

Ring-Composition in *La Chanson de Roland*  
and *La Chançon de Willame*

In récent years evidence has been advanced that *La Chanson de Roland* and *La Chançon de Willame*, as well as other early extant *chansons de geste*, are the product of oral rather than written composition. The diction of these poems has been shown to differ markedly from the diction of written poetry: it is a "language within a language," so to speak, consisting largely of a finite number of formulas and formulaic systems.<sup>1</sup> In thematic content as well these epics have been shown to differ from most written poems: their action tends for the most part to be built up of a series of stylized themes which are repeated, with variations, a number of times.<sup>2</sup> As the oral thesis is backed by ever more detailed documentation, it becomes increasingly evident that students of Old French epic have come upon a powerful tool for literary discovery. Oral poetry has been shown to differ from most written poetry in other respects than in its diction and thematic content. Investigation of some of these other known characteristics of oral poetry may shed a certain amount of light on more than one time-honored question of *chanson de geste* scholarship.

How, for example, does a singer of tales tend to organize his tale in time? Is there any type of narrative structure which seems to be especially favored by the poet who is forced by the exigencies of oral performance to keep the pattern of his tale before him in the mind at all times? To judge by other epic poetry which is known or believed to be oral, one favorite means of developing an oral narrative is by *ring-composition*, an ABCBA type of organization capable of indefinite extension. In this type of organization the last element in a series is made to correspond in some way with the first, the next-to-the last with the second, and so on, usually up to a central "kernel" element. Cedric Whitman has demonstrated the amazingly complex way in which ring-composition underlies the structure of the *Iliad*,<sup>3</sup> and he has pointed out its presence in selected portions of the *Odyssey*.<sup>4</sup> *Beowulf*, too, exhibits a

<sup>1</sup>See Jean Rychner, *La Chanson de geste: Essai sur l'art épique des jongleurs* (Geneva & Lille, 1955), pp. 126-153; Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960), pp. 202-206; and most recently and thoroughly Joseph J. Duggan, *The Song of Roland: Formulaic Style and Poetic Craft* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>See Rychner, *ibid.*, pp. 127-139, and Stephen G. Nichols, *Formulaic Diction and Thematic Composition in the Chanson de Roland*, *University of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literature* 36 (Chapel Hill, 1961), pp. 28-35.

<sup>3</sup>Cedric Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), Chapter XI (pp. 249-284) and the chart at the end of the book.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 288-289.

clear and complex ring structure.<sup>5</sup> What then of the early chansons de geste? Does ring-composition play a significant role in the structure of La Chanson de Roland and La Chançon de Willame as well?

My researches lead me to conclude that the answer to this question is affirmative. In respect to narrative structure as well as in respect to diction and thematic content, these two early examples of Old French epic show the characteristic signs of an oral technique.

Let me begin by citing an example of ring-composition at work on a fairly small level of magnitude, that of the short verse "paragraph" of some six to twenty lines. Consider lines 2603-2611 of La Chançon de Willame. Willame is at "the court of the Emperor Louis seeking additional troops with which to avenge the death of Vivien at l'Archamp. The Queen, Willam's sister, urges Louis to deny her brother's request and Willame turns on her in fury:<sup>6</sup>

Pute reine, pudneise surparlere,	
Tedbalt vus fut, le culvert lecchere,	
E Esturmi od la malveise chere.	2605
Cil deussent garder l'Archam de la gent paene:	
Il s'en fuirent, Vivien remist arere.	
Plus de cent prestres vus unt ben coillie,	
Forment vus unt cele clume chargee,	
Unc n'i volsistes apeler chambrere.	2610
Pute reine, pudneise surparlere!	

Here, however much Willame may be momentarily out of sorts, the verse shows a degree of logic of its own. The first line and the last obviously frame this verse paragraph. The second and third lines (Tedbalt vus fut, etc., 2604-05) correspond equally clearly to the sixth, seventh, and eighth lines (Plus de cent Prestres, etc., 2608-10). In between are two lines of background information (2606-07) which logically seem to have nothing to do with the main content of the speech but which are included by some process of association. The group of lines could be diagrammed as follows:

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Pute reine, pudneise surparlere
Tedbalt vus fut, etc.
Cowardice of Tedbalt, bravery of Vivien at l'Archamp
Plus de cent prestres, etc.
Pute reine, pudneise surparlere.

