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Anarchy in the UK: reading *Beryl the Peril* via historic conceptions of childhood

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Biographical note

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Abstract

Much work within the field of childhood studies has focused on the social discourses through which childhood is understood. This **article** draws on this work in developing a critical framework for considering the appeal of *Beryl the Peril*. The **article** examines the influence of conceptualisations of childhood prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. These theorised children as disruptive and requiring restraint. Approved literature for children sought to socialise them into the adult order. However, a more subversive strain, identifiable in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* novels, celebrated an anarchic vision of childhood. This **article** examines how *Beryl the Peril* negotiated these conflicting conceptions of childhood. Beryl is an unruly force; her opponent, and representative of social authority, is Dad. Their clashes play out the tensions in these articulations of childhood. The development of *Beryl* over nearly sixty years provides an opportunity to examine how her subversive spirit has remained appealing.

Keywords

Childhood; comics; British; order; anarchy; education; society

Theorising childhood

The scholarly study of childhood as a historically placed and socially constructed phenomenon is a relatively new area within academia. The field, which is notably interdisciplinary in approach, combining elements particularly from sociology and cultural studies, has been strongly informed by the work of Alison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout. Key works include *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* edited by Prout and James (1990), *Theorizing Childhood* written by James, Jenks and Prout (1998), and *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy and Social Practice* written by Allison James and Adrian L. James (2004). Central to their discussions is the notion of childhood as an epistemological concept framed by social and cultural discourses. The consequent implication of this being that characteristics of childhood often assumed to occur 'naturally' or to be as a matter of accepted wisdom are actually the result of underlying value systems.

In *Theorizing Childhood*, James, Jenks and Prout differentiate clearly between these two modes of considering childhood (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 3-4). The first, which they call presociological, is what might be described as the commonplace or accepted everyday sense in which we might think of childhood. The second, or in their terms sociological, is one that relies on more overt, self-conscious conceptualisations of childhood, and on the testing of these ideas through gathering evidence. They further divide the sociological category into four different approaches of which the first, the 'socially constructed child', is to be used in this **article**. This approach in particular denies the value of commonsense, accepted wisdom regarding childhood and instead identifies it as a social phenomenon which can only be understood through careful examination of the context which has produced it. This is a methodology that depends on 'the predispositions of a consciousness constituted in relation to our social, political, historical and moral context' (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 27). As they acknowledge, this is intrinsically hermeneutical in that it needs to draw in a variety of discourses which may combine at any given time to construct a specific definition of childhood. A key aspect of this approach, certainly for this **article**, is in seeing childhood as something historically placed, a product of a given time, and yet also part of a continuum of evolving conceptual frameworks in which pre-existing conceptions of childhood can still hold sway over those of the moment. Their study goes on to put this into practical usage by directly placing concepts of childhood within two

dominant paradigms, one in which social space is central and a second which emphasises temporality.

In their more recent work, *Constructing Childhood*, Allison James and Adrian L. James follow a similar trajectory by asserting that childhood 'cannot be regarded as an unproblematic descriptor of a natural, biological phase. Rather the idea of childhood must be seen as a particular cultural phrasing of the early part of the life course , historically and politically contingent and subject to change' (James and James 2004: 13). This then leads them on to a detailed examination of various social discourses which frame that epistemology, including politics and government policies, the law (both local and international), education, health, crime, and the family. Crucially these factors condition not just the way that adults conceptualise childhood and how they address children, but how children then see themselves. It is here that cultural representations aimed at children, but usually created by adults, such as comic books, can find their place.

Historicising childhood

In all of these texts the historiography of childhood is central. All of the authors above make reference to the work of the historian Philippe Ariès (1962) whose *Centuries of Childhood* attempted to show how conceptions of childhood had changed over various historical time periods, and who went so far as to suggest that in medieval Europe it didn't really exist at all. Of course he wasn't suggesting that children didn't exist but that the concept of childhood as a distinct and identifiable period of human development didn't because no one at the time would have recognised this idea. James, Jenks and Prout acknowledge this historiography of childhood in their section on presociological approaches where they identify a number of early discourses of childhood (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 10-21). Two of these are especially appropriate to this **article**: 'the evil child', conceptualised as embodying uninhibited malevolence, and 'the unconscious child' in which many of the same characteristics are filtered through the writings of Freud.

