Introduction

"In all of Shakespeare's development," write C. L. Barber and Richard Wheeler, "there is no change in dramatic style so striking as that between the final tragedies and the late romances."[1] Barber and Wheeler use the term "dramatic style" loosely, referring chiefly to the theatrical sub-genre and the point of view that selects and informs it. But the sentence is true in a strict sense as well, when "style" is taken to mean syntax, meter, diction, repetition, figurative language, and other such verbal and poetic properties. Around 1607, Shakespeare was drawn to a new kind of story and, at the same time, gave his characters a new kind of poetry to speak. At the beginning of this phase, having completed *Macbeth* and begun and perhaps finished *Coriolanus* or *Antony and Cleopatra* (or perhaps both), he contributed to the completion of *Pericles*, collaborating with George Wilkins or possibly finishing a play that Wilkins had begun; at the end of this phase, from about 1611 to 1613, he collaborated with John Fletcher on three plays, *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and *Cardenio*; between 1608 and 1611 he wrote three unaided plays, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. Modern scholarship cannot decide what to call these seven plays, indeed can scarcely agree on what to call any one of them: comedy? romance? pastoral? tragicomedy? Whatever the designation, Shakespeare's shift from tragedy to the new form coincided with and is related – both as cause and effect – to his development of a poetic style like nothing he (or anybody else) had composed before: it is audacious, irregular, ostentatious, playful, and difficult. This book undertakes a detailed examination of that late style.

The plays of this period have resisted most critical efforts to account for their attraction and theatrical power. This is not merely the conventional claim of one who seeks to justify a critical project by decrying the

[1] C. L. Barber and Richard Wheeler, *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 298.

inadequacy of previous efforts. From G. Wilson Knight in the 1930s to Philip Edwards in the 1950s to Howard Felperin in the 1970s, it was generally agreed that criticism had failed to take the measure of these extraordinary works, and even the abundant attention of the past quarter century has not altered that perception. Kiernan Ryan, summarizing twentieth-century scholarship in 1999, acknowledges the perceived inadequacy of most recent efforts. He also identifies a potentially helpful way of proceeding:

It is to the deliberate detail of their language and form that we must look, if the last plays are to be released from both the retrospection of old and new historicism and the abstractions of the allegorists. For it is by dislocating the dramatic narrative and contorting conventional poetic discourse that Shakespearean romance articulates its alienation from its own age and its commerce with futurity. What makes these plays still strike us as enigmatic and elusive is neither their engrossment in recondite topical allusions nor their veiled subscription to the perennial mysteries of myth and religion. It is the fact that we have not yet mastered their formal grammar and poetic idiom, and so have not yet learned how to read them.[2]

None of the other major phases of Shakespeare's career nor any of the other dramatic kinds – comedy, history, tragedy – has seemed so needy.

One possible explanation for this perceived critical failure is that most commentators begin broadly, exploring indisputably central themes such as forgiveness and redemption or attempting to define and contextualize the plays' distinctive dramatic form. My study takes the opposite point of departure, beginning with microscopic units such as syllables and lines and moving outward. It is a response to Ryan's challenge that we take seriously the "formal grammar and poetic idiom" of these plays. But my aim is not merely to redress the neglect of the late style. The chapters that follow not only define its principal properties but also explore the relation of that style to the dramatic forms it was devised to serve. The remarkable stylistic and formal developments both signify and derive from Shakespeare's revised understanding of the world, his refreshed sense of the positive capacities of language, and his reconceived faith in the power of the theatre and the role of the artist. These affirmations seem not to be sustained wholeheartedly through the entire group of plays, however. Much attention has been paid to Shakespeare's last thoughts, chiefly by the allegory hunters of the nineteenth century and their twentieth-century descendants and detractors; considerable notice has been given to the

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[2] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare: The Last Plays* (London: Longman, 1999), p. 18.

generic problems posed by the late plays; but relatively little has been
written about the late verse. Ideas, genre, poetry – these three areas of
critical thought have not been successfully triangulated. By beginning
with particulars and furnishing a genuine poetics of the late works,
I hope to offer a more specific and thus a more persuasive account of
Shakespeare's final period.

