

CHAPTER 2

Gravestone Inscriptions: The Problem of Authorship

Gravemarker scholars have, perhaps, studied the work of individual stone carvers more than any other aspect of gravestone research.¹ The focus of that research centers on the artistic talents of the carvers. Families that actually purchase the markers somehow take on the aura of supporters of the arts--folk who commission the work of artists; the families are patrons.²

Unfortunately, familiarity with this artistic focus of research poses a potential misunderstanding of the essence of gravemarker authorship. A major portion of the uniqueness of gravemarker languages stems from authorship. Particularly, the authors work in groups--as families, as friends. The work moreover, usually occurs during emotional stress, when agreement sometimes eludes even the most patient of grievers.

To concentrate on the language(s) of gravemarkers, perhaps inadvertently, relegates the artistry of the carvers to secondary status. The artists, in other words, constitute only a means to an end. The end resides in the actual language that appears on the markers--and what that language data reveals about the supporting community.

In most cases, a given group of family members and/or friends hire stonecutters to write a collectively written message on a specific gravemarker, which also was chosen by that same group. The gravemarker then conveys a family's message and in the family's language. The stonecutter's role befits the role of

a secretary. A stonecutter's primary purpose lies in inscription; correct, professional inscription.

While on the surface most of the scholarship on stonecutters idolizes the artist, a closer look at the scholarly reports on the stonecutters bears a hidden awareness of the secretary-like role.

In her book, Death in Early America, historian Margaret Coffin, for example, slides from admiration of stone-carver work to condemnation. Particular useful for an understanding of the secretary role of the carvers is Coffin's appraisal of contemporary cutting techniques, "The lettering on today's marble and granite stones is precise," followed by her criticism of early American carvers: "downright errors are much in evidence"; "when the cutter made a mistake"; "Words were misspelled"; "Letters or words were omitted and inserted with a caret."

The lettering on today's marble and granite stones is precise and carefully executed, but not nearly as appealing as the quaint, difficult-to-read lettering on early stones. Inexplicable abbreviations, unexpected capitals, words run together, and s's that look like f's add to the charm. Half-size letters are inserted as hints --M^{rs}, NOV^r, Jan^y--so that we can usually guess what the carver intended. Corrections or additions or downright errors are much in evidence. Stones were reused, just chiseled down so that inscriptions could

be cut deeper, and in this case, the first chisel marks can sometimes be seen. At times chiseling down was done for an individual letter when the cutter made a mistake. A gravestone in Norfolk, Virginia, which starts "Sacred to the Memory of Mrs. Margaret . . . " has a note at the bottom: "Erratum for Margaret read Martha.

"Words were misspelled or spelled in the contemporary British fashion, especially on real early stones: "flour" for "Flower," "boddy" for "body," "mournful" with two l's, and "dye" and "lye" with y's rather than i's. Letters or words were omitted and inserted with a caret. In Schoharie County, New York, a bereaved husband instructed the stone carver to cut "Forever Thine" on his wife's headstone. The carver was careless in figuring his space; the marker reads "Forever Thin." Misplaced marks of punctuation add to our confusion or our amusement. . . . Marion Rawson, in *Candleday Art*, asks, "Are we to believe that the old stonecutters knew what they were about artistically, when they left irregular spaces, chipped a mark through a wrong date, crowded lines up to the very edge of a stone, and yet left masterpieces?" (Coffin 158-161).

Especially helpful for an inquiry into gravemarker authorship is Coffin's observation: "a bereaved husband instructed the stone carver to" In this case, the

husband assumes the role of author, the stone carver the hireling.

Forbes

One should not, moreover, assume that all stonecutters have had professional training. In her seminal work on the gravestones of early New England, Harriet Forbes tells of the use of field stones, usually carved by unskilled carvers, "more likely some friend of the deceased" (8). Forbes writes:

An early and rather pathetic example of these home-made stones is that of Sarah Prescott, Lancaster, quite unshaped, and lettered by one whose knowledge of spelling and stonecutting was about equal. We can imagine how laboriously he toiled to make it known that Sarah's "blased soul" "asanded up to Heaven July 14 1709" (8).

