t, though, they ought to read the fifteen books of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.... They believe *those* stories!⁵

So the debate goes. Fundamentalist Christians today still say yes, Jonah’s claim is true, because the Bible says it happened. Scientists say no, it is impossible, and they emphasize that the only evidence that a whale swallowed Jonah, is that Jonah himself says it happened.

And yet if readers refuse to believe Jonah was swallowed by a whale, then they ought not believe that Ovid was exiled, since in both cases the evidence is identical—and identically bad. Or, to put it more strongly, there is no evidence that either of these extraordinary events actually happened. As Matthew McGowan has emphasized (2009, 52): “Again, everything we know about Ovid’s exile comes from the poems themselves....” The remainder of this paper explains why that is a more

⁴ “I have been banished”: Hebrew *garas*, “thrown out,” Vulgate *abiectus sum*.

⁵ Migne cols. 1132A-B. I thank Ian Fielding for this reference.

serious problem than scholars think, and why I predict scholars *still* will not believe Ovid was never exiled—but they should.⁶

3. The problems

Let me be clear: the evidence is massively against Ovid ever having gone into exile. A new monograph by Esteban Bérchez Castaño consolidates earlier insights, summarizes the basic problems, and has given us a solid platform for all future work.⁷ What do we know?

We now know that Ovid gets the geography and climate of Tomis wrong. Ovid characterizes Tomis as an arctic wasteland, where snow never melts and rivers and seas freeze over. Ovid even claims wine is eaten there as popsicles⁸ rather than drunk from cups. As Peter Green writes (1994, xxi-xxii),

But Ovid's two great fearful obsessions are the biting cold and the constant barbarian raids (*Tr.* 2.125, *frigus et hostes*). Again and again he returns to the snow, the ice, the sub-zero temperatures: bullock-carts creaking across the frozen Danube, wine broken off and sold in chunks, the violent glacial north-easter...that rips off roof-tiles, sears the skin, and even blows down buildings if they are not solidly constructed.

Actually, Tomis is a resort town. It has beaches and a climate like that of Florence. People go there on vacation. The temperature in May 2017 was around 67 degrees Fahrenheit. In the summer months, it averages 79 degrees during the day.⁹ Furthermore, wine cannot turn into popsicles unless it is ridiculously cold. It only turns to slush around -3 degrees Celsius. Ethanol freezes at -100 degrees Celsius.

Ovid's ethnographic information about the natives is also wrong. He does not know the difference between Thracians and Scythians.¹⁰ That is like confusing Arabs and Persians, as Americans often do, or confusing Chinese and Japanese. Today we

⁶ Even Ronald Syme resorted to bizarre arguments to save his faith in Ovid's exile. He maintained that Tacitus was dog-whistling to his readers that he really had Ovid in mind when he narrated the fate of D. Silanus, paramour of the younger Julia: Pitcher 2011, 236.

⁷ Bérchez Castaño 2015; Fitton Brown 1985 and Janssen 1951 are still important.

⁸ *Tristia* 5.10.23-4: *nudaque consistunt, formam servantia testae, / vina, nec hausta meri, sed data frusta bibunt.*

⁹ Bérchez Castaño 2015, 135.

¹⁰ Bérchez Castaño 2015, 152-167.

call that kind of confusion “Orientalism,” or colonialism, or more simply, racism. It is hard to believe that a man who allegedly lived there and learned and wrote poetry in their languages would make that kind of mistake.¹¹

Ovid characterizes Tomis as a land of savage barbarians. In his time, however, it was a Hellenized port town. It had been part of the Roman empire for forty years.

You could attribute all these mischaracterizations to sheer exaggeration. Let me emphasize, however, that this explanation—that is, understandable and pardonable exaggeration, that it was all “real in his mind”—is the *classic* (Pavlovian) response of those who believe incredible claims in spite of physical evidence. We pardon these exaggerations because we believe that self-affirming witnesses are “confused” or “traumatized.” But when our sympathy devolves into a stance of belief *despite* the forensic evidence—of *credo quia absurdum*—then we are propagating myths. And that’s a problem.

