



SEXUALITY *and* ITS  
QUEER DISCONTENTS  
*in* MIDDLE ENGLISH  
LITERATURE

Tison Pugh



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*For Rachal and Jim*



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: SEXUALITY AND ITS QUEER DISCONTENTS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

To adapt an immortal line from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, some are born queer, some achieve queerness, and some have queerness thrust upon 'em.<sup>1</sup> In this book, my interests lie with those who have queerness thrust upon 'em—the male agents and actors who, through their interactions and affinities with others, become marked with and/or compelled to embody queerness before being identified as normatively (hetero)sexual males.<sup>2</sup> The construction of normative masculinity depends upon the possibility of the queer, as queerness provides the binary Other that normativity hierarchically opposes. Rather than flip sides of the same coin, queerness and normativity oscillate in respect to each other in the construction of sexual and ideological subjects. In this manner, queerness often constitutes a necessary tactic in disciplining certain male subjects into the prevailing ideological order.<sup>3</sup> One might think of the queer as the abjected alternative to, if not as an escape route from, cultural normativity, but queerness can be appropriated and systemically deployed to tame disruptions to the prevailing social order by reconstituting the genders and sexualities of men who might otherwise upset the status quo. Assuming a normative masculinity is a task fraught with queerness, and men must frequently contend with queerness to realize such an ideal masculinity, if such culturally viable masculinities are indeed available to them at all.<sup>4</sup> Heterosexuals are created through ideological interpellation as much as they are born as unique individuals, and queerness foundationally constitutes certain heterosexual subjects in myriad ways. The queerness of heterosexuality creates conditions in which discontents are bound to fester, as the imposition of ideological normativity upon otherwise

resistant subjects subjugates their queerness yet can never ultimately squelch it. As Sigmund Freud famously declares, “The two urges, the one towards personal happiness and the other towards union with other human beings, must struggle with each other in every individual.”<sup>5</sup> It is easy to see the relevance of Freud’s words for homosexuals, whose desires for personal happiness, when directed toward sexual fulfillment with a member of the same sex, often conflict with the desire to participate more widely in a homophobic social community.

This tension between the individual and society in relation to sexuality is not unique to homosexuals, as heterosexuals are likewise capable of experiencing queer—although not necessarily homosexual—desires. *Queer* connotes a wide range of cultural stereotypes and identities, from defamatory condemnations of sexual diversity to celebratory proclamations of personal freedom. As the connotative range of *queer* traverses between damning and laudatory, its semantic range elicits further taxonomical crises. When exactly does a sexual act or actor become queer? Are sodomies and sodomites intrinsically and transhistorically queer? Sodomy laws have defined a wide range of heterosexual erotic practices as illicit, which raises the question of whether a given sexual act—fellatio, for instance—is queerer when performed by homosexuals than by heterosexuals.<sup>6</sup> The answer to this question hangs upon given ideological conditions in effect during a particular time and in a particular culture, as responses to sexual acts shift—sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes seismically—throughout history.

Concomitantly, as queerness fails to communicate a clear cultural meaning, heterosexuality too can never signify precisely. For along with questioning when a sexuality transgresses into queerness, we must also ponder when a sexuality metamorphoses into ideological acceptability as representative of that cluster of licit acts known as heterosexuality. Such philosophical musings point to the essential feature of sexuality in regard to its ideological function: its amorphousness. If sexualities were defined in absolute terms, their potential to construct subjects into ideology would be hamstrung because everyone could recognize them in all situations, both historical and contemporary. The definitional haziness of sexuality enables its ideological function, in that all members of a given community must feel its disciplining effect as a constitutive factor in their social position that is then tied to their sexual desires. Fluctuating in regard both to sexual acts and to cultural normativity, sexuality refuses to be taxonomized into epistemological certainty, and its murky range of meaning carries the potential to cast many subjects under clouds of sexual suspicion.