The overall tone of Forbes writing, though, praised the work of the stonecutter: "To him [J.N., a Boston stonecutter] the carving was of more importance than the inscription and above everything was the joy of creating a thing of beauty" (Forbes 38).

Even with such one-sided scholarship on carvers, however, Harriet Forbes treated the customers with equal respect and consideration. While decrying the difficulty of finding much useful information on "the simple business transaction of buying and paying for gravestones (12)" in early Probate Registries, Forbes did find useful evidence in later Registries. She quotes [Judge] Sewall's entry of August 22, 1717 in which he bemoans the

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difference between what the family claims as the age of Mary
Winchcomb and the actual carver's inscription:

'Mrs. Mary Winchcomb was buried in the old burying
place in the 67th ear of her age, as her relations tell
me; though the stone bears 69.'" (13)

Forbes also comments on the authorship of
epitaphs. "Undoubtedly many of [the epitaphs] were written
by ministers or other friends of the deceased" (Forbes 24).

One cannot ascertain if Forbes thought ministers or other
friends had any input on the rest of the gravemarker message, but
she certain recognizes the free hand often taken by the
stonecutter: "However many epitaphs were furnished the
stonecutter, he must often have been left to his own devices,
when, in addition to the name, necessary relationships, and date
of death, he had an opportunity to add a touch of his own . . . "
(Forbes 25).

Specifically this "touch of his own" had total liberty on
footstones: "'The Stone Cutter' carved upon the headstone
whatever he was asked to do, but the footstone was left free for
him to inscribe as he pleased . . . (Forbes 27).

Yet contrary to this freedom, Forbes cites a footstone where
the stonecutter apparently had no such freedom. One can only
speculate that Forbes is correct in her assertion that a fellow
minister wrote the epitaph—and that it was not the stonecutter.
"On the footstone [of the Reverend Edward Thompson, of Marshall]
is one of those interesting epitaphs written without doubt by
some brother minister:

Here in a Tyrant's Hand does captive lye
A rare Synopsis of Divinity
Old Patriarchs, prophets, Gospel Bishops meet
Under deep silence in their winding sheet
Here rest awhile in hopes and full intent
When their King calls, to meet in Parliament"

(Forbes 35).

In a series of examples of headstone inscriptions, though, Forbes clearly acknowledges family and friends as authors. A son writes an epitaph for his parents: "More elaborate still is the stone in Newbury which Judge Sewall erected to the memory of his parents in 1700, with a long inscription which we know from his diary he wrote himself" (Forbes 32).

A diary furnished the epitaph for a preacher's wife: "Mr. Bailed [Reverend John Bailed, Watertown] kept a diary, and undoubtedly, when he asked his friend, the Reverend Mr. Moody, to write an epitaph for his dear Lydia, he told him the incident recorded the day of her death in this diary: . . ." (Forbes 45).

Another preacher wrote his own epitaph for his wife: "It [the stone, now gone, marking the resting place of his wife--no first name] had an inscription written by her husband, the Reverend John Robinson, which closed with the quotation from the Psalms, 'Thus he bringeth them to their desired haven.'" (Forbes, 48).

And finally, a stonecutter himself has an outsider write for him:

"Some one wrote an epitaph for him [stonecutter John Steven, Rhode Island]:

With patience having run his race
Now Death hath sent him free
We wish he doth enjoy the place
Of true Felicity" (Forbes 91)

The Fernandez Family: A San Antonio Update

San Antonio, once again furnishes, more recent data. When the twentieth century was not quite half finished, the marriage of Esperanza Serna and Isidoro Fernandez united two families with extensive San Antonio histories.

Serna: The matriarchal line

Esperanza's family, the Sernas, trace their ancestors back to the original San Antonio settlers, i.e. back to eighteenth century San Antonio. These original settlers arrived as Spanish citizens. All had resided in the Canary Islands. The Serna family plot (a family community within a cemetery community within the Catholic community within the San Antonio community) covers about fifty square feet in the west-central portion of San Fernando Cemetery #1. (Figure 2.1) At the center of that plot,

Figure 2.1: Serna Plot
(INSERT SLIDE SF1.97.2.#12)

seven stones mark the burial places of Esperanza's father and stepmother, her father's parents, Esperanza's brother and sister, an uncle, and her grandmother's sister. (Figure 2.2). Near those seven stones lies Esperanza's

Figure 2.2: Serna Central Seven Markers

(INSERT SLIDE SF1.97.A.#27)

biological mother. Behind the stones, other stones memorialize various members of Esperanza's grandmother's family.

