

Aleksandra Kamińska

Jagiellonian University

Politicising Euripides: *A Mouthful of Birds* by Caryl Churchill and David Lan

Abstract: The article discusses *A Mouthful of Birds* by Caryl Churchill and David Lan in terms of its relation to its Greek inspiration: Euripides' *Bacchae*. Contrary to Michael Billington's opinion that the fascination with the classics which dominated the 1980s theatre in Britain led to the emergence of an 'interpretative culture' motivated by artists' inability to address current political issues, the article analyses a 1980s play that uses its classical source precisely to make political statements. In the course of the article the intertextual links between *A Mouthful of Birds* and *The Bacchae* are analysed with special focus on the politics motivating the modern text. Julie Sanders' theory of literary appropriation is used to discuss selected themes addressing feminist, postcolonial and gender politics.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, David Lan, Euripides, intertextuality, literary appropriation

In his book *State of the Nation*, *The Guardian's* theatre critic Michael Billington laments the 1980s in Britain as an era of little creativity in terms of new writing. According to him, the Thatcherite government's steady cuts on the Arts Council grant resulted in a 'gradual shift from a creative to interpretative culture' in British theatre (Billington 2007: 322). In his opinion, this is the reason why the key theatrical productions from that period include RSC's *The Greeks* directed by John Barton, a ten-play cycle staged as a day-long event at the Aldwych Theatre (1980), followed by Peter Hall's production of *The Oresteia* (National Theatre, 1981) (Billington 2007: 323, 298–300).

Although these productions devoted much attention to the contemporary resonance of the classical plays, Billington remains inconsolable: 'the well [of new writing] looked in danger of drying up' (Billington 2007: 322). The revived interest in the classics was for him directly linked to the artists' inability to address pressing political issues of the day. 'Through its mixture of moral bullying and punitive cutbacks, Thatcherism stifled intellectual discussion' (Billington 2007: 307). In

his view, the only play that seriously addressed the radically changed political landscape was Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (Billington 2007: 307).

This diagnosis seems rather harsh. In fact, the fascination with the Greeks that imprinted itself so firmly on the 1980s theatre amounted to much more than just an 'interpretative culture.'

A good example to prove it is *A Mouthful of Birds*, a play co-written by Caryl Churchill and David Lan and first staged in 1986 by Joint Stock. Similar to Barton and Hall, the playwrights turned to the Greeks for inspiration, but their undertaking can hardly be accused of lack of political verve. In fact, they use themes distilled from a Greek play and place them in a modern setting, in order to address crucial political issues of the era: the empowerment of women, postcolonialism and the politics of gender.

Churchill's much quoted statement is that '[m]ost plays can be looked at from political perspective' whether the playwright intended them to be politically charged or not (quoted in Aston and Diamond 2009: 1). And indeed, all the characters in *A Mouthful of Birds* are political beings, who function within specific cultural and gender constraints. They are 'identified specifically by social and professional roles' only to 'find themselves overtaken by passion, obsession, habit, such that law, sovereign reason, strict regulation of gender roles — all the ballasts of patriarchy — are dislodged in a violent release of psychic and sexual energy' (Diamond 1988: 200).

As Libby Worth reports, the original inspiration for the project was the playwrights' shared interest in Euripides' *Bacchae*, but rather than just adapting the play, both Churchill and Lan were keen to work with contemporary resonances of the themes that the *Bacchae* includes (Worth 2009: 73). While David Lan, according to his anthropological fascinations, wanted to examine the theme of possession, Caryl Churchill saw in the text a perfect opportunity to continue exploring her feminist interests, focusing on the theme of women and violence (Cousin 1989: 56).

From the onset, the *Bacchae* was to be used merely as a point of departure for their further theatrical explorations. The outcome of a jointly conducted workshop was the co-written play, in which Churchill's and Lan's interests are combined. The workshop, involving choreographic work supervised by Ian Spink, as well as group readings followed by discussions, improvisation sessions, and interviews with various invited guests, added new material, which allowed the playwrights to depart from the storyline of the Greek play.

