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**Friends to Foes: A Comparison and Contrast Between  
Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr in *Hamilton: An  
American Musical***

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Burr in *Hamilton: An American Musical*

## I. Introduction

Lin-Manuel Miranda: “This is a story about America then, told by America now, and we want to eliminate any distance between a contemporary audience and this story” (qtd. in Delman).

The Broadway hit musical *Hamilton* tells the life of the “ten-dollar founding father,” Alexander Hamilton, along with that of the other significant historical figures that greatly contributed to the founding of the United States, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Aaron Burr. *Hamilton* has won a lot of praises, not only because it casts American founding fathers “color-blind,” but also because its characters only “sing and rap,” but not speak, their rap accompanied by various other musical styles such as pop music, jazz, as well as Broadway tunes. The playwright, Lin-Manuel Miranda, made a bold decision to have actors and actresses of multi-ethnicity to portray the founding fathers who were supposedly white. For example, the protagonist, Hamilton, is played by the playwright himself, Miranda, who is a Puerto Rican of mixed ethnicities. Additionally, Jefferson in the show is portrayed by an African American actor, Daveed Diggs. In addition to its ethnic-diverse cast and mainstream rap story-telling, the musical *Hamilton* brings to the center stage Alexander Hamilton as an immigrant founding father of mixed races, and thus becomes a musical its 21st century American audience could relate to. The musical allows the immigrants, which consists a large part of the U.S. population

nowadays, to finally feel like they belong to this country and share a sense of brotherhood (Adema).

The development of the plot centers around the relationship between the protagonist and antagonist, Hamilton and Burr. Hamilton and Burr, who, as Miranda puts it, are “oil and water,” but they also circle each other all their lives as “revolutionaries, soldiers, lawyers, elected officials” all together (“Hamilton’s America”). Since the musical reveals right at the beginning that Burr eventually shoots Hamilton (“I’m the damn fool that shot him”), the question, then, is why. Why are they both opposed and similar to each other? And how do these similarities and opposition turn them from friends to foes? This paper aims to infer further that the musical celebrates the ideals of American identity and human differences through the differences between its protagonist and antagonist.

In response to these questions and how these questions connect to my thesis, a thematic literature review of critics commenting on *Hamilton* in terms of its historical accuracy, the portrayal of the relationship between Hamilton and Burr, and how the show reflects the 21<sup>st</sup> century society will be provided as followed.

Although Miranda made an attempt to present the musical as historically authentic as possible without losing its dramaticality, several negative views have been delivered toward *Hamilton* with reference to its historical accuracy. Many of them, while agreeing that the musical is a great piece of art, contend that the musical is not truthful to history with its over-glorification of Hamilton. To begin with, Hamilton’s political stance is questioned: Smith argues that he was actually pro-monarchy (519), and Magness, that he worked on advocating “immigration restrictions” later in his life (498), different from the stance he takes in the musical in working for equality for immigrants and all Americans. Stringham, on other hand, disagrees with the musical’s attributing the US financial system to one great man,

Alexander Hamilton, arguing that this system in fact, was built by “the totality of individuals in society” (524). I, on the contrary, assert that undeniably, the musical has to ignore some historical facts, but it is designed to be theatrical and concentrated enough to appeal to the audience with its message: that immigrants are part of the nation, at its birth and now in the 21st century, and that all Americans should be united regardless of ethnicity and class. As Granieri points out, the musical succeeds in “[drawing] our attention to underappreciated parts of that history,” but it does not mean that Hamilton is presented as a hero, or definitely not the only hero in the musical, which I will prove with my lyrical analysis.

Regarding the two main characters, the critics hold different views, varying from seeing them as parallel, in a web of imitation and competition, to Burr’s being a hero but not Hamilton. Both the show and history reveal how Hamilton and Burr came from very different origins, whereas Burr was born into aristocracy, Hamilton was a nobody who was born into poverty and shame (qtd. in Chernow). However, they were both orphans and grew to be prodigies. Consequently, because of these parallels and their class differences, Burr, in the show, repeatedly stresses on the immigrant identity of Hamilton in disapproval (Adema). Moreover, how the more similarities Hamilton and Burr share, the more they resent each other is evidently shown in Act 2 within a series of their reversals in their pursuit of political success (Acker 3). Additionally, Simons argues that Burr is the “real hero” of the musical, refers to that “History is told by the winners.” Despite the fact that Burr is the winner of their duel, Hamilton is the real winner of history, because Burr has been painted a villain in history. She details on how Burr is a more relatable character than Hamilton is in the show. For instance, she explains that it is reasonable for Burr to be angry at Hamilton because at the very least, Hamilton has publicly insulted him several times while they were still friends. In response, I would agree more with Chernow and treat the two as merely a

protagonist and an antagonist rather than a hero and a villain, each with their strengths and weaknesses both as political figures and humans.