Given the murkiness of queerness and its concomitant function to undermine normativity, many homosexuals resist its power to construct

them as the Other. “Should a homosexual be a good citizen?” ponders Leo Bersani.<sup>7</sup> Hinting at the fundamentally antisocial potential of queers who resist a marginalized construction as debased Other, Bersani’s question limns the almost ubiquitous smoldering antagonism between homosexuals and discriminatory societies.<sup>8</sup> However, homosexuals do not hold a monopoly on antagonistic stances between self and society, and this question could as readily be asked in regard to heterosexuals who face the ideological constraints of sexual normativity and chafe against the discontents that erupt due to the pressures between civilization and eros. When heterosexuals resist normative constructions of their subjectivity, they inhabit a queer position of conflicting with a social system that would otherwise reward them for their normativity. Queerness refuses to function monologically, as it frequently defines and constructs normative masculinities for heterosexuals by allowing a space of pleasure that must be foresworn in the advent of the discontented heterosexual subject.<sup>9</sup> Of course, neither does heterosexuality function monologically, yet its ideological weight allows it the pretense of ubiquity; with its ostensible omnipresence, its fantasy of normativity goes largely unnoticed. Normativity surrounds a culture, as “natural” as the air we breathe, and it polices sexuality by enveloping heterosexuality and excluding queerness. Consisting of both sexual acts and breaches of normativity, queerness comprises sexual, amatory, and gendered practices that ostensibly depart from prevailing cultural norms. However, its tense relationship with cultural norms does not necessitate that queerness *always* subverts ideology: it rebels against ideological identity codes in some instances while quelling such resistance under other circumstances.

Despite the apparent paradox of using queer theory to analyze normative sexualities, such an approach underscores the fundamental queerness at times necessary to inhabit normative positions. Ideological constructions of heterosexuality and heteronormativity dismiss questions about their ontological value as unworthy of critical inquiry, if not as altogether inane, because heterosexuality bears the standard of unquestioned normativity. It is culturally constructed as the natural foundation of all sexuality, and its more strident supporters present it as naturalizing and normalizing as well.<sup>10</sup> As David Halperin demonstrates,

The crucial, empowering incoherence at the core of heterosexuality and its definition never becomes visible because heterosexuality itself is never an *object* of knowledge, a target of scrutiny in its own right, so much as it is the *condition* for the supposedly objective, disinterested knowledge of *other* objects, especially homosexuality, which it constantly produces as a manipulably and spectacularly contradictory figure of

transgression so as to deflect attention—by means of accusation—from its own incoherence.<sup>11</sup>

Heterosexuality is no more natural or unnatural than homosexuality. It is more widely experienced, yet numerous scientific studies document the naturalness of homosexuality as well.<sup>12</sup> The cultural responses to hetero- and homosexuality diverge greatly depending on the ideological conditions in effect in a given society, especially in that heterophilic cultures imbue heterosexuality with normative valences. In such instances, the construction of heteronormativity often depends upon the debasement and denigration of queer desires.

In cultures predominantly antithetical to queer desires such as medieval western Europe, queerness threatens constructions of cultural normativity in regard to a given person's social privilege. In its crudest incarnation, the queer path to ideal masculinity depends upon the power of ideology to ostracize the queer. "Don't be a fag": this harsh playground taunt has taken many forms over the centuries, and its discordant contempt for sexual nonnormativity peppers myriad historical and literary texts including (but by no means limited to) biblical injunctions, classical amatory satire, and medieval monastic discourse. To look briefly at some examples, Leviticus admonishes, "Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind: because it is an abomination" (18:22).<sup>13</sup> In his *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid teases effeminate men while giving grooming instructions: "[Going] Beyond [these directions] is for wanton women— / Or any half-man who wants to attract men."<sup>14</sup> Peter Damian coins the word "sodomia" in the eleventh century to castigate sexual sinners in his *Book of Gomorrah*.<sup>15</sup> These diverse authors and texts, representative of vastly different cultural conditions, clearly teach proper sexual masculinity through their negative injunctions. To be a functioning male member of society, as these texts coercively conceive of masculine sexual normativity, one must assiduously avoid any associational relationship with queerness as marked by sexual acts, effeminacy, or other nonnormative behavior. A crude tool, homophobia nevertheless efficiently communicates overarching societal preferences for normative sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