4. The hierarchy of evidence

All men are created equal, says American law. Not so with evidence. Evidence fits into an iron hierarchy. Historians and lawyers classify it into four types, going from strongest to weakest as follows:

- A. Physical evidence (also called real evidence or material evidence)
- B. Documentary evidence (e.g. the text of an inscription)
- C. Impartial witness testimony
- D. Party witness testimony

Physical evidence relies on the exact sciences—the laws of physics and chemistry. It asks us to ponder technical possibilities and impossibilities, to trust our observations, and to use our common sense. For example, physical evidence for Jonah’s ordeal might take into account the diameter of a whale’s throat or the acidity of the chemicals in a whale’s stomach.

¹¹ On Ovid’s incredible boast of learning Getic, Thracian, Sarmatic, and Scythian, see Bérchez Castaño 2015, 182-189.

Documentary evidence consists of written records contemporaneous with events. Except for the occasional inscription, documentary evidence is hard to come by for the ancient world.

Witness testimony is the worst kind of evidence. It is notoriously unreliable. Witnesses make mistakes. They forget. They lie. They can even believe their own lies. And the least reliable evidence of all is “party witness testimony.” That is the testimony offered by someone who has a personal stake in the outcome of a dispute—for example, a man accused of rape who denies that he did it.

Evidence is often ambiguous or contradictory. When it is, then in a perfect world physical evidence *should* trump witness testimony every time. In that utopia, a man convicted of rape by witness testimony is summarily exonerated by DNA evidence—a semen stain, for example, on clothing.

In the real world, however, witness testimony *routinely* trumps physical evidence. This is the point we must grasp clearly and not lose sight of. The implications of this simple insight are sensationally massive, and they are responsible for endless mischief in the world. Science and common sense tell us a man cannot physically live inside the throat or stomach of a whale, but people believe the story anyway. In fact, true believers like to ostracize those who cannot share their belief; and when they are in a position of power, true believers readily use the law to prohibit disbelief.¹²

Why is this so? The reason that witness testimony routinely trumps physical evidence is that party witness testimony engages our emotions. We do not want to cheat someone of their pain, if it is real, or cheat them of justice, if it is due. Most of us would rather believe a victim's horror story than call a victim a liar—or rather, to put it more correctly, most of us would rather believe an *accuser* than call that person a liar. And so, when we believe a witness' word despite physical evidence that contradicts it, we are believing in a myth.

In the exile poetry, Ovid calls himself a victim. Actually, Ovid is an accuser. That distinction, between victim and accuser, is important, and it helps us see that in the

¹² Thus Theodosius' Edict of Thessalonica of 380 AD mandated belief in the Christian trinity: *Hanc legem sequentes Christianorum catholicorum nomen iubemus amplecti, reliquos vero dementes vesanosque iudicantes haeretici dogmatis infamiam sustinere...* (“We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics...”).

exile poetry, Ovid is accusing Augustus of assaulting him, of “raping” him, in a metaphorical (non-sexual) sense. Our mistake, therefore, is to believe that Ovid is actually a victim merely because he says so.

I realize it sounds heretical to say that Ovid’s “exile” could be simply a metaphor; indeed, to point out that a metaphor is a metaphor is one common definition of a heresy. Heresies of this kind, remarks Thomas Szasz (1976, 2),

...pertain to matters where language is used in two ways, literally and metaphorically; where the true believer speaks metaphorically but claims that he asserts literal truths; and where heresy may consist of no more than insisting that a metaphoric truth may be a literal falsehood.

Thus, some people believe Jonah’s claim that he was swallowed by a whale, and others believe Ovid’s claim that he was sent into exile by Augustus. My heresy here consists of no more than insisting that both writers are speaking metaphorically, whereas true believers claim those writers are asserting literal truths.

That disbelief in Ovid’s exile is a heresy is also revealed by the emotionally-charged responses some scholars make to the claim. I have seen the thesis called “perverse”¹³ and “misguided.”¹⁴ But these are terms of morality, not reasoning.