Esperanza believes that other members of that maternal grandmother's family, the Loyas and the Vidals, were buried in the Floresville Canary Island Cemetery, about twenty miles south of San Antonio. (See Figure 2.3) At present, all attempts by the Alamo Area Council of Governments to locate burial records for that cemetery have failed. No Loya nor Vidal gravemarkers exist on the grounds.

Figure 2.3: Canary Island Cemetery

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Neither the Spanish language nor the English language dominates the six markers of the Esperanza's immediate family, the Sernas.

This claim, however, needs a quick disclaimer. Half of the markers have either no discernible features or have only partially discernible features, language or otherwise. Esperanza believes that her brother Joe, in the back row, has the marker with the missing angel. (Figure 2.4) (The family

Figure 2.4: Joe

(INSERT SLIDE SF1.97.1.#11)

possesses the missing angel and hopes to return it to the marker.) Also, in the front row, sits the equally indiscernible marker, which Esperanza believes marks the burial spot of either her Great Uncle Felician Serna or her Great Uncle Jose Loya Serna. (See Figure 2.5:) (The Cemetery records

Figure 2.5: Jose Loya Serna
(INSERT SLIDE SF1.97.1.#12)

indicate that Jose lies under this marker. One must treat this information with caution, however, since the same cemetery records have no documentation for the tall stone in the back row--that of Dolores Serna.) (See Figure 2.8)

In addition to the two clueless markers exists the halfway discernible marker that Esperanza believes records the death of Kelly Lucinda Serna--Esperanza's sister. (Figure 2.6) Note that

Figure 2.6: Kelly Lucinda Serna
(INSERT SLIDE SF1.97.I.#36)

S
L K-
Nov-30-1941
AGE 16Y4M
SAN ANTONIO

The bits and pieces of this language could reflect English or Spanish or both.

The three gravemarkers (of the main seven stones) on the back row all convey their messages in Spanish. The stone on the far left memorializes Esperanza's father, Leocadio--born in 1900 and died in 1957. (Figure 2.7) Even though Esperanza's step-

Figure 2.7: Leocadio L.Serna
(INSERT SLIDE SF1.97.2.#3)

SERNA
LEOCADIO L.
1900 - 1957
RECUERDO DE SU ESPOSA

mother has been buried beneath the same stone, the family has so far opted not to have anyone inscribe her name in the available space. Note the current possibility of change--and the family's

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reluctance. One sees no stonecarver involved in this particular
decision.

Next to Leocadio and his second wife, we find a tall stone
memorializing, again in Spanish, Esperanza's aunt Dolores, who
died at the young age of fifteen--in 1918. (Figure 2.8)

Figure 2.8: Dolores Serna)
(INSERT SLIDE SF1.97.A.#23)

Dolores
Serna
Nació Mai'zo
21, 1903
Falleció el
17.Julio 1918
Sus Padres
le dedican
esle Recuerdo
a su Memoria

Next to Dolores the family has placed a gravemarker
memorializing Esperanza's paternal grandparents, Leocadio and
Eulalia Serna. (Figure 2.9) Leocadio and Eulalia, in effect,

FIGURE 2.9: LEOCADIO AND EULALIA SERNA
(INSERT SLIDE SF1.97.2.#8)

LEOCADIO	EULALIA L.
SERNA	SERNA
FALLECIO	FALLECIO
ENERO 19,1937	FEB. 10, 1942
EDAD 73 ANOS	EDAD 73 ANOS
SOCIADAD DE LA UNION	
????????????????????	
No. 156	

raised Esperanza, because of her parent's divorce. Note the
Spanish language used even on the inscription symbolizing the
labor union to which Leocadio belonged.