Negative constructions of same-sex desire are but one side of continuing cultural discussions about sexuality and homosocial relationships, and along with these representative voices disdainful of homophilia, one can readily find resistant voices describing homosocial relationships and desires in laudatory, sometimes hungry, terms. In the Bible, the imprecations of Leviticus are balanced by the tender friendship of Jonathan and David, as attested by their covenants of loyalty and great love for each other.<sup>17</sup> Ovid's sly digs at sissies find a counterpart in Martial's blunt

desires for anal intercourse with a male slave (“And unless I say under oath ‘I’ll give it,’ you withdraw those buttocks that let you take many liberties with me”),<sup>18</sup> and Peter Damian’s and Alain of Lille’s condemnations of sodomy sharply contrast with voices of other monastic men, such as Marbod of Rennes and Baudri of Bourgueil, who praise male beauty in highly eroticized terms.<sup>19</sup> The dominant voices of biblical, classical, and medieval cultures at times drown out encomiums to homosocial relationships, but these homosocial desires nevertheless created a broad enough social space to warrant their own traditions, as documented in the historical and literary record.

In this cursory overview of cultural conversations about male homosexuality and homosociality from the biblical, classical, and medieval periods, the primary congruency arises in the lability of homosociality and same-sex activities within various cultures such that they never communicate precisely. The examples cited earlier all concern homosocial behavior, and many of them concern homoerotic behavior, but which of these relationships, if any, were queer? Same-sex relationships do not necessarily disrupt cultural normativity when couched within prevailing social codes of male friendship and hierarchical association. It is difficult to envision that David and Jonathan’s homosocial affection queered biblical norms;<sup>20</sup> likewise, assuming that Martial’s or Marbod’s sexualities disrupted cultural normativity appears an ahistorical and anachronistic view of homosocial relationships, as these men would be unlikely to speak candidly about their desires if they faced severe social reprobation for them. The queerness of these relationships, if any queerness exists in them at all, appears in their eroticism, yet male eroticism in itself does not always and transhistorically register as disruptive to societal norms. Such homosocial relationships cannot be definitively construed as queer, yet queer potential is nonetheless latent in homosocial structures of male friendships. In the amorphousness of queerness and its convoluted relationship to heterosexuality, normative men can enjoy homosocial, and possibly homoerotic, attachments.

Such conflicting paradigms of queerness challenge scholars to categorize accurately the meanings of same-sex desires throughout history. One cannot necessarily equate same-sex desires with ideologically queer ones, as systems of heteronormativity are balanced by systems of homonormativity—the social practices of people of the same sex that are endorsed by the governing ideological regime as reinforcing necessary cultural values. Laurie Shannon suggests that same-sex friendships should be understood within the framework of homonormativity, a theoretical concept that “evoke[s] the strange blend of ordinariness, idealization, and ideology entailed in this rhetorical regime” of homosociality;<sup>21</sup> her conception of

homonormativity captures the amorphous relationship between social practice and social ideal, which sets the stage for queering potential. The paradox of homonormativity, however, is that it may either obscure queerness or reflect true social normativity, depending on the circumstances of the relationship. For example, Mathew S. Kuefler asserts that “throwing suspicion on male friendships as breeding grounds for sodomitical behavior suited the goals of the men of the ecclesiastical and royal hierarchies” in twelfth-century France.<sup>22</sup> Medieval male homonormativity, as evidenced through studies of male friendships and homoerotic verse, bespeaks a radically different conception of male-male relationships from that in the modern era, but we can still attempt to identify the parameters of the normative within the period.<sup>23</sup> The confused space that simultaneously separates and envelops homonormativity, queerness, and heterosexuality necessitates deeper investigations into their interrelationships. Again, if sexuality registered with a uniform valence in a given society, its cultural meaning would always be clear; however, queerness—in its ambiguity and amorphousness—potentially marks every man, including heterosexuals, as nonnormative.