5. Ovid’s exile poetry as survivor memoir

Heretical as it may be, I would like to insist on the distinction between “victim” and “accuser.” It helps us see that Ovid’s so-called exile poetry is best seen in the framework of a survivor memoir—specifically, a survivor of the Holocaust.¹⁵ When Cicero went into exile, he was free to move about from place to place (and did). No so Ovid, who poses as someone writing from inside an internment camp. This is a second crucial point we must grasp and not lose sight of. Over and over, Ovid claims he is being held in Tomis against his will by the decree of Augustus. He characterizes Tomis

¹³ Green 1994, xxiii.

¹⁴ Chiu 2016, 6. Similarly emotional in its appeal is Oliensis 2004, 319: “To represent the exile poetry as an autonomous fiction is to drain off its vengeful efficacy.” Citing nothing more than aesthetic grounds—namely, that Ovid’s exile poetry is “brilliant”—Claassen 2008, 230 states: “This beguiling theory has some merit, but in the end there is too much against it.... The theory may be dismissed.”

¹⁵ *Tristia* 1.3, which recounts the night of Ovid’s departure from Rome, evokes many Holocaust memoirs.

as a prison camp.¹⁶ That makes Ovid's exile poetry similar to the most famous survivor memoir of all, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, which recounts Wiesel's harrowing incarceration in Auschwitz.

It may seem strange for me to compare Ovid's exile to memoirs written by Holocaust survivors but the parallel is closer than you think. It will surely seem sacrilegious of me to question some of the more sensational claims made in Holocaust memoirs. Survivors are regarded as sanctified by oppression, so only a heretic—an evil person, with malign intentions—would challenge their version of events, even when the tales they tell are incredible indeed.

Robert McAfee Brown—a Presbyterian theologian—sums up this attitude in a preface he wrote for the 25th anniversary edition of *Night*, in which he alludes to a number of people who had challenged aspects of Wiesel's story.¹⁷ Of such skeptics, Brown writes (Wiesel 1982, p. v):

They are committing the greatest indignity human beings can inflict on one another: telling people who have suffered excruciating pain and loss that their pain and loss were illusions. Perhaps there is a greater indignity; it is committed by those who believe them.

All the same, sometimes we simply have to question those claims. In recent years, as we get further away from World War II, many self-obviously incredible Holocaust memoirs have appeared in the United States, and often to great public acclaim.¹⁸ An egregious example appeared in 1997, when a Belgian-American woman published a book titled *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years*. In it, the author claimed she had spent the war years, aged 6, wandering across Europe in the protective custody of wolves. In that time, she killed a German soldier, penetrated the Warsaw Ghetto, and

¹⁶ Bérchez Castaño 2015, 15 infers that Ovid's exile must therefore have been a *relegatio in insulam*, which does not necessarily require confinement on an actual island.

¹⁷ For many years, *Night* was classified as a novel. In 2006, under political pressure, and at the instance of Wiesel himself, it was re-categorized as an autobiography. Nevertheless, Holocaust historians do not accept some of the claims the author makes in it.

¹⁸ Outstanding examples include Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* (Schocken Books, US edition 1996), Herman Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence* (Berkeley Books, February 2009, cancelled), and Irene Zisblatt's *Fifth Diamond* (Ithaca Press, 2008).

made her way back home after the war. The author toured the US and Europe promoting her book. It was translated into 18 languages, and even made into a movie.

The problem, however, is that wolves do not nurture six-year-old girls. They eat them. People who smile at the legend of Romulus and Remus had no trouble crediting this memoir's absurd claims based on nothing more than the word of the author herself—the sole survivor of her alleged trauma. Ten years went by before her hoax was exposed, when documents were found to prove that the author had spent the war years at school near her home in Belgium—and that she is not even Jewish.¹⁹ Common sense should have trumped the “party witness testimony,” but it did not. Why? Because no one wants to deny a self-affirming victim his or her pain. That is all there is to it.

I am suggesting that a similar attitude prevails today in regard to Ovid's alleged exile—but there is evidence that it did *not* prevail in Ovid's own time.