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What is the relationship of the kernel element here to the elements which enclose it? Willame does not pause to explain, but evidently the Queen's desertion of Willame is being viewed as an analogue to Tedbalt's desertion of Vivien at l'Archamp. In the earlier case, too, the poet fell back upon backroom humor to characterize the full shameful nature of this desertion: readers of the poem will recall the accident which befalls Tedbalt at the crossroads where the four

<sup>5</sup>See my unpublished doctoral dissertation Aspects of the Oral Art of Beowulf: A Comparative Investigation (University of California, Berkeley, 1972), Chapter 5: "Ring Structure in Beowulf and in Oral Poetry" (pp. 154-190).

<sup>6</sup>La Chanson de Guillaume, ed. Duncan McMillan (Paris, 1949-50), two volumes (vol. 1).

thieves are hanging (lines 340-346).<sup>7</sup>

Few verse "paragraphs" of *La Chanson de Roland* and *La Chançon de Willame* show such striking ring structure as the lines just quoted; more significant is the influence of ring-composition on the structure of large "blocks" of verse. Often an entire episode of from several hundred to several thousand lines may be organized as a self-contained unit within which events answer back and forth to one another with remarkable regularity. The first main episode of *La Chanson de Roland*, for example, the battle at Roncevaux which occupies lines 848-2163, can be seen to partake of a nine-part ring structure. First Marsile's barons assemble, and pledge to destroy Roland and his Franks (848-993). Then the Saracens arm and approach, sounding *mil grailes* (994-1005). Oliver sees them; he repeatedly but fruitlessly urges Roland to summon aid by blowing the *olifan* (1006-1179). The battle is then joined, and both in a series of general combats and in the general *mêlée* the Franks are victorious (1180-1419). At this point, when the Franks' hopes are high, the poet interjects a vision of the tumult in nature which foreshadows Roland's death. The lines are the more powerful for the unexpectedness with which they occur:<sup>8</sup>

En France en ad mult merveillus turment:	
Orez i ad de tuneire e de vent,	
Pluies e gresilz desmesurement;	1425
Chiedent i fuildres e menut e suvent,	
E terre moete ço i ad veirement.	
De seint Michel del Peril josqu'as Seinz,	
Dès Besençon tresqu'al port de Guitsand,	
N'en ad recet dunt del mur ne cravent.	1430
Cuntre midi tenebres i ad granz.	
N'i ad clartet, se li ciels nen i fent.	
Hume nel veit ki mult ne s'espoant.	
Dient plusor: "Co est li definement.	
La fin del secle ki nus est en present."	1435
Il nel sevent, ne dient veir nient:	
Co est li granz dulors por la mort de Rollant.	

After this vision of apocalyptic destruction the battle is rejoined. Both in a series of single combats and in the general *mêlée*, however, the Franks now suffer grievous losses (1438-1690). Once again Roland and Oliver debate over the horn, but now the tables are turned: now it is Roland who wishes to blow the *olifan* and Oliver who scorns aid (1691-1795). Once again an army mounts horse and rides

<sup>7</sup>Un grant chemin u quatre veies furchent,  
 Quatre larruns i pendirent bouche a boche;  
 Bas ert le fest, curtes erent les furches.  
 Li chevals tired, par de desuz l'enporte ultre;  
 Li uns des penduz li hurte lunc la boche.  
 Vit le Tedbalt, sin out doel e vergoigne;  
 De la pour en ordead sa hulce... (340-346).