As a result, *A Mouthful of Birds* is far removed from its literary source in terms of plot and characters. The play can hardly be treated as hypertextual according to Genette's definition, demanding that the derived text cannot exist without its source (Genette 1997: 6–7, Alfaro 1996: 280–281) and that understanding its meaning depends upon the readers' and spectators' knowledge of the hypotext (Allen 2003: 108). This is important so far as it defeats Billington's claim that Ancient Greek

inspirations automatically mean less original writing. Churchill and Lan's text proves that, in fact, it is perfectly possible to have both.

Churchill and Lan's play presents seven stories of possession happening to seven contemporary characters who seemingly bear no link whatsoever to the *Bacchae* plotline. Also their corresponding stories remain essentially unlinked. In fact, the only character connecting the two texts is Dionysus himself (only in *A Mouthful of Birds* the part is silent and consists solely of dancing¹). The contemporary text is divided into thirty two short scenes, each headed by a title, including six scenes entitled 'Possession'. These scenes are quite short, but equivocally violent and abrupt, relating directly to the plot of the *Bacchae*.

Apart from the 'Possession' scenes, *A Mouthful of Birds* almost completely lacks immediate intertextual references to the *Bacchae*. Direct textual references are very sparse and whenever they are used, it is usually in comical context (like in scene 13 entitled *Baron Sunday*, in which Marcia, a Trinidadian medium, announces: 'The one who thieved the bracelet, that's the one in purgatory. The penalty to break god's law — hm — death', 18). The allusion to Pentheus' terrible punishment for 'breaking the god's law' and refusing to worship Dionysus is made in the context of a (probably sham) spiritual *séance*, the king's horrible death juxtaposed with a girl coming to a medium in order to discover (for a moderate fee of 'ten p's', 17) the whereabouts of a lost bracelet.

Churchill and Lan's focus is not on reconstructing the plot of Euripides' play but rather on reinterpreting its central themes. Essentially, the Dionysian rites to which the Greek play refers are deeply feminised. In their rituals, the Bacchantes escaped the patriarchal rules of ancient Greece. And this is precisely what Pentheus is ready to fight against in Euripides' play. His opposition to the new cult stems mainly from his unwillingness to accept the situation in which his royal power slips through his fingers and women — who, in his view, should stand at the very bottom of the social hierarchy — are emancipated through the new worship. From his speech it seems evident that his opposition to the Dionysian rites is largely motivated by the need to reaffirm his patriarchal control over women, who followed the new god into the woods. What angers him most is their abandonment of prescribed gender and social roles: 'I only have to leave town, go away for a few days, and what happens? What's this I hear about strange goings-on, women leaving home to roam around the mountains (...)?' (119). The king clearly perceives Dionysian mysteries as a threat to the patriarchal sexual domination. 'And, of course, in the midst of all this revelry, drink. Then off they creep to bed down with some man in a quiet corner' (119–120).

It is true that Dionysian mysteries are unique in the sense that they are deeply feminised. To the essentially patriarchal social and political system of Thebes, the

¹ Moreover, in *A Mouthful of Birds* the part of Dionysus is at times danced by two dancers simultaneously (Dionysos 1 and 2) — which possibly refers to the god's duality and fits in with the Ancient Greek tradition of depicting Dionysus as a double persona.

arrival of Dionysus is tantamount to a revolution. The god brings with him ‘an outlaw system’, which is ‘ecstasy’ (Schechner 1968: 424). The functioning of the city depends on a universal agreement to adhere to a particular system of values: ‘[t]he men have their tasks, the women theirs; the government is highly organised and centralised; political and religious power have been separated, each with its own claims, traditions and spokesmen’ (Schechner 1968: 417). Meanwhile, Dionysus ‘embodies the antithesis of all this’ (Schechner 1968: 417).

For most female characters in *A Mouthful of Birds*, possession scenes take them on a path of self-discovery and help them reaffirm their strength. For instance, Lena is a young mother struggling with postpartum depression. In the first scene of the play, *Skinning a Rabbit*, she is unable to handle the dead animal in order to prepare a meal. ‘Look at the hole in its stomach’ (3), she repeats, as if entranced. The violence inherent in taking a life is unbearable to her. In her possession scene, however, we see her murdering her own child. What Lena experiences is clearly a psychotic state — while she talks to her husband about every-day, mundane things, she is spoken to by a Spirit, who instigates her to kill the baby. She should kill it to finally be free: ‘When you kill the baby you’ll be free of him. You’ll be free of yourself. You’ll be free of me. That’s why you’re going to kill the baby’ (13). The act of killing the child is meant to sever this connection and annul Lena’s role of the mother in a patriarchal nuclear family. Even more than that — it is the only way in which Lena can be born to life: ‘The universe will go forward again when you kill the baby. Then he [the husband] won’t fill up all the space. Then you might get born’ (14).