Concerning how the 21st century audience can relate to the musical with respect to the American identity, in general, *Hamilton* reminds the audience of the issues that still remain unresolved in the U.S., such as “police brutality towards people of color, an immigration crisis, and islamophobia” (Adema). In addition, with regard to “an immigration crisis,” Adema points out how the musical provides a sense of national belonging to Americans, especially for the minorities in the U.S., not only because of the casting choices but also by presenting these seemingly great figures of American history as “flawed” people with weaknesses to the contemporary audience. She further asserts that numerous students of color “are disproportionately likely to dislike history in school,” since it creates a sense of alienation to them “by only including stories of their defeat and demise.” As a result, she touches on how the musical shows the presence and significance of the immigrants to the U.S. as a whole, both then in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All in all, *Hamilton* has unified the modern audience by connecting all Americans to the current American society, in my opinion, via its indication of celebrating the hybrid national identity.

In summary, with a focus on lyrics, I aim to discuss how the relationship between Hamilton and Burr evolves through discovering their connections and differences in their personalities and temperament, romantic relationships, as well as in their political actions. These connections and differences, I argue, suggest how the Broadway musical reflects a 21st century view of the American national identity and celebrates human differences. As mentioned earlier, Hamilton was born into nothing and misery, while Burr was born into everything and glory. Through his rags-to-riches life as portrayed in the show, Hamilton presents the ideal of American Dream, as stated in the Declaration of Independence by Jefferson, “in which freedom includes

the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility for the family and children, achieved through hard work in a society with few barriers” (“American Values and American Dream”). However, the approval of the efforts made by Hamilton and his earned success is not equivalent to the denial of Burr and his achievements. I will prove how the two characters are demonstrated as both heroes and humans who make mistakes. This paper will thus examine how the two characters’ differences in class, in their political ambition and attitudes towards family provoke conflicts between them and lead unfortunately to their fatal duel. At the same time, *Hamilton*, as a whole, is about accepting differences, allowing different voices to be heard, and different walks of life to have an equal chance to thrive. In other words, the musical celebrates the multiplicity of American identity.

## II. Hamilton vs. Burr

Their conflicting personalities and life philosophies can be defined in the two “I want” songs of Hamilton and Burr respectively, “My Shot” and “Wait For It”. “My Shot” declares Hamilton’s impetuosity and burning ambition. To begin with, the repetition of “I am not throwing away my shot” highlights his ambitious and aggressive nature to take initiative and seize every opportunity he gets. In addition, the line that follows, “I’m just like my country/I’m young, scrappy and hungry,” serves as a precise metaphor and introduction to his personality. The number also shows his arrogance and inability to stop expressing his opinions or boasting about himself, “I prob’ly shouldn’t brag, but dag, I amaze and astonish.” Indeed, Laurens, Lafayette, and Mulligan are all amazed by the genius of the 19-year-old young Hamilton and approving of his remarks, which Burr interrupts by saying that they should not openly express their opinions, punning on the word “shot”: “If you talk, you’re gonna get shot.” Hamilton then refutes Burr by insisting on using and showing his intellect. This interaction between Hamilton and Burr demonstrates Hamilton as



having a more active attitude and Burr a more passive and cautious one. Because of their delivery of different attitudes, while Hamilton gains popularity among the revolutionaries here, Burr does not. Furthermore, this number slightly gives away how the origins of Hamilton has contributed to his aggressiveness. He discloses,

See, I never thought I'd live past twenty  
 Where I come from some get half as many  
 Ask anybody why we livin' fast and we laugh, reach for a flask  
 We have to make this moment last, that's plenty.