What, then, makes a man queer and/or homosexual? Lee Edelman observes how perceived differences overwhelm similarities in constructing men and male sexuality:

For if...the cultural production of homosexual identity in terms of an “indiscreet anatomy” exercises control over the subject (whether straight or gay) by subjecting his bodily self-representation to analytic scrutiny, the arbitrariness of the indices that identify “sexuality”—which is to say, *homosexuality*—testifies to the cultural imperative to *produce*, for purposes of ideological regulation, a putative difference within that group of male bodies that would otherwise count as the “the same.”<sup>24</sup>

Differences construct identities, and identities are thus phantastically synthesized in response to sexual variances among men. Any man could be subsumed into queerness, depending on how cultures scrutinize and construct a range of possible sexual signifiers and correlate these signifiers to a given human male. Likewise, although men could be viewed as equals in ideological normativity regardless of their partners in sexual acts, they are nonetheless rendered different from one another in service to ideological regimes dependent upon the creation of this very difference. Edelman indicates that such policing bears the potential to produce straight or gay men alike, and it is critical to realize that heterosexuality, like homosexuality, is produced through social forces as well as generated by biological and hormonal influences.<sup>25</sup> The resulting classification of

sexualities—and of the men who enact and embody them—differs according to the varying levels of social approbation or disapprobation in conjunction with their sexual identities. Queerness is embodied and experienced in vastly different ways among men who register as normative—or not—in regard to their sexual desires and acts.

Edelman's analysis of the fundamentally similar cultural production of gay and straight men points to the necessity of queer theory in analyzing both homosexuality and heterosexuality. Indeed, queer studies is evolving as an analytical tool of cultural ideology by shifting its primary focus on homosexuality to a more ecumenical perspective. As David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz suggest, queer studies must be "ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference, and calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent."<sup>26</sup> This study participates in such an expansive view of the queer, in that none of the men under scrutiny are homosexual or express a desire to experience sexual relationships with other men. They are nonetheless ideologically queered from the masculine privilege of western society precisely because their gendered identities and sexual desires are rendered suspect in a manner congruent to the construction of the sexually queer. Here we see the power of "regimes of the normal," as Michael Warner labels them, to confer upon some subjects the ideological benefits of normativity and upon others the opprobrium of the queer.<sup>27</sup> With its conscriptive bent, ideology deploys queerness to pursue its own normative ends. Creating queerness interpellates heterosexual men into social structures that they might otherwise resist, and their queered position as debased Others thus mitigates the possibility of resisting such ideologically hierarchical systems. Normativity inculcates cultural values into individuals, yet such normativity can frequently only be realized through queerness.

How could normative regimes of sexuality function during the Middle Ages if concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality did not exist in this time period, as some scholars argue? Michel Foucault famously observed that sexualized perceptions of personal identity formulated in response to the medical discourses of the nineteenth century, which radically shifted social constructions of and reactions to sexual acts and actors.<sup>28</sup> Foucault is certainly correct that perceptions of sexual identity changed markedly in response to cultural shifts in this era, and scholars such as Karma Lochrie and James Schultz persuasively argue that we cannot rely on formulations of heteronormativity, as well as on modern conceptions of heterosexuality and homosexuality, to facilitate analyses of medieval sexualities. Quite simply, sexual norms do not function transhistorically, and medieval and modern norms frequently conflict. In

her coinage of the term “heterosyncrasies,” which adumbrates the culturally particular construction of sexualities and subjects, Lochrie explains the vastly different conceptions of medieval and modern sexual norms:

Desire for someone of the opposite sex in modern norm-speak is natural or normal because it is the most widespread sexual practice and, secondarily, because of religious ideology that is likewise dependent on the concept of norms. Desire for someone of the opposite sex in medieval nature-speak is natural in the corrupted sense of resulting from the Fall, but it is not in any sense legitimated by its widespread practice or idealized as a personal or cultural goal.<sup>29</sup>

Schultz ponders the vacuity of heterosexuality as a critical concept: “There would seem to be a trivial sense in which any sexual act involving a woman and a man could be called heterosexual. The designation is trivial because *most* sexual acts involving more than one person involve a man and woman. What’s the big deal?”<sup>30</sup> Lochrie and Schultz demonstrate that ostensibly heteronormative desires of the Middle Ages do not, in fact, mirror medieval perceptions as much as they reflect modern preconceptions, and they rightly condemn the facile deployment of modern heteronormativity in studies of medieval sexuality. Historical constructions of sexuality vary intrinsically from modern ones, and scholars of medieval sexuality must take into account that modern eyes tend to blur the contours of medieval normativity. From this perspective, heterosexuality and heteronormativity cannot be identified as a meaningful tool of ideology within the sociotemporal and cultural field of the Middle Ages.