<sup>8</sup>Quotations from *La Chanson de Roland* as well as citations of line numbers refer to the edition by Joseph Bédier (Paris, 1937).

toward Roncevaux, this time the army of Charles, who rides desperately in an attempt to save his nephew (1796-1850). The episode concludes with the annihilation of the French rearguard with the exception of Roland and Archbishop Turpin and with the flight toward Spain of the surviving Saracens (1850-2163). The symmetry of this episode is clear:

**Saracens assemble, pledge to destroy Franks**  
**Saracens arm and approach with grailles**  
**First debate over blowing of horn**  
**General combat: Franks victorious**  
**Lament in nature for death of Roland**  
**General combat: Franks defeated**  
**Second debate over blowing of horn**  
**Charles' Franks arm and approach with grailles**  
**Decimation of rearguard; Saracens dispersed.**

All action centers on one key narrative interlude: li granz dulors por la mort de Rollant. For a brief moment here the normal flow of the narrative is broken: the myriad vicissitudes of battle fade into insignificance as the elements themselves respond to the coming tragedy. When the flow of the narrative resumes, the tide of battle has turned against the Franks.

Another example of the self-contained narrative unit which is built as a ring is the central portion of *ta Chanson de Roland* from the time of the isolation of Roland and Archbishop Turpin up to the time of Baligant's attack (2166-2973). This part of the poem comprises three main actions: the death of Roland, the vengeance taken by Charlemagne on Marsile's Saracens, and the arrival of Baligant in Saragossa. The following diagram summarizes the way in which events answer to one another within this part of the *chanson*:

**Turpin administers last rites to Franks (2166-2258)**  
**Death of Roland (2259-2397)**  
**Charlemagne arrives at Roncevaux (2398)**  
**Charles' lament for the dead (2399-2422)**  
**Charles' prayer to God for the sun to stop (2447-57)**  
**Miracle of sun: drowning of Saracens (2458-75)**  
**Charles' thanksgiving to God for miracle (2476-81)**  
**Charles' nocturnal visions of destruction (2525-69)**  
**Baligant arrives at Saragossa (2609-2844)**  
**Charles' planctus for the dead Roland (2845-2944)**  
**Charles administers last rites to Franks (2945-73)**

Here again the "kernel" event of the passage partakes of miracle, in this case a miracle of light. The standing still of the sun in mid-sky, which allows Charlemagne time to carry out full vengeance on the fleeing Saracens, once more sets the poem's action into a cosmic context and shows the sympathy of nature and of nature's God for the poem's protagonists. On either side of this central event actions are arrayed in complementary pairs. Immediately before the event Charles descends from his horse (*Culchet sei a tere*, 2449) to pray to God for aid; immediately after the event he once again descends (*Culchet sei a tere*, 2480) to offer God his thanks. The arrival of Charles at Roncevaux finds its answering event in the arrival of Baligant at Saragossa. The death of Roland

is balanced structurally and emotionally by Charlemagne's passionate planctus for his dead nephew ("Amis Rollant, de tei ait Deus mercit!," 2847 ff.). Framing this central portion of the narrative and establishing its dominantly elegiac tone are passages which recount the obsequies bestowed on the bodies of the fallen Franks first by Archbishop Turpin and then by the Emperor Charles.

Other examples of ring-composition within self-contained portions of La Chanson de Roland are not difficult to locate. The terminal episode at Aix, for example, centers on the single combat between Thierry and Pinabel. Immediately framing this incident are two council scenes, at the first of which Ganelon's guilt is debated and at the second of which his punishment. Beginning and ending the episode are brief incidents which deal with the response of female personages (first la belle Aude, later the Saracen queen Bramimonde) to the poem's catastrophe.

The whole of La Chanson de Roland, in fact, may be described fairly well as a single great ring which is composed in turn of a number of lesser rings. As has been suggested elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> the main episodes of the poem, like parts of a Romanesque cathedral, are set into careful balance with one another. The prelude at Roncevaux, which serves to motivate Ganelon's treason, is balanced by the terminal episode at Aix at which his treason finds its reward. Marsile's initial attack against Roland is balanced on a grander scale by Baligant's attack against Charlemagne; weighing against the death of Roland and the annihilation of the rearguard is the death of both Baligant and Marsile and the decimation or conversion of their Saracens.