Surviving his early life of poverty and difficulties, Hamilton is not afraid of death, instead, he is afraid of not making a name for himself before his death. In fact, he thought of martyrdom as a fantasy before he was recruited by General Washington and realized that there is an alternative for him to “rise up”. He also explicitly expresses this mindset in the later number, “Meet Me Inside,” which he irritatingly states to Washington that he is “more than willing to die,” complaining about how Washington refuses to let him fight in the war when he first became his “right hand man”. As a result, “My Shot,” becomes a refrain that appears whenever an opportunity is taken or thrown away by Hamilton throughout the musical, also foreboding the Hamilton-Burr duel.

On the other hand, “Wait for It” reveals Burr’s reserved and cautious personality as well as his perspective on Hamilton and suggests a turning point in their relation. Burr discusses how he views “love,” “death,” “life,” and Hamilton in the four choruses respectively. First of all, Burr explains that he believes the former three items all do not “discriminate between the sinners and the saints”. By “do not discriminate”, he discloses that the influences of “love,” “death,” and “life” on him is beyond his control, but he firmly believes that there is a time for him to win out in love and in life, so he will wait for it. For example, he argues that if he could get

Theodosia, a woman who was married to a British officer, to love him back, then it must have been worth it that he tried and waited. To wait for Theodosia, actually it means that he will not force her to reciprocate his love by committing adultery or getting a divorce. The second and the third chorus, furthermore, reveal his awareness of mortality in his family as well as in general and then his solid belief in having “a legacy to protect” and the significance of his survival. The turning point, however, happens in the third chorus, when Burr talks about Hamilton and the pattern alters a little. The alteration makes this chorus stand out from the other three, seemingly putting the focus of the song on his thoughts on Hamilton. Burr acknowledges that unlike him who thinks thoroughly before he takes action, “Hamilton doesn’t hesitate.” However, Hamilton’s exhibition of zero restraints and impulsiveness actually has been keeping him on the winning side (so far), which is in contrast to the beliefs of Burr. In response, Burr furiously (with the curse word “Goddamnit”) asserts that if a man like Hamilton could thrive, he has every reason to believe that he will, too, as long as he waits for it. This anger is further complicated with the envy Burr expresses: “Hamilton’s pace is relentless/He wastes no time/What is it like in his shoes?” This remark implicates that Burr, despite the fact that he does not agree with nor understand the philosophies of Hamilton, he admires him and even feels jealous of him. Also, in the previous lines as follows, “I’m not falling behind or running late/I’m not standing still/I’m lying in wait,” Burr defends himself by explaining that he is not being idle. As a matter of fact, he is merely waiting and planning for the right move and the right moment to strike, instead of like Hamilton, who acts on impulse.

From the first few numbers, “Aaron Burr, Sir,” and “Farmers Refuted,” for example, their differences in personality and temperament is further indicated. In “Aaron Burr, Sir,” when Hamilton finally meets Burr in New York City, (whereas Burr already has a well-reputed name at the time, and Hamilton was still a nobody),



he cannot stop speaking his mind, to which Burr responds with some advice, “talk less, smile more,” and “Don’t let them know what you’re against or what you’re for.” For Burr, it is better to play safe than to take risks and speak up, even if adventurousness could lead to more opportunities or even success. However, Hamilton rejects this advice, “If you stand for nothing, Burr, what’ll you fall for?” Their differences is also revealed in the comedic number, “Farmers Refuted,” Hamilton is encouraged by the other revolutionaries (Laurens, Lafayette, and Mulligan) to rebut an anti-revolution speech by a loyalist. Burr steps in and tries to prevent Hamilton from intervening. As expected, Hamilton does not listen and starts arguing against the loyalist. He later gets back at Burr and expresses, “I’d rather be divisive than indecisive.” Once again, Burr is exhibiting his principles of not letting the public know his stance, which Hamilton clearly objects to.