This preliminary chapter moves eventually to a statement of purpose
and method, but it opens by introducing certain critical problems that
require elucidation before stylistic analysis can begin. First comes the
question of textual authority, the status of the play-texts available to us.
The fact of collaboration also demands a brief comment, especially as it
affects stylistic analysis. Next is "lateness," an abiding and enormously
influential notion in discussions of the plays from *Pericles* on. That
problem leads conveniently to a brief critical history of the last plays in
general, a survey glancing at some of the major approaches and important
names. It is followed by a summary of the comparatively little work done
on the late style, and then by a consideration of dramatic kind: what
nomenclature best suits these works? Since one of my aims is to identify
the points of correspondence between poetics and dramatic mode, this
last critical question is uncommonly significant, more significant, in fact,
than the answer. Finally, after referring to certain critical models I have
found helpful, I set forth my argument in moderate detail. Given that the
taxonomy I shall construct is (once again) literal, in these pages the phrase
"the late style" means, for the most part, dramatic verse. The stylistic
changes that become audible around 1607 are most easily discerned in the
poetry, although many of the traits that make the verse challenging also
complicate the prose, and some prose passages will be cited and discussed.
In both its manifestations, prose and verse, Shakespeare's late style is
difficult – difficult to listen to, difficult to read, difficult to understand,
and difficult to talk about.

THE TOPIC OF TEXTS

Any treatment of stylistic particulars must acknowledge the distinctive
textual circumstances of this group of plays. Each one considered here,
unlike many of the earlier works, exists in only one version, all later
texts deriving from the first printing. *Macbeth, Coriolanus, Antony and
Cleopatra, The Tempest, The Winter's Tale, Henry VIII*, and *Cymbeline*
were published initially in the 1623 Folio; *Pericles* appeared in 1609 in
an unsatisfactory quarto, from which the five subsequent quartos were

reproduced; *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, advertised as the work of Shake-speare and Fletcher, finally saw print in a quarto of 1634 and again in the second Beaumont and Fletcher Folio (1679); no text of *Cardenio* has survived. Scholarship has so far failed to learn why so few of the plays from the second half of Shakespeare's career found their way into print: between 1594 and 1600, thirteen of his plays were published, whereas between 1601 and 1616, only five appeared. This discrepancy suggests a changed attitude towards publication on the part of the author (or authors) or of the owners of those texts, the King's Men, and a number of explanations for this reduction have been proposed, from company prosperity (no need to sell) to a glutted market (too many books being sold) to a decline in Shakespeare's popularity.

Recently two additional possibilities have been advanced: first, that the company's involvement with the aristocracy, especially the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, "might have prompted Shakespeare and his fellows to change their publication strategy from print for a relatively wide readership to manuscript presentation copies for a small group of influential patrons"; and second, that Shakespeare and his fellows with-held the playbooks because even at this early date they had begun to entertain the possibility of a collected edition of his plays.[3] After publica-tion of the second quarto of *Hamlet* in 1604, perhaps a defensive response to the faulty Q1 of 1603, none of Shakespeare's plays appeared in quarto for the first time except *King Lear* and *Pericles*, the latter in the unsatis-factory version of 1609. Thorpe's quarto version of the Sonnets also appeared in 1609, of course, but its origins, especially whether it was published with the poet's permission, are debatable. Whatever the cause or causes, the texts of many of the plays we rank among Shakespeare's greatest achievements were not available to the reading public until after his death.

This dearth of textual choices limits the close reader, of course – "limits," but does not disable. The increased complexity of the style, particularly the syntax, as Chapters 3 and 4 will demonstrate, yields a relatively high quotient of confusing sentences or phrases, but editors lack an alternative text that might help them clarify or emend a difficult or manifestly corrupt passage. Naturally such textual instability affects the work of the stylistic critic, whose conclusions about minute poetic or

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[3] The quotation is from Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 112. Erne considers both these possibilities in some detail (pp. 108–14) and makes a persuasive, if not a knockdown, argument.

syntactic effects might seem dubious or unreliable. While it would of course be desirable to have better texts, versions reflecting greater fidelity to the words that Shakespeare wrote or that the King's Men performed – especially in the case of *Pericles* – the existing copies nevertheless offer thousands of comprehensible and more or less authoritative lines and sentences, plenty of territory for noticing poetic choices and linguistic properties. As Coburn Freer remarks about the problem of textual in-stability, "if such objections vitiate the study of the poetry in Renaissance drama, they also invalidate every other kind of criticism, except the study of the text and the facts connected with its generation and transmission."[4]