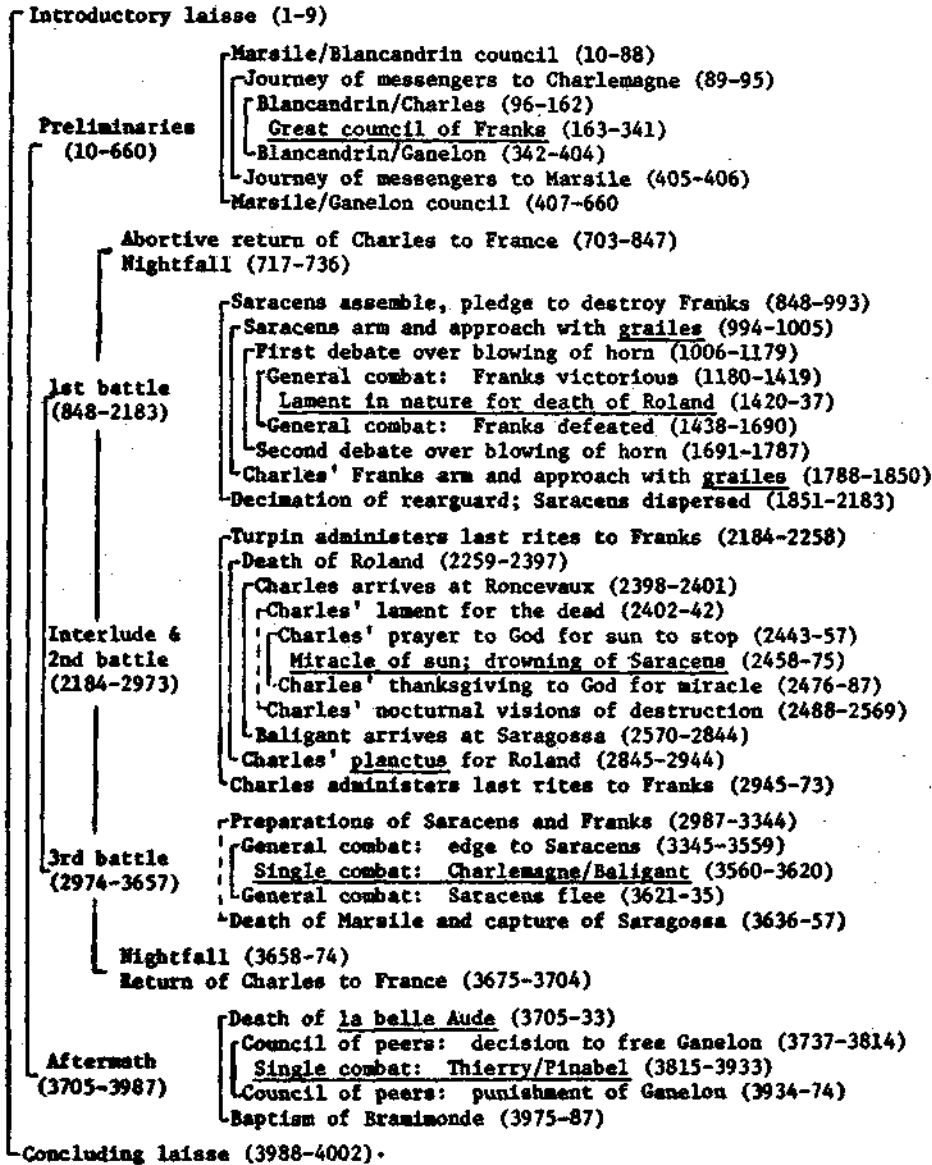
The diagram on the following page summarizes the overall ring structure of La Chanson de Roland. As can be seen, no important part of the poem stands apart from the ring structure which informs the whole. From beginning to end, events answer back and forth to one another with a regularity which cannot be the result of chance. The author of the Oxford Roland, we must conclude, deserves admiration not only for his mastery of the white-hot incident, for his direct and forceful style, and for his vivid characterization, but for his keen sense of form. Like a master builder, he knew how to maneuver large blocks of verse into place so that their narrative weight would be effectively balanced by counterweights. Whether his skill was solely the product of innate genius or (as is more likely) was perfected in the course of his oral training, we may conclude that in fashioning the poem preserved in Digby MS 23 at Oxford he authored a work of unusually subtle symmetry of form.