In killing the baby, Lena becomes linked to Agave but in their appropriation of Euripides’ text the contemporary playwrights make one crucial change to the pattern. Even though Lena is in a sense beside herself when she commits the act, she is never blinded to such an extent that she becomes unaware of what she is doing. Agave believes that she hunts and slaughters an animal, only later to discover that what she holds in her hand is not a lion’s head but the butchered corpse of her own son. Lena is fully conscious that she is drowning her baby daughter. In doing this she makes a choice, even if a terrifying one, but one that serves a particular purpose of escaping from the constraints of the patriarchal order that suffocates her.

Another character, Yvonne, makes a similar journey. In scene 21, *Golden Shoes*, she is shown as an alcoholic. She repeats two sorts of alphabets, desperately (and, sadly, in vain) trying to replace the alphabet of an alcoholic (‘A – advocaat. B? Brandy? C? Cognac’, 40) with a non-alcoholic one (‘A – apple. B? Butterfly’, 40). She is supposed to be leaving for a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous but she cannot bear it, and she denies her addiction: ‘I’ll go to the meeting but I won’t go tonight. I can’t bear to sit there ... my name, Yvonne... alcoholic. I’m not an alcoholic’ (41). The playwrights’ interest in alcoholism is quite obviously derived from the fact that Dionysus is the god of wine and ecstatic states of the Bacchantes were closely tied to intoxication (Cousin 1989: 56). Although some critics

claim that *Golden Shoes* investigate ‘potential impact of alcoholism on society’ (Nutten 2001), I would argue that they focus rather on the devastating impact of alcoholism on human psyche. We know that Yvonne is in terrible pain (her mother shouts at her: ‘You’ve worn me out, out, out. I’m finished with your crying, your howling’, 42) and that the alcohol makes her violent (‘You going to cut me again?’, asks her mother, ‘I’m cut to pieces’, 42). Like Lena, Yvonne hurts another female, the closest blood relative, and through this she metaphorically hurts herself.

According to Raima Evan, Yvonne’s addiction, her violence, and suffering all result from her relationship to the body, ‘one defined not by strength but by weakness. Her escape into the world of high society, fashion, and alcohol revealed her anxiety about her body and appearance — only too typical of many women’s relationships with their bodies’ (Evan 2002: 276). The golden shoes which she attempts to wear (together with a pair of dungarees) become thus an oppressive, patriarchal Cinderella’s shoe — something that a woman is supposed to wear and look good in, and if it does not fit, cutting off heels and toes is the only possible solution.

Fortunately, Yvonne manages to connect with her violent impulses and learns to control them. She abandons her work as an acupuncturist (another stereotypically nurturing feminine job) and becomes a butcher. In the profession, Churchill and Lan appropriate the Bacchantes hunting and killing rites but in a pronouncedly politicised way. Yvonne’s new job is a typically masculine one, requiring physical strength and resilience to violence. She is clearly proud that she is better at it than her male colleagues, who come to her for help. Obviously, she feels happy, fulfilled, in the right place. ‘When I was young I’d dream. I’d wake and forget. Now I sleep, I wake, I’m here’, she says (51). Her being ‘here’ translates as being present in the moment, identifying herself with her new life.

Overcoming the patriarchal stereotypes and recognising their capacity for violence (persistently denied to women according to the patriarchal standards), Yvonne and Lena are able to redefine themselves and transform their lives in a manner that finally suits them. Through unleashing, recognising and controlling their violence they gain their freedom as women and individuals. That is much more than Euripides could have allowed the Theban queen.