To summarize, evidently, Hamilton is a man of action who is confident, short-fused and extremely motivated, while Burr a man of reflection who is much more reserved and long-fused. Hamilton does not hesitate to get what he wants. In contrast, Burr “waits” for opportunities and he refuses to take risks by rushing things. He reflects and analyzes that he believes that there is a reason for him to be in the place he is right now, although he is not happy that Hamilton is rising to the occasion. In addition, Burr’s line, “wait for it” could also be viewed as a contrasting response to Hamilton’s “just you wait” in the first musical number, “Alexander Hamilton” (“My name is Alexander Hamilton/And there’s a million things I haven’t done/But just you wait, just you wait.”) Besides the lyrics, there is evidence of their differences in the different musical styles of the two songs. While Hamilton mostly raps in a rather rapid speed in “My Shot,” suggesting his impulsiveness by the adoption of hip-hop, Burr in “Wait For It” sings to an elegant dancehall beat, implying his patience and deliberation by the adoption of pop ballad.

The two characters' differences, as a matter of fact, are not just personal; rather, they suggest differences in American national identity. The personality of Hamilton reflects the values of the American Dream and an opportunist, while that of Burr the values of a fatalist, as a consequence of their class differences. To start with, Hamilton was just as young, aggressive, and eager as this new nation was to contribute. Also, his confidence and extreme motivation realize the American dream ideal of positivity and the belief of how one could make accomplishments via hard work. His humble background serves as a drive for him to always take initiative and not waste any given opportunities that come his way, even those with risks. Burr, on the other hand, believes that he has his historical baggage as a result of his fatalist view: a legacy of family name to protect. In other words, Burr represents the group of people in the U.S. who still respect tradition.

If Burr cannot compete with Hamilton with his charisma and aggressiveness on the political stage, Burr's caution is actually less hurtful on the personal level. Concerning Hamilton, his romantic relationships in the show include his marriage with Eliza Schuyler, and his notorious affair with Maria Reynolds. As for Burr, Theodosia Prevost, was the only love interest of Burr presented in the musical, which started as an affair at first, too.

Primarily, Hamilton's aggressiveness shows problems in his views on love and marriage while Burr's caution shows merits on the same subject. To illustrate, during "The Story of Tonight (Reprise)," Burr admits that he is having an affair with Theodosia. Upon receiving this information, Hamilton does not discourage him from this affair. Instead, he questions Burr, "If you love this woman, go get her! What are you waiting for?" This remark demonstrates how Hamilton is a person who would not wait but work to make sure he attain anything that he wants, sometimes without deliberation and regardless of right and wrong. Ignoring Hamilton, Burr continued his

secret affair with Theodosia for about three years until he officially married her after the decease of her husband. In this case, consequently, Burr's reserved and cautious approach towards personal relationship succeeded and brings light to its virtue.

Hamilton's unreserved actions, on the contrary, fails in the case of romantic relationships. The relationship presented on stage between Eliza and him seems to be revolving around the theme of "satisfaction". How Eliza is easily satisfied serves as a foil to how Hamilton is never satisfied, as he himself says so in the number "Satisfied". In addition, the sister of Eliza, Angelica, acknowledges the endless hunger of Hamilton earlier than Eliza: Hamilton will never be satisfied neither in a romantic relationship with Eliza as his wife nor in his political career. Or more specifically, he will always desire more from himself or from his life in general. In contrast, the number, "That Would Be Enough", evidently demonstrates the strong affection Eliza has for Hamilton as well as her nature of being easily-fulfilled. She distinctly expresses that "Just stay alive/that would be enough." When Hamilton questions her if she will "relish being a poor man's wife," she positively, without hesitation, answers yes. She further claims that, "We don't need a legacy/We don't need money/If I could grant you peace of mind/If you could let me inside your heart." Eliza is saying that she hopes herself, as a partner, as well as having a family, is enough for Hamilton.

However, as repeatedly emphasized, Eliza and domestic life can never be enough for Hamilton, as can be seen in how Hamilton constantly chooses his career over his family as the musical continues. To elaborate, in "Non-Stop," when Hamilton is appointed Secretary of Treasury by Washington and is again leaving her, Eliza asks him with great sorrow, "Look around, isn't this enough?" Hamilton simply responds with his refrain, "I'm not throwing away my shot!" Yet again, in "Take a Break," when Eliza requests that Hamilton joins her to a vacation at her old residence,

Hamilton says no, “I can’t stop until I get this plan through Congress.”