This **article** concerns itself with the lasting influence of a conceptualisation of childhood which had particular credence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Britain, and beyond, and which continues to throw its influence over popular culture. In *The Invention of Childhood*, Hugh Cunningham (2006) illustrates how the Victorian era gave rise to many notions of childhood which held sway until remarkably recently. He shows how

it is in this period in Britain that childhood becomes institutionally enshrined as a specific life phase through the passing of a range of legislation, much of it reformist in nature and intended to protect children from physical and economic exploitation. He also shows how the development of compulsory education was often framed to shape the outlook of the emerging industrial working class. In this regulatory context he sees the overarching influence of the class structures of the period: 'The upper and middle classes, about a quarter of the total population, managed to retain power and influence, their ideas and practices setting the tone for society as a whole' (Cunningham 2006: 140). This view is supported by the historian A.N. Wilson. For Wilson, the dominant modes of thinking about childhood in the Victorian period are intrinsically bound up with the rise to power of the middle classes. He sees the very invention of childhood itself as something which only took place in the 1860s and which was 'a privilege of the ever expanding middle class' (Wilson 2002: 260).

A key thread running through many of the changes to childhood instituted by the Victorians was a notion of children as essentially unruly and without moral conscience, particularly the children of the working class. The solution to this potential social danger was to be a combination of strict educational policies and personal discipline, the latter often supported with a programme of punishments. Some of these ideas were influenced by forms of social Darwinism, and especially the writings of the early sociologist Herbert Spencer in the 1860s. The popularisation of these ideas among the Victorian middle class shaped a view of childhood as one in which children needed to be socialised from their primitive state of animal aggression and ignorance towards one in which they could understand their proper place in the social order. Colin Heywood (2001) in his *A History of Childhood* points to the influential work of the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall around the turn of the twentieth century. Hall saw adolescence as the point at which the individual would start to move away from 'childlike savagery' through a 'new birth' towards civilised behaviour. As Heywood saw it, this concept of childhood describes the human race as developing from its 'animal origins to civilization' with the unsocialised pre-adolescent child representing a 'remote, perhaps pigmoid stage of human evolution' (Heywood 2001: 28). This unpleasant terminology equated children directly with forms of animal or primitive behaviour. As James, Jenks and Prout (1998) suggest, this view was further strengthened in the early years of the twentieth century by the partial readings of Freud made by some

educationalists who then associated childhood with the unrepressed disruptive power of the id (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 19-21). Here the most basic drives towards desire inherent in the id are yet to be effectively controlled and are apt to emerge unbidden. Children are therefore seen as essentially animal-like and potentially disruptive; they require education (of a tightly prescribed nature), discipline, and punishment to steer them successfully into the roles assigned to them in the structures of adulthood.

This view contrasted strikingly with the prevalent eighteenth century romantic notion of childhood which had equated children with innocence, imagination, and the more benign aspects of the natural world. Cunningham sees this alternative version of childhood surviving in the work of some nineteenth-century writers who rejected the official version of childhood given to them, among them Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll (Cunningham 2006: 148-53). For Carroll in particular childhood is associated with 'fancy', the ability to put aside the worries and restraints he associates with the adult world and retreat into a place where imagination and enjoyment are given free rein.

It is worth looking more closely at the intentions and achievements of Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). One characteristic of the period in relation to the conceptualisation of childhood was the view that children's literature should be steered away from the romantic realm of fantasy and should instead focus on strict educational content and a clear moral purpose. As a result, much literature for children of the Victorian era is fiercely didactic in tone. This tendency is directly mocked and satirised by Carroll in his *Alice* books. A fine example is provided by Carroll's parodies of the type of 'improving' verse favoured in many children's books of the period and which children were expected to learn by heart and then recite. One of the most popular is his pastiche of Robert Southey's 'The Old Man's Comforts' (1799). In the original an elderly gentleman warns contemporary youth not to be abuse their 'health and vigour' as they will pay for this in the end. In Carroll's hands this becomes the comic verse 'You are old, Father William' in which the old man is actually an ill-tempered curmudgeon who threatens to throw his own son downstairs and who confesses to having no brain at all (Carroll 1982: 43-4). In a similar vein, 'The Sluggard' by Isaac Watts from *Divine Songs for Children* (1727), a salutary piece about the dangers of idleness much reissued in the Victorian period, has become a riot of irreverent wordplay about a dancing lobster (Carroll 1982: 93). The attitude taken here by Carroll has been highly influential in