Even though the Spanish language marks the burial spots of
Esperanza's grandparents, father, and aunt, the family chose to
use English on the front row stone memorializing Esperanza's

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sister Consuelo and brother Adolph. (Figure 2.10) Consuelo died

Figure 2.10: Siblings Adolph and Consuelo
(INSERT SLIDE SF1.SP97.2.#16)

SERNA	
ADOLPH	CONSUELO
APR. 4, 1922	FEB. 17, 1926
MAY 25, 1947	JUNE 6, 1927
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN	ANOTHER ANGEL IN HEAVEN

in 1927; Adolph in 1947; thus date of death appears to have no relationship to which language appears on the gravemarkers (Spanish for death dates of 1918, 1937, 1942, and 1957; English for death dates of 1927 and 1947). On the other hand, date of birth bears a perfect corollary: Spanish for the earlier birth dates of 1864, 1869, 1900, and 1903; English for the later birth dates of 1922 and 1926.

In addition Esperanza's family has memorialized her biological mother, Maria Escelara, by using English on a flat stone, off to the side of the upright seven--a subliminal message that her position in the family cemetery plots seems secondary in geographic, spatial position also. (Figure 2.11) In addition,

Figure 2.11: Maria N. Escelara
(INSERT SLIDE SF1.97.1.#15)

MOTHER
MARIA N. ESCALERA
*OCT. 12, 1873
+JUNE 3, 1966
IN LOVING MEMORY

this one gravemarker casts doubt on the birthdate-language-corollary hypothesis. Maria was born in 1873, clearly a Spanish language time-period. Her marker, however, expresses the family's grief in English.

FERNANDEZ: The Patriarchal Line

Isidoro Fernandez's family moved to San Antonio from Mexico over a hundred years ago. Esperanza, again with the aid of her children and their families, at present maintains the series of her husband's family burial plots in San Antonio's San Fernando Cemetery #2, a cemetery opened by the Archdiocese of San Antonio in 1922.

Figure 13: Manuel and Eleuteria

Isidoro himself died a little over a year ago, in March of 1996. Across the road from his burial place, lie his parents Manuel and Eleuteria. Isidoro's family chose to memorialize them in Spanish. They also used Spanish on the marker erected in honor of Isidoro's sister "Janie," who died in **1937**.

Isidoro himself died a little over a year ago, in March of 1996.

Across the road from his burial place, lie his parents Manuel and Eleuteria.

In 1984, San Antonian Isidoro Fernandez retired, after a full career as a civil servant. His anticipated enjoyable of retirement, spending full time with his family, lasted only three months. A stroke left him paralyzed on his left side, confined to a wheelchair, and unable to talk. For thirteen years he lived this way, unbelievably cheerful, giving and receiving comfort, support,, and love from his friends and his family. He died on March 16, 1966. His six daughters and one nephew even today thank God for their presence at his deathbed. His wife and two sons today regret they had left his room just before he died.

Victoria Fernandez, the youngest of the six daughters, had moved back to San Antonio from Seattle in order to be her father and her family during his last year.

While the entire family vowed that a fitting gravemarker would memorialize their father, Victoria vowed that the marker would begin its function within a year. While her role as a facilitator in the Fernandez family's selection and placement of gravemarker accelerated the process, her role also exemplifies the relationship between the families of deceased persons, the stonecutters, and the cemetery owners. Victoria's story, in other words, helps illustrate and explain the unique process of gravemarker authorship.

The process of authorship began with Esperanza's decision to purchase a plot in San Fernando #2, across the lane from the plots where Isidoro's parents, Manuel and Eleuteria, and where Isidoro's sister "Janie" are buried. (Figure 2.12) Isidoro's

Figure 2.12: Manuel, Eleuteria, & "Janie" Fernandez
(INSERT SLIDE SF2.SP97.2.#22)

FERNANDEZ		FERNANDEZ
PADRE	MADRE	HIJA
MANUEL	ELEUTERIA	SAN JUANA
1888 - 1961	1889 - 1964	1921-1989
RECUERDO DE SUS HIJOS		RECUERDO DE SUS SOBRINOS & SOBRINAS

family chose to his parents in Spanish (their epitaph reads "In remembrance from your family"). Isidoro's family also chose to memorialize their aunt "Janie" in Spanish ("In remembrance from your nephews and nieces").