More significantly, his scandal with Maria Reynolds serves as a key proof of his negligence to family. In “We Know,” which Burr, Jefferson, and Madison confronts Hamilton, assuming that he was involved in embezzlement, Hamilton tells them the truth and in defense, he addresses,

Yes, I have reasons for shame

But I have not committed treason and sullied my good name

As you can see I have done nothing to provoke legal action

Are my answers to your satisfaction?

“He’s not bragging, but the language is complicated” (“Hamilton’s America”). The wording and tone of this remark is delivered with confidence to a certain degree that shows problems in his perception of adultery, which resembles the mentality he had when Burr first told him about Theodosia, suggesting that his arrogance and ambition to rise above anything affects his moral values. Afterwards, in fear of this scandal being exposed by his enemies, Hamilton thought exposing it himself would minimize the damage of his political career (“The Reynolds Pamphlet”). In doing so, he once again acts on impulse, ignores how his actions would affect Eliza. As Eliza points out in “Burn”, “In clearing your name, you have ruined our lives.” However, subsequent to both the scandal and the death of their son, Phillip, Eliza, who is in great grief and pain, still manages to forgive Hamilton. Her forgiveness implies once more, how the presence of Hamilton alone, is enough for her as well as serves as a foil for Hamilton’s endless dissatisfaction.

Burr, by contrary, cherishes his domestic life and takes his duties seriously. For instance, in “We Know,” Burr, says to Hamilton, “I hope you saved some money for your daughter and sons,” while Jefferson and Madison focused on sneering Hamilton on his finished career because of their assumed embezzlement of Hamilton. Thus,

Burr's line stands out, since it indicates Burr's attentiveness to family relations compared to Jefferson and Madison. Additionally, in the final duel number, "The World Was Wide Enough," Burr cries, "This man will not make an orphan of my daughter," before the duel took place, touching on how his family is always on his mind. On the contrary, Hamilton, as elaborated above, keeps choosing his career over family, as he continues to tune out the words of Eliza, such as rejecting her invitation for a break. Later, what is worse than an affair is that his self-exposure of it without hesitation and without talking over with Eliza, for the safety of his career that hurt Eliza tremendously thereafter. To conclude, in my opinion, how Hamilton and Burr differently deal with their domestic duties draws the sharpest contrast between them in that Burr's personality and ways of conduct demonstrate the most merits and relatively, those of Hamilton shows the most flaws in this category.

Apart from their different philosophies toward domestic life, their political conduct further summarizes their irreconcilable differences and produces their last fatal conflict. Opposed to how Hamilton almost always explicitly expresses himself, Burr's approach of not taking a stance publicly, "Don't let them know what you're against or what you're for" applies to his political strategy as well. This flaw of Burr is continually emphasized as the show goes on by constantly being stabbed at by Hamilton, Jefferson and Madison. For example, when Hamilton invites Burr to write the Federalist Papers to defend the Constitution, Burr refuses, being himself, he would not risk his legacy by writing for something with such uncertainty at the time. He questions Hamilton, "And what if you're backing the wrong horse?" Upon receiving his refusal, Hamilton attacks Burr, "For once in your life, take a stand with pride/I don't understand how you stand to the side." Yet again, their contrasting perception of having a stand is stressed. Moreover, the number, "The Room Where It Happens," illustrates the historical event, "the Compromise of 1790," in which Hamilton agrees

to move the U.S. Capital from New York City to Potomac in favor of Jefferson and Madison. Burr, after acknowledging this decision, accuses Hamilton, “You got more than you gave.” Hamilton, instead of justifying his actions, Hamilton answers,

And I wanted what I got

When you got skin in the game, you stay in the game

But you don't get a win unless you play in the game

Oh, you get love for it. You get hate for it

You get nothing if you...

Wait for it, wait for it, wait!

Hamilton replies Burr by indicating their difference here and pointing out once again the reserved philosophy of Burr. As another illustration, Burr changes parties overnight just to grasp the chance for the Senate Seat without considering the values of the party. In addition, Jefferson also addresses “He’s not very forthcoming on any particular stances” (“The Election of 1800”). In other words, Burr, by holding on so tightly to his “talk less” principle, actually lacks beliefs and opinions as a politician.