establishing an alternative tradition within children's literature, and comics, which prefers nonsense, subversion of the adult world, and anarchic humour to didactic moralising. In a curious way this tradition actually acknowledges the overarching perception of children as disruptive but then offers this image up to children themselves for their own enjoyment, and to adults as a form of refuge from the constrained adult world. The latter may well have been the appeal to Carroll himself. We need only look to the children's poetry of Spike Milligan or to any of Roald Dahl's immensely popular novels for children to see the continuing appeal of this to readers of all ages today.

Beryl in context

The character of Beryl the Peril stands firmly within this tradition and responds in the same resistant way to these underlying Victorian conceptions of childhood. Beryl made her debut in the first issue of *The Topper* on 7 February 1953, published by D.C. Thomson. Beryl was created by Davy Law as a female counterpart to his most famous creation, Dennis the Menace; she was reputedly based on his own daughter. Her appearance, with distinctive hair and red and black outfit, certainly seems to have an affinity with that of Dennis, albeit with his spikey locks replaced by plaits. She quickly developed a sufficient following to warrant her own biannual, the first of which came out for Christmas 1958. The biannual, which reprinted strips from previous editions of *The Topper*, was published through until 1977, and then again rather more sporadically in 1981, 1987 and 1988. Beryl's popularity proved resilient, although she did suffer the fate of many D.C. Thomson characters in being moved from one comic book title to another over the years. She eventually became the cover star of *The Topper* in 1986, a testament to her continuing popularity at a time when the comic itself was suffering a decline in circulation, and she survived the merger of *The Topper* with *The Beezer* in 1990. She joined *The Dandy* three years later on the demise of the conjoined title.

When *The Dandy* underwent the first of a series of re-launches in 2004 her appearances became rare until she fully re-emerged in March 2005. When the comic had a further revamp in August 2007she virtually disappeared altogether from its pages other than for the occasional re-run of some old strips. Until mid-2012 she was confined to these reprints and one or two fleeting cameo appearances in pages devoted to other *Dandy* characters. When a new strip finally appeared in 2012 it ran for just 12 weeks before

vanishing again, with only the odd historic reprint to provide solace for diehard fans since then. *The Dandy* itself ceased publication, at least in hardcopy form, in December 2012. A digital version survived online for barely another six months beyond that. Despite this there is plentiful evidence of continuing interest in Beryl as indicated by the prices reached by copies of the biannual: according to the Comic Book Price Guide website a near mint copy of the 1959 edition should fetch £750. In the 75th special anniversary edition of *The Dandy* she was ranked number eight on their all time list of popular characters. Her ability to still cause disturbances is also confirmed by a piece in the *Daily Record* of 21 July 2008 which reported that a plan to place a plaque celebrating Beryl as part of a women's history trail in her hometown of Dundee had been scrapped; the decision to abandon this on the basis that she was only a fictional character was welcomed by local politicians who claimed her as a bad influence over children.

Davy Law drew Beryl from her birth in 1953 until his retirement in 1970, although he developed his depiction of her over this period from the rather impish figure of the early strips into the more recognisable, fully rounded version of the mid-1960s which became the archetypal version of the character for most fans. A particular speciality of Law are his faces: Beryl, and dad, generate a great deal of humour from their facial expressions, with Beryl's characteristically shifting between an enormous grin of appreciation when things go well to a reversed scowl when they don't, while dad more typically moves between various looks of outrage and astonishment at Beryl's antics, to raging anger when seeking retribution. John Dallas eventually took over from Davy Law, maintaining much of his style. He was then followed by Robert Nixon in 1986 and then Karl Dixon from 1999. When she made her brief reappearance in 2005 Steve Bright was drawing her somewhat in the style of Davy Law; she had undergone a softening of her image during the 1980s and 1990s which was reversed by Bright, who also drew her for her twelve week run in 2012.