Their situation is contrasted with that of another character, Doreen. Significantly, she is the one possessed by Agave in the play, so, in a way, she re-enacts the queen’s story. Doreen, unlike Lena and Yvonne, does not come to terms with her violent impulses. She remains locked in her body, incapacitated by a terrible, agonising pain that she experiences. In her psychotic states, her behaviour is marked by self-aggression (‘Doreen bites her arm’, 48). As a woman, she is utterly victimised, associates her femininity with inferiority, aggression and guilt (‘My sister lives with a man who ... poured boiling water over her head and she thinks it’s her fault’, she relates, 48). Her physical and emotional pain becomes unbearable: ‘I can find no rest,’ she says (53). Despite her pain and worsening psychological condition, she still keeps within the boundaries ascribed to her in a male-dominated world, which

adds to her suffering: 'It seems my mouth is full of birds which I crunch between my teeth. Their feathers, their blood and broken bones are choking me. I carry on my work as a secretary' (53). Her physical pain may be read as a metaphorical (or perhaps psychosomatic?) reaction of protest against the life she must live. Raima Evan interestingly points out that this is perfectly adequate to the social situation that reduces women to their bodies only:

the female body in pain is an expression of women's entrapment in a social system that reduces them to bodies. Thus, the violent possession scenes — the physical pain and the psychic struggle — are the metaphors for a nexus of violent conditions — social, sexual, psychological, racial, economic — which affect women on a daily basis. (Evan 2002: 266)

Doreen's incapacity of freeing herself is, it seems, a political statement in itself. In the words of Elin Diamond, in *A Mouthful of Birds* female '[e]cstatic, dying, dancing, screaming, possessed bodies attempt to represent the release from the representation and in the futility of that endeavour a feminist politics is made visible' (Diamond 1988: 204).

With the fourth female character, Marcia, the problem is even more complex — apart from feminist undertones there are also postcolonial allusions. In Euripides' play a conflict may be traced between the Greek culture and the Orient. Dionysus is an outsider and the discord between Theban customs and the rich, ecstatic worship of the new deity stems partly from cultural differences. As Richard Schechner points out, Dionysus comes from the 'East with its warmth, its flesh, its perfume, its dancing' (Schechner 1968: 416). The clash of the sensual Eastern cult with austere Theban traditions is unavoidable.

Churchill and Lan pick up this element, appropriate and transform it into a political commentary on colonialism and multicultural society (which is just one of the many links between *A Mouthful of Birds* and Churchill's earlier play, *Cloud Nine*). Marcia is a Trinidadian, living and working in Britain. She operates a switchboard in a company selling lingerie and for her work she must hide her accent, so she constantly switches between standard British and West Indian accent. What is more, she is sexually harassed by her white boss and has to put up with it, for otherwise she might lose her job. She is not attracted to him in the least but she has no choice: 'I'd have to be desperate to look at him. In fact I am desperate,' she says (4). In *A Mouthful of Birds* Marcia is the ultimate Other, the most victimised character of all. '[S]he is the epitome of the disempowered woman of colour,' 'disempowered employee from a colonised country, who functions as the instrument of a company that represents the British empire' (Evan 2002: 278). The phrase 'I am desperate' becomes Marcia's refrain, repeated several times in the play, as it best summarises her situation.

The theme of postcolonial critique is further explored in Marcia's possession scene, in which she acts as a 'Trinidadian medium,' attempting to connect with a spirit called Baron Sunday, symbolising her Trinidadian cultural roots. Instead, against her wishes she is possessed by Sybil — 'a spirit from the white

upper-middle classes' (17). The spirit physically takes over Marcia's space (her chair), imposes the white upper middle class logic on her and begins to give orders. Her justification is always the same: 'That's how it is done in this country' (20).

As Elin Diamond puts it, 'in a white sexist culture, otherness is crippling; a spirit in the shape of a white upper class woman inhabits her [Marcia], steals her West Indian accent, and rejects her gods' (1988: 201). Despite Marcia's protestations that she 'gets on good with Baron Sunday' and needs no other spirits (21), Sybil is there to stay, imposing, threatening, and suffocating. Again, this is projected onto Marcia's body — she suffers terrible headaches. Finally, there comes a crucial scene when she discovers that she is unable to speak: 'No words come out,' indicate the stage directions (22). The white upper-middle class spirit has taken away her voice.