While I agree with Lochrie and Schultz that constructions of sexuality and normativity differ intrinsically between medieval and postmodern cultures, must we then throw out the baby of a queer critical lexicon with the bathwater of anachronism? As Foucault himself cautioned, “The term [sexuality] itself did not appear until the beginning of the nineteenth century, a fact that should be neither underestimated nor overinterpreted.”<sup>31</sup> With this observation, Foucault points to the possibility of transhistorical similarities in constructions of sexualities as he simultaneously upholds their differences. Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon embrace the chaos of studying sexuality in their vision of *homohistory*, a history “invested in suspending determinate sexual and chronological differences while expanding the possibilities of the nonhetero, with all its connotations of sameness, similarity, proximity, and anachronism.”<sup>32</sup> I embrace the potential for anachronism in homohistory and address it to the construction of heterosexuality and normativity in the Middle Ages. The

critical terminology of contemporary queer studies can still be usefully, if anachronistically, applied to analyses of medieval sexualities when these terms are carefully contextualized. If normativity is used as a critical rubric in analyses of medieval sexuality, it must be situated among the norms of the Middle Ages in regard to sexual acts and personal identities, while simultaneously highlighting the vast lability of normativity throughout the centuries.

For example, medieval concepts such as spiritual and chaste marriages highlight how certain social systems register either as normative or as queer depending upon the circumstances of their enactment of heterosexuality. Spiritual marriages must be construed as normative within medieval ideology since these relationships met with cultural approval (although marital chastity today broaches heteronormative Christian practice in marriage).<sup>33</sup> The normativity of medieval spiritual marriages nevertheless opens possibilities of gender play, as medieval women accorded themselves great spiritual power—often greater than their husbands—through the practice. Precisely because of the normative valence of spiritual marriage, medieval women could exploit its contours to wield authority over their husbands, as evidenced in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. In these narratives, the normativities of spiritual marriage and of male gender roles collide, resulting in the possibility of ideological subversion. In the *Second Nun's Tale*, Cecilia's husband Valerian accepts his wife's spiritual guidance, and both husband and wife find greater holiness as exemplary (and thus normative) Christian subjects who choose martyrdom for their faith.<sup>34</sup> Margery's husband, in contrast, wonders hypothetically whether she would sleep with him to save him from imminent murder; she famously concludes, "For-sothe I had leuar se yow be slayn than we schuld turne a-yen to owyr vnclennesse," to which he resignedly concludes, "Ye arn no good wyfe."<sup>35</sup>

In these conflicting depictions of spiritual marriage, heteronormativity fails to function transhistorically, and thus if heteronormativity is to be used as a critical tool to study the past, it must take into account the ways in which men and women entered into sexual relationships adhering to or disruptive of medieval—not modern—constructions of normative behavior. Normativity nonetheless functions in spiritual marriages to regulate identities, in that Valerian finds proper Christian submission with Cecilia while Margery's husband is queered from his patriarchal privilege by her demand that he renounce his sexual desires and join her in chaste—and normative—marriage. Margery's adroit manipulation of normativity in spiritual marriage allows her to undermine the ideological construction of feminine subservience in medieval marriage, in obvious contradiction to her husband's desires. Because they straddle the fence

between normative and queer, spiritual marriages must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis, but scholars can nonetheless employ normativity and sexual hermeneutics to uncover who is and who is not experiencing queerness in the construction of a nonetheless heterosexual identity. Spiritual marriages expose the conflict between opposing senses of cultural normativity, thus highlighting the phantastic construction of normativity itself: normativity cannot be maintained against its inevitable confrontation with its multifarious and contradictory constructions, yet neither should it, therefore, be dismissed as irrelevant to discussions of medieval sexuality.<sup>36</sup>