Further evidence of her longevity was provided by a fascinating sequence of appearances on *The Dandy*'s Facebook pages commencing on 19 May 2011. The first short strip, consisting of just three panels depicting an instantly recognisable Beryl taking on a white-haired dad, was drawn by Steven Becket. He challenged readers to make comments and promised a second strip for the following week. The sequence was then taken forward by a further three artists: Andy Fanton (who had drawn her for one of her cameo appearances in *The Dandy*); Nik Holmes; and Nigel Auchterlounie. This progression became

known as ‘Pass the Peril’, with each of the artists offering their own distinctive versions of Beryl. The strips also brought her into the digital age as she is seen making use of Facebook, a smart phone, tweets, and mobile apps to pursue a more familiar objective, humiliating dad.

Beryl: a close reading

The central narrative conceits of Beryl the Peril remain largely consistent throughout her sixty years of activity. She consistently appears dressed in her trademark black pinafore dress and sporting her pigtails, with the exception of a brief period in the 1980s when her red shirt morphed into blue and white stripes, and again in 2006 when she was temporarily updated with a sweat shirt and jeans. Her terrain is largely domestic, with most strips taking place inside of the family home which she shares with her mum and dad, or in their garden. Occasionally we see her in the street immediately outside the house and there are rare trips to the shops, the park or a friend’s house. She sometimes drops in at dad’s office to cause chaos but curiously her school hardly ever appears. Perhaps there would be insufficient opportunity within a more institutionalised setting for her particular brand of mayhem. Another factor seems to be that her principal antagonist is dad and therefore most stories need to take place where he is in close proximity. Even the school stories tend to feature dad being summoned by the head teacher. Other than mum and dad, few other characters of any significance appear; Beryl has one or two school friends, although only Cynthia turns up with any regularity. Beryl’s own gender seems to be largely irrelevant in relation to her audience appeal or the narrative structures; as Susan Brewer points out in her history of girls’ comics, ‘both boys and girls appreciated the slapdash, often outrageous humour’ (Brewer 2010: 49). There are various victims of Beryl’s pranks including travelling salesmen who come to the door, and policemen, neighbours and various passersby usually encountered in the street, but they are largely interchangeable and featureless. This narrowness of focus helps to give the strip its peculiar intensity of effect, as her relationship with dad remains the overwhelming focus.

Beryl can be usefully read in terms of her embodiment of the anti-authoritarian strain in children’s popular culture, as well as a manifestation of the unrestrained id. Indeed she seems to directly express its devious spirit as she seeks ways to entertain herself by causing maximum disruption to others. Boredom and restraint are her chief enemies. In

‘Dropping in for Tea’, a story from the 1973 biannual, Beryl declines to play at being a spaceman with two neighbourhood boys because ‘it’s too tame the way YOU play it!’ Her attempts to play it her way, ‘borrowing’ various household items including her father’s braces so as to construct an enormous catapult, end with her flying through the air into the monkey enclosure in the zoo where she takes over the chimps’ tea party. In ‘Beryl the Bold’ her pirate games with another group of local kids run out of steam when they refuse to walk the plank for her. However, she manages to persuade a gullible dad to undertake the role – he mistakenly thinks he will only be jumping into a tiny bowl of water but actually ends up in a full size water butt. In another story from the same biannual called ‘Beryl’s “Best”’ she heads into a shoe shop to avoid the rain and keep herself amused for awhile. The salesman’s futile attempts to sell her a pair of football boots result in his being kicked in the nose, thrown from a step ladder, and finally hit in the throat with a shoe box which Beryl fires across the shop when practising taking penalties. Throughout these escapades the reader is firmly positioned on the side of Beryl; we see the narrative from start to finish from her point of view and no other characters are privileged with any real attention. The humour, and the pleasure for the reader, is squarely centred on the various inventive ways in which she wrecks havoc. There is no purpose in her actions other than the sheer joy of an unrestrained destructiveness which we are invited to share in. Contrary to the Victorian ethos of childhood, the celebratory tone of her adventures suggests a cathartic aspect to the pleasures she offers readers.