The cemetery officials, however, had restrictions on the new plot, the one across the lane. These restrictions thwarted the

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Fernandez family's wishes to erect a standing marble gravemarker, similar to the other Serna and Fernandez gravemarkers. After appealing unsuccessfully both to cemetery and to diocese authority, the Fernandez family resignedly purchased three burial places--in block 29, row 16, plots 94, 95, and 96. (Figure 2.13)

Figure 2.13: Block 29
(INSERT SLIDE SF2.SP97.A.#2)

San Fernando
BLOCK
29
Cemetery

After phoning several monument companies listed in the yellow pages, Victoria chose to use the Rodriguez family's company, because, she says, "They were the first to treat us with respect on the phone."

The first visit to the Rodriguez Monument Company, a cordial one, resulted in the family purchasing a long bronze plaque--long enough to cover plots 94-95-96 in row 16 of Block 29.

The family specifically ordered calla lily begonias as decorations on the plaque, because Isidoro and Esperanza had chosen these particular begonias as the flowers for their wedding and had used them again as a unification symbol on each of their fifty-eight anniversaries.

Significantly, for a sociolinguistic viewpoint, the children chose to override Esperanza's desire for the use of Spanish on the gravemarker, because, they said, "We don't understand Spanish."

A month or so after ordering the gravemarker, the Fernandezes received notification from the Rodriguez Monument Company that the completed bronze plaque awaited their approval.

Approval did not come, however, because, unlike the pictures in the monument book, the calla lily begonias on the plaque both faced to the left, rather than face each other across the Fernandez name. In addition, the stonecutter had placed Esperanza's name above Isidoros, on the far left side of the plaque, in spite of the family's explicit instructions to place Isidoro at the top—as a symbol of his position as head of the household.

After considerable unpleasant haggling and several week's delay the monument company finally redid the bronze plaque. Acquiescing to the family's wishes the calla lily begonias now face each other across the Fernandez name. (Figure 2.14)

Figure 2.14: Calla Lily Begonias
(INSERT SLIDE SF2.SP97.B.#5)

Isidoro's name plate, moreover, appears above Esperanza's name. (Figure 2.15)

Figure 2.15: Isidoro and Esperanza
(INSERT SLIDE SF2.SP97.1.#3)

FATHER
ISIDORO, SR.
NOV. 4, 1914
MARCH 16, 1916

MOTHER
ESPERANZA SERNA
SEPT. 23, 1919

The issue of authorship, at this point, assumes paramount importance to sociolinguistic research. While the gravemarker

now appears ready to rest over Isidoro's burial sight, several more decisions must first be addressed. When the Rodriguez staff asked the Fernandezes to select a granite base for the bronze plaque, the family learned that they could inscribe whatever they wanted, at no extra cost, on the blank granite at either side of the plaque.

Family members pored over books of quotations before unanimously selecting a portion of a poem by James Whitecomb Reilly. The poem, they felt, captured the image of their father during his last thirteen years, unable to speak, but always greeting people with a smile and friendly wave of his one good hand. (Figure 2.16)

Figure 2.16: Isidoro Epitaph
(INSERT SLIDE SF2.SP97.1.#9)

I WILL NOT SAY
THAT HE IS DEAD
HE IS JUST AWAY
WITH A CHEERY
SMILE AND A
WAVE OF THE
HAND. HE HAS
WANDERED INTO
AN UNKNOWN
LAND.

Esperanza easily made the selection for her side of the plaque. On one of her visits to Seattle, Victoria had found a small memento with an inscription that she felt captured her own love for Esperanza. All agreed with Esperanza that that inscription should be inscribed in stone. (Figure 2.17)

Figure 2.17: Esperanza's Epitaph
(INSERT SLIDE SF2.SP97.1.#12)

A MOTHERS LOVE
IS FOREVER
NOTHING CAN
TAKE IT FROM
YOU FOR IT LIVES
IN YOUR HEART
AND MEMORIES
AND IS PART
OF ALL THAT
YOU DO.

Again tension arose between the monument company and the Fernandez family. None of the children liked either the spacing or the lettering that the company had chosen for the inscriptions.