6. *Odysseus the Liar*

It is not a new insight that people are routinely duped by “survivors” whose sensational claims are at odds with physical reality; it is a paradox of great antiquity. Let me give an example. The two classic survivor memoirs from antiquity are *Aeneid* 2-3 and *Odyssey* 9-12. Both accounts include many incredible features. This is particularly true of Odysseus' account, which he narrates in the court of the Phaeacians. The story he tells there is the most famous part of the *Odyssey*: he speaks of clashing with cannibals, giants, Cyclopes, Scylla, Charybdis, the Sirens, the witch Circe, of communing with the dead, and all sorts of other fantastical stuff that cannot happen in the real world.

In my experience, most readers today readily accept Odysseus' story as true within the fiction of the larger story in which it is embedded. Ancient readers, however, took a more skeptical view. For example, the Roman satirist Juvenal says (15.13-26, emphasis added):

¹⁹ Shields 2008.

attonito cum

tale super cenam facinus narraret Vlixes
 Alcino, bilem aut risum fortasse quibusdam 15
 moverat ut **mendax aretalogus**. “In mare nemo
 hunc abicit saeva dignum veraque Charybdi,
 fingentem inmanis Laestrygonas et Cyclopas?
 nam citius Scyllam vel concurrentia saxa
 Cyaneis plenos et tempestatibus utres 20
 crediderim aut tenui percussum verbere Circes
 et cum remigibus grunnisse Elpenora porcis.
 tam vacui capitis populum Phaeaca putavit?”
 sic aliquis merito nondum ebrius et minimum qui
 de Corcyraea temetum duxerat urna; 25
solus enim haec Ithacus nullo sub teste canebat.

When Odysseus told a tale like this over the dinner table to the amazed Alcinoos, he stirred some to anger, some perhaps to laughter, as a **lying virtue signaler**. “What?” one would say, “will no one hurl this fellow into the sea? He deserves a terrible and *true* Charybdis, with his inventions of monstrous Laestrygones and Cyclopes! I could sooner believe in Scylla and the clashing Cyanean rocks and bags full of stormwinds, or in the story how Circe, by a gentle touch, turned Elpenor and his comrades into grunting pigs. Did he think we Phaeacians are so devoid of brains?”

That’s how someone might justly have spoken who was not yet tipsy, and who’d taken only a small drink of wine from the Corcyraean bowl, **because the Ithacan’s tale was all his own, with none to bear him witness.**

(tr. G. G. Ramsay, modified)

Juvenal’s point is easily understood: Odysseus’ tales are incredible, impossible; therefore, they are untrue. If Odysseus lies about his past on every other occasion in the *Odyssey*—and he does—then why should we believe him in the court of Phaeacia? Juvenal understood better than most, in other words, that virtue-signaling misery literature, victimization tales, sole survivor tales, are both inherently one-sided, and therefore worthy of skepticism, *and* that they are extremely profitable: they win amazing sympathy.

But it is important to realize that Homer himself had already made that point. It is seldom appreciated that when Odysseus finishes his memoir, King Alcinoos is so impressed that he decides to tax his own people to give extra gifts, extra donations, to his amazing guest. Alcinoos instructs his counselors as follows (13.13-15):

ἀλλ' ἄγε οἱ δῶμεν τρίποδα μέγαν ἠδὲ λέβητα
 ἀνδρακάς: ἡμεῖς δ' αὖτε ἀγειρόμενοι κατὰ δῆμον
 τισόμεθ'.

15

But come on, let's give him a great tripod and a cauldron,
 each of us, and we in turn will recoup the cost from among the people,
 and repay ourselves.

That is an impressive honorarium—and a perennially popular way of funding it! Ovid would surely agree that this is the funniest moment in all the *Odyssey*.

Why? Because it is surely significant that in *Tristia* 1.5.59-84, Ovid *himself* compares his own alleged sufferings in exile to Odysseus' account of his wanderings. Like Juvenal, Ovid knows that Odysseus' wanderings are a pack of lies (*pars maxima ficta laborum*, 79), but—amazingly enough—he insists his own ordeals are entirely truthful (*in nostris fabula nulla malis*, 80). By now, however, I hope we can agree that just because an accuser insists his claims are true, that does not make them true. Of course they might be; but as the cliché has it, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. As with Jonah and his whale, or the little girl who says she roamed Europe with wolves, the burden of proof lies with the true believers, not with the skeptics.