The focus of restraint, representing both the Freudian ego and the didactic values of Victorian patriarchy, is dad. Dressed almost without fail in his pinstriped suit, shirt and tie (even when at home), he is a stuffy establishment figure. Well aware of the dangers which Beryl embodies, he sets out to thwart her at every turn. Sometimes his intention is to compel her to perform various routine tasks, such as tidying her room or finishing her homework, but on other occasions he simply seems to be bent on preventing her having fun. He is also the conduit for the approbation of the wider society. There is a constant queue of complaining adults at his door asking for him to exert retribution on Beryl. Dad duly obliges by punishing Beryl in various ways, including sending her to bed early without supper, watching over her to ensure she performs her chores, and even locking her up in her bedroom. However, the most common punishment is to administer a spanking with his slipper. In the 1973 biannual just under one third of all the stories end with Beryl being

beaten by dad. The final panel became a kind of running joke in its own right, with Beryl upended across dad's knee, her rear end pointing sharply into the air, and dad brandishing his slipper. The story 'Winter Sport' is typical. Beryl scoffs a plate of baked snowballs meant for tea and then substitutes real snowballs in their place, before making a hasty exit. Out in the streets she performs a number of other disruptions including putting snow into the hat of a political candidate and terrifying her school teacher by building a rather sinister snowman outside her front door. However, there is no escape from sanction. When she finally returns home, dad is waiting for her with slipper in hand. Despite her protestations that he has no sense of humour, he inflicts the usual punishment. Beryl then finds another use for the snow in cooling down her backside. Values change and by the 1981 biannual Beryl is only on the receiving end of a spanking on three occasions and is chased by dad with a slipper in hand just once. However, his role as representative of order and repression remains undiminished and the dynamic of the stories still revolves around Beryl's attempts to thwart him.

However, in the battle between Beryl and dad, between the id and the ego, or between the rule of order and the pleasure of revolt, it is Beryl who most often wins. In the 1971 biannual she scores nine more wins than dad and in 1973 she still has the upper hand by three. Even in the toned down 1981 edition she comes off better than dad in six more stories than he does. The core of their conflict can be found in a recurring series of stories where Beryl is required to stay in the house when she wants to go out to play. In 1971's 'Freedom Fighter' she shins down the drainpipe from her room only to fall into dad's waiting arms. She then 'tunnels' out under the hall carpet but is met by dad wielding a carpet beater. However, she finally outwits him by calling out to their neighbour, Mrs Brown, for her to come to the door. When dad sees Mrs Brown heading back down the garden path he assumes it must be Beryl in disguise. After trying to drag poor Mrs Brown back into the house, she pummels him into unconsciousness with her umbrella, while Beryl makes a quick escape – 'I'm the only one who can explain that one an' I'm not stoppin'!' The same plot is repeated for 1973's 'A Little Trick'. Beryl is to be punished for breaking windows by having to go to bed at six o'clock for a week. She initially escapes disguised as a small man in a raincoat, bowler hat and false moustache, but dad sees through her ruse. She then gets her friends to all dress as Beryl so that when dad tries to fetch her in from football he won't know which one is the real Beryl is. However, she is too clever by half and dad realises she

must be the rather large Beryl padded out with cushions. Nonetheless Beryl wins out again. When a small man in raincoat, bowler and moustache passes the house, Beryl gets him to join in their football match in the street. Dad automatically assumes it is Beryl using the same disguise and carts the aggrieved passerby off to bed while Beryl escapes again – 'Ha! Ha! Should take him quite some time to sort that out!' In these contests the two antagonists are usually evenly matched. They know each other's strengths and weaknesses and plot their strategies with knowing looks to the reader. Each story is punctuated with physical gags and exaggerated facial expressions but Beryl often gets the upper hand. The reader is, however, almost always positioned with Beryl. We rarely sympathise with dad except when he has been particularly ill treated. For the most part it is Beryl who we support. Graham Kibble-White suggests that this is because Beryl is 'arguably more a victim of circumstance' (Kibble-White 2005: 241) than the instigator but I would suggest it is due to the fact that dad is usually identified as the force that prevents Beryl from having fun. If she is the unrestrained id and we are positioned to wish for her release, then dad is the repressive order which seeks to quite literally lock her in. We long for to break out and rejoice when she does. This desire suggests a reversal in the discourses of childhood established by the Victorians, so that readers are now happy to see Beryl's anarchic spirit unleashed; rather than equating this with danger, it is deemed beneficial to allow this safe release of restrained desires, if only in fictional form.