An irreducible fact about the poetry treated in this book is its status as dramatic verse. Much will be made of Shakespeare's metrical disposition, his increasingly elliptical approach to expression, the tangled structure of much of the poetic syntax, the insistent repetitions audible in the verse, and other such formal features. These technical properties combine to produce poetry initially delivered from the stage, and this theatrical origin has shaped, and thus needs to be borne in mind throughout, the ensuing analysis. How audience members perceive the distinctive verse of the late plays determines how they respond to the dramatic narrative, how they react intellectually and emotionally, how they comprehend the meaning of the story enacted before them. In other words, what they hear is as important as what they see, and in fact what they hear to some extent determines what they see. Recognizing the theatrical status of the medium is one of the ways in which the analysis performed in this book differs from what some detractors of poetics deride as "New Criticism." The kind of poetic analysis conducted fifty years ago would not normally have insisted on the relevance of the dramatic context, would have been more likely to address the play as poem and contented itself with certain favored critical topics, notably metaphor, tension, paradox, and irony. As we have learned, a just appraisal of almost any aspect of Shakespeare's style must include an awareness of its theatrical provenance.[5]

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[4] Coburn Freer, *The Poetics of Jacobean Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 11.

[5] The patriarch of this insistence on the theatrical was J. L. Styan, *The Shakespeare Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); more recent exponents of performance criticism include James L. Bulman, *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1996), Barbara Hodgdon, *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), and William B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

To acknowledge that origin is not, however, to insist that it constitutes the only legitimate context: Lukas Erne has argued convincingly that "Shakespeare did not only expect that at some point in the future people would 'read – and reread' his plays. He could not help knowing that his plays were being read and reread, printed and reprinted, excerpted and anthologized as he was writing more plays."[6] Moreover, although Erne himself eschews detailed analysis of verbal properties, he acknowledges that his argument "does go some way toward justifying such an approach, suggesting that a close, 'readerly,' attention to the play's text is not a modern aberration."[7] Much of the analysis undertaken herein depends upon the leisure needed to reflect on the verse, to read and re-read, to notice its patterns and other effects. And yet we must remain conscious that these verbal configurations are acting upon the ear of the audience and affecting their perception of the semantic content of the poetry, even though the operation of those effects may be extremely subtle or even subliminal. Hence, the discussion that follows is not predicated exclusively on one or the other conception of textual ontology.

COLLABORATION

The problems of what was written are complicated by some uncertainty about who wrote what. According to MacDonald Jackson, with reference to *Pericles*, "The very gateway to the final period of Shakespeare's play-wrighting career is . . . obstructed by thorny problems of text and authorship."[8] So, it might be added, is the exit ramp. Even if we tidy up the end of the career, placing *Pericles* after *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* and thus treating the plays from *Pericles* through *Cardenio* as a discrete group, we cannot avoid the inconvenient fact that four of the seven were written by Shakespeare and somebody else. As will become clear in the next section, nineteenth-century suspicions about the presence of another hand in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII* helped to

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[6] *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, p. 25. Erne has thoroughly documented what a number of scholars have been arguing for some time. Even before the Styan-led revolution of performance criticism in the 1970s, Sigurd Burckhardt insisted that "to be understood [Shakespeare] must be *read* – with attention to sometimes minute detail. There is an odd superstition abroad that nothing can be part of Shakespeare's intention that cannot be communicated directly across the footlights." *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. vii. See also Harry Berger, *Imaginary Audition: Shakespeare on Stage and Page* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[7] Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, p. 22.

[8] MacDonald Jackson, *Defining Shakespeare: 'Pericles' as Test Case* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 11.

stimulate interest in the last plays as a group. Those early concerns, although based on a non-systematic impressionism, have been validated by stylometric and other kinds of tests developed by twentieth-century scholarship, especially the meticulous labors of Cyrus Hoy in the 1950s.[9] Recent scholarship has returned attention to the practice of collaboration. Brian Vickers's *Shakespeare, Co-Author*, focusing on the investigations of such scholars as Jonathan Hope, David Lake, and MacDonald Jackson, offers an exhaustive account of the current state of attribution studies.[10]