Taking away Marcia's voice, Sybil symbolically 'silences her discourse' (Evan 2002: 278). Both postcolonial and female subject, she is the ultimate subaltern in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's term: '[i]f, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply shadow' (Spivak 1993: 82–3).

At the end of the play, there is no happy ending, no empowerment for Marcia. She flees from the society to live alone at sea. She has no intention of ever coming back ashore: 'If I go ashore they'll ask my name. I could tell them — oh, what I could tell them. Horror. What for?' (52). Apparently, she does not belong anywhere. She remains the subaltern — forever wrapping herself up in her silence.

Apart from feminist and postcolonial politics, *A Mouthful of Birds* addresses also the theme of gender fluidity. This aspect of the play is very deeply Dionysian: the god is traditionally represented as ambivalent in terms of gender. Called the 'twice born god' (Kubiak 2013: 399), he was born first from his mother's womb, then from his father Zeus' thigh, and thus he combines in him the two sexes. What is more, in his childhood he had to be hidden from the wrath of jealous goddess Hera and so he was raised as a girl, clothed in female clothes (Kubiak 2013: 399). His is, therefore, an ambiguous sex, hybridity, the state that Foucault calls 'the happy limbo of non-identity' (Foucault 2010: xiii).

In *A Mouthful of Birds*, Dionysus is also presented as ambivalent in terms of gender: with long hair and delicate complexion, wearing 'a white petticoat' (3). His costume introduces a puzzling element of cross-dressing, 'suggestive of his ambivalent sexuality' (Cousin 1989: 58). But most importantly, in Churchill and Lan's play the aspect of Dionysian ambivalent sexuality is represented through the character of the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin. Elin Diamond argues that "Herculine's 'twice-sexed body' is 'an echo of the twice-born Dionysus'" (Diamond 2009: 134) and indeed s/he in a way repeats the Dionysian myth: twice sexed, raised as a girl, with fluid, ambiguous identity that produces a hypnotising sexual appeal.

The character of Herculine Barbin is based on a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite who was brought up as a girl but later, after a medical examination,

s/he was forced to undergo a medical procedure of sex correction and assume a male identity (Foucault 2010: xi–xii). S/he became Abel Barbin but could not accept this new life and committed suicide eight years after the fatal medical intervention. The character in *A Mouthful of Birds* draws largely on Barbin's memoirs. The stage directions determine that Herculine should be played by a woman in man's clothing, which symbolises that her natural gender is female and the male identity is something external, imposed on her (exactly the same mechanism was used in Churchill's *Cloud Nine*).

Herculine is undoubtedly an appropriation of a motif from Euripides' play — after all, 'sexual confusion is precisely what Pentheus struggles against' (Diamond 1988: 202). What s/he represents, however, is the rigidity of socially imposed gender identities that have nothing to do with one's inner self. 'Hermaphrodite,' Barbin comments bitterly, 'the doctors were fascinated. How to define this body, does it fascinate you, it doesn't fascinate me, let it die' (35).

As Foucault asserts in his introduction to Barbin's memoirs, the necessity of medical adjustment of one's sex means the 'disappearance of free choice' (Foucault 2010: ix). For Herculine Barbin, 'the happy limbo of non-identity' (Foucault 2010: xiii) was bliss, whereas the imposition of norms brings on pain and death. His repeated refrain is all but elegiac in tone: 'Abel Barbin, suicide, they'll find the body of a man in the morning, no one will doubt it. Was I really Herculine Barbin, playing by the sea' (35). Churchill and Lan demonstrate how the imposition of gender identities against people's will is also a form of violence. And it is all inscribed on the body, as in the play 'the body becomes a kind of limit-text of representational information, a special site of inquiry and struggle' (Diamond 1988: 189).

But there is more to the presence of Herculine Barbin in the play. In a meaningful scene Derek (who in several other scenes in the play is possessed by Pentheus, who symbolises the traditional, patriarchal set of values) begins to take on Herculine's speeches and becomes, in fact, possessed by her subversive, hermaphroditic identity. Finally, Herculine stands behind Derek and in a vampire-like gesture kisses him on the neck. For the audience watching the play they would be forming a disturbing double figure — a Dionysian mixture of the masculine and feminine element.