La Chançon de Willame also partakes of ring structure, albeit of a simpler kind. In order to perceive this structure, however, one must free himself from the generally accepted opinion that the poem as it has come down to us is an artificial compilation of two independent songs, La Chançon de Willame proper (1-1980) and La Chanson de Rainouart (1981-end).<sup>10</sup> Primitive, bizarre,

<sup>9</sup>See Fern Farnham, "Romanesque Design in the Chanson de Roland," Romance Philology, XVIII (1964), pp. 143-164.

<sup>10</sup>For several different statements of this point of view, see Duncan McMillan, ed., La Chanson de Guillaume (Paris, 1949-50), vol. 2, pp. 127-130; Jean Wathélet-Willem, "La Chançon de Willame; Le problème de l'unité du MS

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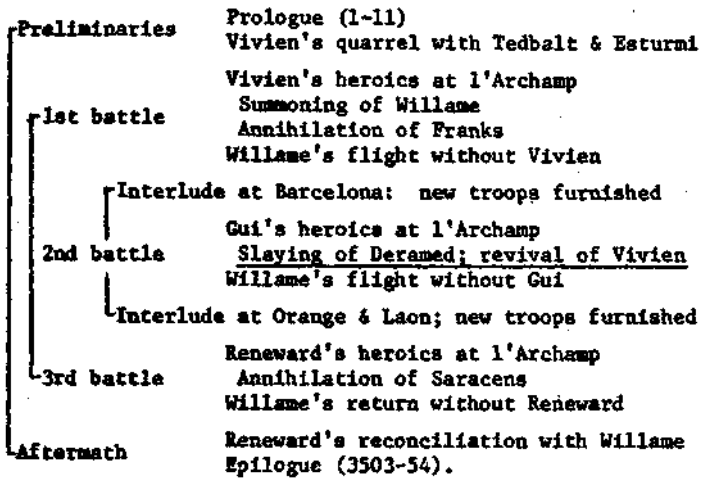
and at times self-contradictory the poem may be, but in my view it does not wholly lack unity.

In its broad outlines the Willame is threefold in shape. First comes the tale of Vivien's heroics at l'Archamp (12-932). At the end comes the tale of Reneward's heroics at l'Archamp (2647-3502). In between, occupying the broad central portion of the narrative, is the tale of Willame's various adventures on the battlefield, at home, and at Laon. The first and third parts of this threefold structure complement one another well. In act of suicidal audacity Vivien attempts almost singlehanded to hold off an attacking Saracen army. Both he and his Franks are annihilated. In an act of still more incredible audacity Reneward, armed only with his tinel, wades into the very same Saracen host. This time it is the pagans who are annihilated. However antithetical Vivien and Reneward may be in character—Vivien surpasses in nobility all other persons of the epic while Reneward is always half the buffoon—the poet seems to have perceived some essential likeness between them. Both are youths. Both are close kin to Willame, though up to the end of the poem Reneward serving in effect as Vivien's avenger. In the end the poet links the two men directly: Willame rewards Reneward with gifts which include, significantly, the whole of Vivien's former estates (tote la tere Vivien le ber, 3501).

Once one perceives a similarity between the role of Vivien and that of Reneward in the narrative then the symmetry of La Chançon de Willame becomes clear. In brief, the poem consists of three main battles separated by interludes and framed by scenes of quarrel and reconciliation. At the very beginning occurs the quarrel between Vivien on the one hand and Tedbalt and Esturmi on the other. Angered by the drunken boasting of his superiors, Vivien goes to his hostel alone. The next day the first main battle is joined. It is compound in nature. First Vivien and his men are cut down despite heroic resistance. Word is brought to Willame; that night he hastens to l'Archamp, but the next day his troops too are cut down to a man. There follows a dramatic interlude at Barcelona in the course of which Willame is rewarded with new troops. In the second main battle, which soon follows, Willame succeeds in killing the Saracen king Deramed but once again suffers the total loss of his troops. There follows a second dramatic interlude, first at Orange and then at Laon, as again Willame is granted reinforcements. In the third main battle the boy hero Reneward annihilates the Saracen host. Concluding the main action of the poem is a scene of reconciliation as Reneward, enraged at Willame over an imagined slight, is persuaded to give over his wrath and join in the general celebrations. In the poem's terminal laisse the true identity of Reneward is revealed.