Scholars agree on the following general conclusions: that Shakespeare both began and ended his career writing with other people, and probably did so in the middle of it as well; that *Pericles* was a collaborative effort with George Wilkins, even though we can't be sure by whom the product was conceived or how the partnership functioned; and that *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and *Cardenio* were all joint productions with John Fletcher, although questions remain about the nature of this final collaborative relationship, such as who plotted the plays? Did the two authors work together or separately? Did Fletcher touch up certain scenes first written by Shakespeare? Might a third playwright have contributed? Other questions that used to receive attention, such as the nineteenth-century belief that Shakespeare couldn't have written the scene depicting the descent of Jupiter in Act 5 of *Cymbeline*, have mostly disappeared from the critical discourse. While specialists still quibble over certain scenes and decline to speculate on some small samples, such as prologues and epilogues, we can say that Shakespeare is probably responsible for the following sections of the collaborative plays. *Pericles*: Acts 3, 4, and 5, with Wilkins having written Acts 1 and 2 (although there may be some Shakespeare in the first two acts and some Wilkins in the last three); *Henry VIII*: 1.1, 1.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.2.1–203, and 5.1; *The Two Noble Kinsmen*: 1.1 through 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, and 5 (but not 5.1.1–33 or 5.2).[11]

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[9] Hoy's conclusions appear in a series of articles entitled "The Shares of Fletcher and his Collaborators in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon (I-VII)," published in *Studies in Bibliography* between 1956 and 1962. Some of his conclusions have been modified by later work, such as that of Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays: A Socio-Linguistic Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), although in general Hoy's attribution of scenes and passages in the Shakespeare–Fletcher collaborations has remained the starting point for most analysts. See also Jackson, *Defining Shakespeare*.

[10] Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Vickers's second chapter, "Identifying Co-Authors" (pp. 44–134), surveys the history of attribution studies by describing the various kinds of tests employed. Chapter 5 (pp. 291–332) considers the evidence for the joint authorship of *Pericles*, chapter 6 (pp. 333–432) for *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

[11] In addition to Vickers, who is interested in the methods of distinction, see *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, with John Jowett and William Montgomery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's*

Accepting these conclusions about division of labor, I should acknowledge their significance for the present study. Although I sometimes write of one or another of these collaborative works as if it were entirely Shakespeare's, such reference is largely a critical convenience. The phrase "the style of *Henry VIII*," for example, denotes those scenes or parts of scenes that most scholars have assigned to Shakespeare. A similar assumption obtains when *Henry VIII* is referred to loosely as one of the "romances," although it should probably be called a history play. The reader should consider such phrases a kind of shorthand, with the assurance that all stylistic illustrations are taken from Shakespearean scenes. For purposes of clarity I have evaded other potential complications. Although Shakespeare is generally assigned the last three acts of *Pericles*, "it is nevertheless true," as Frank Kermode points out, "that the first scenes also occasionally have lines that sound like idiosyncratic Shakespeare," in support of which claim he cites the image of the "blind mole" and the "poor worm" (1.1.100–2).[12] While remaining aware that such possibly Shakespearean lines exist here and there, I have mostly resisted the diversion that entering into such controversies would entail.

That collaboration renders parts of certain plays unavailable for stylistic analysis may be taken less as a hindrance than as a benefit. Having the presence of another poetic hand – Fletcher's much more than Wilkins's, of course – is most instructive in the attempt to establish Shakespeare's stylistic profile after 1607–8. The audible differences between two distinct styles of verse initially set scholars to investigating the details of composition and led them eventually to establish the order of the canon. And the differences between Fletcher's and Shakespeare's verse are marked: respectively, smooth versus choppy, heavily versus subtly patterned, delicate versus rough. According to Charles Lamb, Fletcher "lays line upon line, making up one after the other; adding image to image so deliberately that we see where they join: Shakespeare mingles every thing, he runs line into line, embarrasses sentences and metaphors; before one idea has burst its shell another is hatched and

Plays, and Jackson, *Defining Shakespeare*, as well as the following editions: Suzanne Gossett, ed., *Pericles* (London: Thomson Learning, 2004); Gordon McMullan, ed., *Henry VIII, or All is True* (London: Thomas Nelson, 2000); Eugene Waith, ed., *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Lois Potter, ed., *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1997). Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) is interested especially in the gender politics of collaboration and in the political history of modern attribution studies.

[12] Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 255–56.

clamorous for disclosure."[13] This is one of the most insightful stylistic analyses ever written, and without pausing now to illustrate its accuracy, I will have occasion throughout the book to refer to Lamb's distinctions as a way of sharpening the definition of Shakespeare's particular style.