For Derek, this scene of possession is a means of achieving freedom. In his final scene, entitled simply *Body*, he describes his delight in his transformed, hermaphroditic body: 'My breasts aren't big but I like them. My waist isn't small but it makes me smile. My shoulders are still strong' (52). Now he is finally at peace with him/herself, fearless and open: 'My skin used to wrap me up, now it lets the world in ... I've almost forgotten the man who possessed this body. I can't remember what he used to be frightened of' (52). On the one hand, 'the ease with which some of the characters slide into new subject positions ... illustrates the inherent instability of social discourse in the form of prescribed gender roles' (Nutton 2001), on the other, it shows the cruelty of imposing forced restrictions on the gendered body. 'At the bottom of sex, there is truth', claims Foucault (2010: xi) and the character

of Herculine Barbin best exemplifies what happens to those who are forced to live a lie. Conversely, Derek's final happiness in the ambivalent body is a joyful rediscovery of possibility, which has important political implications: gender norms and restrictions are a form of oppression. Gender oppression, symbolised by the tragedy of Herculine Barbin, is visibly contrasted with the sense of freedom accompanying Derek's 'transformation' into Herculine, which undermines and overcomes the supposedly natural connection between sexed bodies and gender.

Churchill and Lan move far away from the plot of Euripides' play but, instead, they retain something else: the liberating aspect of the subversive space that Dionysus represents. In his analysis of *The Bacchae*, Richard Schechner points out that Dionysus' actions and Dionysian rituals presented in the play are 'politically and socially disruptive' (Schechner 1968: 419). Anarchy lies in the very nature of the deity: 'Dionysus is natural disorder, human chaos, the original stuff civilisation struggles against to survive' (Schechner 1968: 418). And this is precisely what Churchill and Lan's play is about. As Amelia Howe Kritzer sums up, '*A Mouthful of Birds* takes as its central action the rediscovery of complexity and multiplicity through the destruction of artificially constructed individual identity. That Churchill regards such rediscovery as having profound political significance is evident' (Kritzer 1989: 130–131).

Caryl Churchill is well known for her political interests and it comes as no surprise that *A Mouthful of Birds* makes such a decisive political statement. As Genette points out, 'there is no such thing as innocent transposition' (Genette 1997: 294) and what Churchill and Lan achieve with their play is not mere adaptation but rather it falls into the category of artistic appropriation as defined by Julie Sanders. In her book *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2005) Sanders plays on words in order to point out how adaptations and appropriations are 'after' canonical works — not only in the literal, temporal sense, but also in a metaphorical one: of assault or chasing. 'The drive of many of the appropriations ... to go "after" certain canonical works and question their basis in patriarchal or imperial cultural contexts is an important act of questioning' (Sanders 2005: 157), she writes.

Sanders stresses, therefore, that adaptation and appropriation are cultural processes that are essentially political: 'In appropriations ... what is often inescapable is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer's, director's, or performer's decision to re-interpret a source text' (Sanders 2005: 2). This is definitely true about *A Mouthful of Birds*. In fact, the political content of Churchill and Lan's text is quite Dionysian in character. It comes across in the way in which central political themes of the play — feminists, postcolonial and gender politics — are approached: through supernatural experience and liberating force of violence and madness, as well as the liberating subversive space of ambiguity.

It was during the workshop which preceded the writing of *A Mouthful of Birds* that Caryl Churchill came up with the idea of an 'undefended day', which was to define the whole concept of the play. She argued that on everyday basis people use habit and 'normality' as defence mechanisms, barring anything that may threaten to

unleash their demons and regulating their responses and behaviour. Conversely, the 'undefended day' is a state when people 'release all kinds of internal and external forces which are normally held at bay' (Cousin 1989: 57), when 'nothing is fixed and static' (Cousin 1989: 58). It is a time 'of extreme possibilities, in which the characters are open to possession by their own demons and capacities for ecstasy, and also by external powers' (Cousin 1989: 57–8). This refers *A Mouthful of Birds* directly to the Dionysian element of anarchy and possibility, openness for ecstatic states and giving in to all sorts of drives.

Thus, against the austerity of the Thatcherite 1980s, the playwrights proposed the Dionysian 'politics of ecstasy'. Surely this should be enough to prove that the reports of the lack of political drive in Greek-inspired 1980s British theatre have been greatly exaggerated.

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