Both heterosexual and queer desires were frequently proscribed in the Middle Ages, especially since an unmarried state was in some instances thought preferable to sexually active lifestyles, in line with Paul's admonition that "it is better to marry than to be burnt" (I Corinthians 7:9). Yet such proscriptions could never contain or delimit desire; the queerness of medieval spiritual marriages thus arises in the possibility of gender deconstruction through one's very participation in normative social structures, as Margery so strikingly illustrates. In its ostensibly oppositional stance to normativity, the queer is thus foundational to any purported construction of normativity: the normative needs the queer to establish itself vis-à-vis its apparent ideological adversary. But when related yet distinct normativities collide, queer potential almost inevitably comes to the forefront to expose the contradictions inherent in normativity. Scholars should use such terms as *queer*, *homosexual*, *heterosexual*, and *heteronormative* in referring to medieval sexualities with care and should contextualize them for the sociocultural environs of the Middle Ages. In this regard, Judith Bennett's suggestion to use "lesbian-like" to describe certain medieval women and their communities strikes me as a reasonable solution to the difficulties of using modern words to describe medieval sexualities,<sup>37</sup> and I ask my readers to supplement the suffix *-like* to *heterosexual*, *homosexual*, and *heteronormative* in the ensuing analysis to spare both of us the weight of clunky neologisms. Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and heteronormativity did not exist in the Middle Ages as we know them today, but sufficiently similar ideological weight was placed on sexual acts and actors so that a current critical lexicon can be used to describe the past when such terms are used with appropriate caution and contextualization.

Heterosexuality demands gendered actors to embody its naturalized position in ideology, yet as heterosexuality is built upon a foundation of queerness, so too is gender phantastically constructed by imbuing biological sexual differences between men and women with normatizing assumptions. Studies of gender in the Middle Ages reveal the period's ostensibly rigid gender categories that police individuals yet frequently

fail to regulate gendered acts and actors successfully.<sup>38</sup> Jo Ann McNamara contends that the cloudiness of medieval gender categories springs from conflicting depictions of humanity's creation in Genesis, which relates first that God created man and woman in his image, but then indicates that Eve is incarnated through Adam's rib.<sup>39</sup> In this foundational moment of Judeo-Christian history and thought, gender (as incarnated through sexual biology) both does and does not exist, and McNamara trenchantly remarks that the "gender system requires strong institutional support to resolve the tensions" inherent in cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity.<sup>40</sup> Gender potentially defines a person's place in medieval society, yet it is built on such an unstable foundation that it continually falters when its basic parameters are questioned.

In regard to masculinities in the Middle Ages, the illusions of gender continually deflate their pretensions, and again, we see the queer tension inherent in conflicting constructions of normativity.<sup>41</sup> For example, courtly heteronormativity appears to fortify constructions of knightly masculinity, but this heteronormativity is itself predicated upon the impossibility of its realization. Similar to Zeno's paradox, the enactment of gender demands that men continually approach and adhere to a model of masculinity that can never be fully attained. Because the people of the Middle Ages frequently defined social orders and identities through rites of initiation, masculinities were performed and reiterated in public spectacles. As Ruth Mazo Karras declares, "Medieval society was one of collectivities, in which identity came from membership in particular groups. Many of these groups—knights, monks, apprentices, guildspeople—underwent particular initiation ceremonies that marked their selection or separation from the rest of society."<sup>42</sup> In this manner, social relationships mark a man as a representative of a given social order, whether his masculinity is that of son or father, or of king or commoner, or a combination thereof.<sup>43</sup> By proclaiming a masculinity as encoded through a social role or identity, however, a man confronts the likelihood of that masculinity experiencing duress in response to other cultural forces. Such circumstances occur frequently in romances when a knight's loyalty to his lord conflicts with his love for his lady. Both relationships are normative within the ideological construction of heterosexual masculinity in the Middle Ages, yet they bear the potential to queer the knight depending on his response to antithetically gendered tensions. Such conflicting masculinities reveal the ways in which genders can never shore themselves up against every daily condition. Because neither the relationship with the lord nor the lady should be jettisoned in favor of the other, the pressures inherent in serving a male lord and a female beloved often elicit queerness that colors the contours of knightly identity.<sup>44</sup> Ideological

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