Victoria finally, out of desperation, used her own computer to configure the quotes. The configurations she then gave to the stonecutter—along with her family's support and approval. The family, at least, now finds pleasure and comfort in the completed gravemarker—placed, unfortunately, one week after the first anniversary of Isidoro's death.

Coda

Isidoro and Esperanza had eight children. One of the daughters, Gloria, died as a child. Another daughter, Veronica, now resides in Florida. The other six children--Isidoro Jr., Anna Maria, Veronica, Marcelina (Leyeni), Lydia Elida, Victoria Inez, and Luis Jose--still reside in San Antonio. Esperanza, with the help of her children and their families, at present maintains the Serna family burial plot in San Antonio's San Fernando Cemetery #1.

I met part of the Fernandez family at City Cemetery #2 in November of 1966. The Fernandez gravemarker struck me as being

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especially well cared for, in a cemetery known for its excellent care. On a routine field work trip to that cemetery that fall day, I saw the family clustered around the gravemarker. (Figure 2.18)

Figure 2.18: Fernandez Caretakers
(INSERT PHOTOGRAPH No.18A Nov 22+01 NNNNN 409)

Their story struck the cord that prompted me to search for a pattern of gravemarker authorship. That pattern of family involvement now obviously covers Coffin's "bereaved husband" (see page 2 above), the Fernandezes, and most everything in between.

I made an issue, above, about the cemetery rules that prevent a family from using traditional markers when a plot number 29 is separated by a lane from plot number 26.

On May 21, 1996, Victora Fernandez, responded in anguish to an unpaid-for addition to her father's marker (Figure 2.19). The

Figure 2.19:Uninvited Signature
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16.94.95.96

stonecutter had defaced the gravemarker almost with the same disdain that stonecutters had carved their own initials in the early New England gravemarkers that Margaret Forbes idolized. Whether the offensive numbers yielded to cemetery dictates or to memorial company conventions matters not. The family certainly did not contribute to this unwanted authorship. I close this chapter with Victoria's poem of anguish³

Twenty-nine--Sixteen--Ninety-four

*'96 has been a tough year so far
Thousands of tears leaving a scar
Years degenerate--withering away those I love
Sadden by fate living in fear I hate
He was always here to protect
Let it be His will and learn to accept
Physically laid to rest
Spiritually soaring above our nest
Lessons still taught, walking this earth is a test
Love of a parent I truly found
Values inherited beyond material bounds
Gloom follows from that grave day at the mound
Live by His Master lesson
Each day that follows is that of a blessing
After all the years he practiced the great motto he preached
"Survival of the fittest" he took much time to teach
His legacy lives on in his children because we are a breed of survivors
His presence is missed never meaning to be dismissed
I thank God for granting us that one last hour
For the chance of farewells embraced with a kiss*

(Victoria Inez Fernandez, May 21, 1996)

1 The first nine volumes of the Association for Gravestone Studies' journal Markers, for example, contain articles on twenty-seven carvers--and that number does not include the entire volume VIII, which consists of eighteen articles by Ernest Caulfield, all on Connecticut Carvers.

2 Note, for example, John Gary Brown's comment:

"While exploring a Wichita, Kansas, cemetery, I met by chance the *craftsman* who has inscribed the odd message on this monument ['Bornd'd' 1918 -- 'Died Dead' 1990]. He could not explain the curious choice of words, but he did say that he had asked the thoroughly articulate clients several times if they were sure this was exactly what they wanted and they assured him it was" (Brown 137).

I have inserted the emphasis upon the word *craftsman*. Moreover, I quote Brownie on purpose. Brownie considers himself, first of all, an artist. Secondarily, he photographs. He, himself, fits the *craftsman* image perfectly. I admire that focus. I envy that focus. My own, focus, however, lies within academia; lies within linguistics; lies within sociolinguistics. Thus we differ only in focus; not in importance.

3. Unpublished. Victoria gave me a copy for inclusion in this essay.

4. Victoria claims that the numbers refer to the location of the marker: It lies in block 29, row 16, and includes plots 94, 95, and 96. Within the last month the family has purchased what it hopes are block 29, row 15, plots 94, 95, and 96--which connect her parents' series of plots with the road.

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