The correspondances between the main parts of La Chançon de Willame are summarized in the diagram on the following page. The poem moves from an initial crushing defeat for the Franks, to an intermediate combat of mixed victory and loss, to a final crushing victory. Corresponding to this three-fold progression is a progression in the role of the secondary hero. Vivien dominates the terrible first fight. The comic third fight belongs to the buffoonish Reneward. In

British Add. 38663, "Medium AEvum, LVIII (1952), pp. 363-377; Jean Frappier, Les Chansons de geste du cycle de Guillaume d'Orange, I; La Chanson de Guillaume, Aliscans, La Chevalerie Vivien (Paris, 1955), p. 131 et passim; and Jean Rychner, La Chanson de geste: Essai sur l'art épique des jongleurs (Geneva & Lille, 1955), pp. 46-47 and 159-170.

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between, leaping up from nowhere to assume a role comparable to that of Vivien and Reneward, appears the ash-boy hero Gui. Just as the second battle partakes of both victory and defeat, Gui's exploits manage to inspire now humor, now awe. Overall, the poem lacks the interlocking complexity of design of La Chanson de Roland but achieves a comparable formal clarity: for a poem whose structure has been so vociferously maligned, La Chançon de Willame shows a remarkable balance and symmetry of parts.

Let us see where we stand.

First of all, since both La Chanson de Roland and La Chançon de Willame exhibit a geometric structure of a type especially favored by oral poets the likelihood is strengthened that both poems are oral in origin. The ring-structure of La Chanson de Roland, in particular, gives evidence by its complexity that a long oral poem may be not less but more highly organized than a comparable poem composed pen in hand. This conclusion is in accord with what is known of the diction of oral poetry: as is well known, a poem being composed in the process of being sung aloud is much more highly subject to patterning in diction than is a comparable written poem. In time, one hopes, scholars will learn to recognize the ability of trained singers to organize and hold in the mind, without benefit of pen and paper, vast and seemingly chaotic narrative materials.

In addition, it would appear that both La Chanson de Roland and La Chançon de Willame are complete poems as they stand. They neither lack essential parts nor include material which is not subordinated to the whole. In view of the beauty of design of La Chanson de Roland, in particular, one can scarcely sympathize with scholars who in seeking to "perfect" the poem have wished to excise from it whole narrative portions. Perhaps the poem could be re-written to achieve symmetry without Baligant, for example, but this is not the poem we

have. In time critics may have to make their peace with *Reneward* as well. However erratic the poet of the *Willame* may have been as a stylist—however much he may have tired at times, as in the *Reneward* episode—the overall plan of the poem lacks neither coherence nor dignity. Unlike the *Roland*, the *Willame* is a comedy. Also unlike the *Roland*, the *Willame* is no polished work of art but appears to be the result of a careless performance haphazardly reproduced. These two factors may account in part for the frequency with which the poem has been misunderstood.

One final aspect of the ring structure of *La Chanson de Roland* and *La Chançon de Willame* deserves mention. In each case the "kernel" event of the poem's overall ring structure partakes of miracle. In the *Roland*, the critical event is the standing still of the sun in mid-sky, an event which permits the drowning of Marsile's army. At the center of the *Willame* occurs the killing of Deramed and the subsequent coming to life of Vivien. It is a curious fact that the "kernel" event of other oral epic poems as well represents some kind of breakthrough from everyday human world to an "other" world of death and more than human power: the "kernel" event of *Beowulf* is the hero's slaying of Grendel's dam in the depths of the monsters' pool, while in the *Odyssey*, as Cedric Whitman has shown, the story of Odysseus' wanderings which occupies Books IX-XII centers on the hero's visit to the world of the dead to speak with the shade of the blind seer Teiresias. Whatever the significance of this fact may be, it is clear that at its very midpoint an oral narrative is capable of the utmost intensity. Here, if anywhere, is where we must look if we wish greater understanding of the mythic substructure of these tales. In time, one hopes, the "kernel" events in the ring structure of *La Chanson de Roland* and *La Chançon de Willame* as well as of other archaic epic poems will be studied more intently as chiefly structural studies such as the present one are made the foundation of more far-ranging inquiries.

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