A curious symbiosis sometimes occurs between the Beryl and dad, as in 'Alarm Call' where Beryl does her best to ensure that dad doesn't miss his early morning train by keeping him up all night; the final frame shows them asleep together at the breakfast table. Occasionally they work together such as in 'What's from Uncle Joe?' when they both want to find out what is in the Christmas present from Uncle Joe and they can't wait until Christmas Day. There are even stories where dad himself acknowledges Beryl's powers. In 'Eye-Eye!' Beryl expects to be punished after inflicting black eyes on the Jones twins but dad is actually delighted and impressed by her efforts – 'Great stuff! Takes after her Granny… absolutely fearless!' Her ultimate show of supremacy is actually to come to dad's aid, in a complete inversion of the Victorian social order. In 'Lucky Dad' she rescues her father from getting the sack by providing an impromptu dinner of fish, chips and lemonade for him and his bosses. Such actions suggest that his censure of Beryl is unjust and that ironically she has

the moral high ground. On occasions even dad seems to acknowledge that the world might be more fun, if not a better place, if the social order could be subverted.

The disruptive energy of Beryl's adventures extends to breaking the 'rules' of the British comic book tradition of which she is part. Scott McCloud's (1993) *Understanding Comics* outlines the classic use of the 'gutter' to bridge elements of narrative information and propel comic book stories forward, and this is certainly the dominant technique used in the Beryl stories, often with joyous progressions to the moment before and after each joke. However, this is typical patter is frequently subverted by a technique that is closer to the spatial variations offered in manga, whereby the beginning, middle and end of a given physical sequence or gag all take place within the same panel. The biannuals are also frequently interrupted by sections which are self-reflexive in their satire. Here we have sections which are apparently written and drawn by Beryl herself, including slightly crude versions of her own image and of dad. In these interruptions we often see Beryl at the D.C. Thomson offices. The Editor is depicted as a raging tyrant who is in a near constant state of depression. In his frequent absences, the staff run riot, riding motorbikes, playing the bagpipes and sleeping on his desk. The artist who draws Beryl is depicted as suicidal and is only happy when he breaks his wrist and doesn't have to draw Beryl. On other occasions he is so nervous he can't draw her properly. Here Beryl takes on a postmodern life of her own, stepping outside the rules of her own comic strip to deconstruct its creation. These sections provide the ultimate evidence of Beryl's disruptive force as she undermines the very conventions which underpin her world.

Conclusion

The influence of Victorian conceptions of childhood casts a long shadow over the British comics tradition. Beryl the Peril is both a product of that and a testament to the fact that ideas long ago thought unfashionable still hold more sway than we might like to admit. However, those politicians in Dundee misunderstand her function. She is not likely to be a bad influence over children and there is no proof that she ever has been, but what she does represent is in some ways more disturbing. She is both the unleashed id and the disruptive child that the Victorian educationalists feared, but she also a product of their repressive endorsement of the control of children. The fact that her antics are the impetus for so much pleasure in the reader might say more about her audience then we would like to know but

the enjoyment is clearly cathartic. In stories openly aimed at children, it seems that we would rather give vent to these feelings than repress them. In the story 'Boom Town', from the 1967 biannual, she make maximum use of some left over bangers from Guy Fawkes night and causes havoc at a bus queue and for a workman painting a post box, as well as for a group of soldiers. For a grand finale she appears to blow up an entire house. Although this final act wasn't really her fault, dad actually believes it possible that she could have done this and imposes his usual punishment. Beryl has taken on superhuman dimensions, capable of almost any level of anarchy. The pleasure knows no bounds. By comparison, the schoolboy naughtiness of a certain menace called Dennis pales into insignificance.

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