I suggest, therefore, that if we just read the “exile” poetry with fresh eyes and allow ourselves the taboo thought, the scales will fall away. Snap out of it! It will become immediately clear that *everything* in the exile poetry is fiction, a pose for literary purposes.

7. The exile poetry as metaphor for isolation and depression

If Ovid's exile poetry is not really a reflection of exile, then what is it? It is, I suggest, a metaphor for isolation and depression. Compare once more Jonah's prayer from inside the belly of the whale (2:5-7):

5 The engulfing waters threatened me,
 the deep surrounded me;
 seaweed was wrapped around my head.
 6 To the roots of the mountains I sank down;
 the earth beneath barred me in forever....

7 "When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD..."

Jonah is not drowning literally. He is drowning existentially, metaphorically. He is discouraged or, to use the medical idiom of our times, he is depressed. And in my view, he sounds exactly like Ovid in the exile poetry.

What then is the exile poetry? Let me conclude by giving my own view.

The exile poetry is the poetry of depression. In it, Ovid cries out in lamentation and loneliness, fear and isolation, in the very same way that Ariadne, Dido, and Attis cry out in lament in the poems of Catullus and Virgil—or indeed, in Ovid's *Heroides*.

In fact, a line in *Heroides* 7 seems to anticipate this line of interpretation. In it Dido tells Aeneas (56),

multa tamen latus tristia pontus habet.

The broad (Mediterranean) sea holds many grim things.

The exile poetry seems to reinterpret this line to mean:

multa tamen latus Tristia Pontus habet.

Wide Pontus holds many *Tristia*...

In the exile poetry, Ovid is making myths just as surely as he makes myths in the *Metamorphoses*; here, however, he shows us the metamorphoses of a man's fortune instead of his shape.

From this point of view, "Tomis" is an appropriate name. Though of non-Greek origin (it may be named for Tomyris, a Massagete queen), it sounds identical to one Greek word for "books," τομοί.²⁰ More to the point, it also evokes the Greek word for "cutting" (self-mutilation?) and being "cut off" from the city—just as Catullus' Attis cuts off his penis and thereby cuts himself off from normal society. In that light, it is hard not to notice that when Ovid claims he lost a dearly beloved brother nearly his own age in *Tristia* 4.10, Catullus too has a famous poem lamenting the loss of a dearly beloved brother, too. Perhaps that is not a coincidence. Similarly, perhaps we ought

²⁰ Bérchez Castaño 2015, 184 says Tomis is of Getic or Thracian origin.

to connect Ovid’s alleged mistake of “seeing” something, *vidi*, with his name, *oVIDIus*.²¹

I realize these are speculations, but I hope readers now see why they are worth suggesting. It is becoming increasingly obvious that Ovid makes many such verbal and thematic links among his different works, such as echoing the *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria* in *MetAMORphosES*, in order to connect the components of his poetic output into a unified whole. In a forthcoming paper, Gareth Williams makes many such links clear, showing how themes and stories in Ovid’s earlier work foreshadow Ovid’s exile poetry. If, however, we regard his exile as literal rather than metaphorical, as Williams does, then we are surely attributing all that ingenuity to Augustus rather than Ovid himself. That strikes me as unlikely to be the case.

Let me close by insisting on proper language. Ovid’s exile is not a hoax. It is not a lie. It was never calculated to deceive. It is, rather, a metaphor whose literal truth we have come to believe in, like witches or the transubstantiation. It is a myth. That is why it is so utterly persuasive. As John F. Kennedy observed,

The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations.²²

M.F.

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²¹ *Tristia* 2.103: *Cur aliquid vidi? Cur noxia lumina feci?*

²² Commencement Address at Yale University, June 11, 1962. — I presented the foregoing paper in 2017 at two conferences devoted to the bimillennary of Ovid’s death, first at Shanghai Normal University in May, then in June at Bucharest University (near Tomis). I presented it a third time in July at the Conventus XIV Academiae Latinitati Fovendae, held at the University of Kentucky. As I expected, audience members were skeptical, some even contemptuous, but not entirely so. Perhaps change is coming.

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