Up to a point, the contradictory political beliefs between Hamilton and Burr and the failure of them understanding each other leads to their duel and Hamilton’s death at last, and the direct fuse is the endorsement of Hamilton for Jefferson instead of Burr. Burr could not understand how Hamilton would choose Jefferson over him to support. Although he acknowledges their undeniable differences, they have been friends, or at least, were once friends, while Jefferson and Hamilton are never presented nearly as friends in the musical. Despite having achieved success for a brief period of time, as he has become Senator and later a candidate for president, he is now once again dragged back because of Hamilton, at least according to Burr, as he declares with fury, “I look back on where I failed/And in every place I checked/The only common thread has been your disrespect.” As expected, Hamilton did not apologize nor agree at all



with what Burr accused of him. Instead, he proves to Burr how he could only blame himself for his own downfall:

I am not the reason no one trusts you

No one knows what you believe

I will not equivocate on my opinion

I have always worn it on my sleeve

Hamilton, again, assaults Burr of him not having an opinion and draws a contrast between them. Hamilton, even in this matter of life and death, insists to not “talk less” and stand his ground. In advance, Burr did war him: “Answer for the accusations I lay at your feet or/Prepare to bleed, good man.” Hamilton, regardless, adds fuel to the fire,

I stand by what I said, every bit of it

You stand only for yourself

It’s what you do

I can’t apologize because it’s true

He displays his “self-destructive stubbornness” (Mead) by expressing that he would not under any circumstances admitting or apologizing for things that are against his beliefs, even if he knows that he could avoid “to bleed” or worse by doing so. To summarize, if Hamilton with his immigrant background is passionate and ambitious, he is steadfast in following through his words in actions with courage but sometimes impetuosity. Burr, being weighed down by his family history, is cautious and conscientious to the degree of being an opportunist in politics.

### III. Conclusion

Despite their many differences, they are not depicted as a hero and a villain in this musical. Instead, *Hamilton* presents equally both their strengths and flaws.

Hamilton indeed has heroic qualities such as being a man of action and going after

what he wants. More importantly, he evolved from an immigrant with nothing to a founding father that many people would agree, shapes the financial system of the U.S. However, his fatal flaws also lies in his strength. His aggressive nature and eagerness did get him on top for a while, but it was also these qualities that allowed him to “always say what he believed” (“Non-Stop”) and thus, made numerous enemies, including Burr, who ended his life. Concerning Burr, his “hubris” would be what Hamilton has accused him of throughout the show, “having no stand”. However, his jealousy of and hostility toward Hamilton is quite relatable and compassionately delivered in the show. Seeing a peer, even a junior to him, with a much humbler background than him, soaring way above his career, could not be easy for him, considering they were friends and in a sense, Burr introduced him to the Revolution and hence his uphill climb. Although Burr might be overlooking the possibility that his political debacle stemmed from his own flaws, and placed the blame all to Hamilton, his antagonism is understandable. In addition, he did show regret after firing a bullet into Hamilton, as evident in his repentant shout of “Wait!”, the fact that he “walks towards him” the next second, as well as his lamentation at the end, “I should’ve known/The world was wide enough for both Hamilton and me.” Burr is not a villain with pure evil character, instead, he is just a man that reacts to the downfall of his life negatively, as any human being would have. The musical is not only about displaying the glorious history of the founding fathers and their extraordinary contributions, but also unmasking that these whom we called great men, also have the humane and ugly side that we all people have.

The musical’s study of these differences, for me, reflects a 21st-century view of the American national identity which should accept and confirm the human differences of people living in this country. By allowing both Hamilton and Burr to be more than a typical hero and villain, but a pair of inspiring protagonist and antagonist,

*Hamilton* celebrates human differences. Furthermore, the similarities and parallels Hamilton and Burr share throughout their legendary lives even though they come from contrastingly different family background, implies a celebration of the ideals of American identity, which is how Hamilton uses a metaphor by comparing his nation, America, as a “symphony” towards the end of the show. The musical is implying that, regardless of one’s origins, orphan or not, American Dream or not, aristocracy or not, everyone should have the equality to thrive. And by “symphony”, Hamilton in addition stresses how the audience should recognize that America, then and now, has a “hybrid” identity and how all Americans are significant to its identity.

*Word count: 5044*



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