LATENESS

Shakespeare's style, like everything connected with the last plays, is inevitably associated with the idea of "lateness," Shakespeare's "last" productions, his "final period," even his "swan song." An implausibly large number of critics find themselves unable to write about the last phase of Shakespeare's career without invoking the late years of Ibsen, Michelangelo or, invariably, Beethoven. The composer represents "an ideal example of the final achievement of a great artist, when he seems to acquire a new profundity, a new understanding, in making a last attempt to solve the enigma of life" – Kenneth Muir's sentence is typical of this critical position.[14] A variation on the theme is found in Adorno's interpretive reversal of the terms, so that "the antiharmonistic postures of Michelangelo, of the mature Rembrandt and Beethoven are all attributable to the inner development of the concept of harmony and in the last analysis to its insufficiency."[15] Such rhetoric is difficult to escape, based as it is on perception of a distinctive voice in a recognizable phase of an artist's career. Still, throughout this book the phrase "Shakespeare's late style" is meant to function chiefly as a chronological pointer: a term designating the dramatic verse Shakespeare composed between 1607 and 1613, a sign divested, insofar as possible, of emotional or teleological connotations. Logically, of course, the use of the adjective "late" implies a way of thinking about the style, acknowledges a category separating it from the expressive forms discernible in earlier plays, but such groupings need not be sentimentalized, nor must the style be considered necessarily superior, the plays regarded as wiser.[16]

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[13] *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas (London: 1904), IV, 341–42. Lamb also remarks of Fletcher's style that "its motion is circular, not progressive. Each line revolves on itself in a sort of separate orbit. They do not join into one another like a running hand" (p. 329).

[14] Kenneth Muir, *Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine, and Ibsen* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1961), p. 3.

[15] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 161.

[16] Another figure whose late work is sometimes compared to that of Shakespeare is Henry James. This comparison can be more fruitful than some of the others, based as it is on the specific resemblances between two styles of writing (albeit that one is verse, the other prose). See John Porter Houston, *Shakespearean Sentences: A Study in Style and Syntax* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 200–5.

Owing to the overexposure of such comparisons with other major artists, "lateness" is an idea that has recently come under attack, and it is worth scrutinizing the critical history of this concept and noting some of its ramifications for the study of style.[17] The santification of the late plays, and indeed our capacity for talking about "late plays" at all, is a function, interestingly enough, of very close reading. In the nineteenth century such scholars as William Spalding, the German G. G. Gervinus, and above all F. J. Furnivall, the prodigiously energetic editor and founder of the New Shakespeare Society – these scholars and others, mostly working independently of one another, set out to determine which parts of certain disputed texts were written by William Shakespeare.[18] This goal required that they establish Shakespeare's poetic identity, a task they undertook by means of detailed prosodic investigations. Thus they were able to determine that, broadly speaking, Shakespeare liberalized his blank verse as he matured, writing a progressively less regular line as he moved from histories and comedies to the tragedies and beyond: such relaxation of the line, they discovered, entailed the poet's admission of multiple forms of variation, particularly enjambment and light endings, along with an increasing tolerance for lineal disruption. Knowledge of this progression then allowed scholars to determine with considerable certainty the order in which the plays were composed.[19]

"Of these tests," A. C. Bradley concluded, "that of rhyme and that of feminine endings, discreetly employed, are of use in broadly distinguishing Shakespeare's plays into two groups, earlier and later, and also in marking out the very latest dramas."[20] Bradley is cautious, as well he

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[17] Suzanne Gossett, in her Introduction to the Arden3 edition of *Pericles*, enumerates the obstacles to considering it a "late" play: "the 'lateness' paradigm is inadequate to describe a play which is not entirely by Shakespeare; on which Shakespeare worked when he was not yet forty-four years old; which reworks a plot that had already served as a frame for one of his earliest comedies; and which he may have been writing simultaneously with or shortly before *Coriolanus*, a play with ties to an entirely different section of Shakespeare's *oeuvre*" (p. 54). The most thorough treatment of this topic promises to be Gordon McMullan's *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship, Biography, Reception* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[18] See William Spalding, *A Letter on Shakespere's Authorship of "The Two Noble Kinsmen,"* ed. J. H. Burton (London: New Shakespeare Society, 1876). For a detailed survey of some of these tests and their results, see Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author*, especially pp. 44–134, and *passim*.

[19] See Barbara A. Mowat, "'What's In A Name?': Tragicomedy, Romance, or Late Comedy?" in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Jean Howard and Richard Dutton, 4 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), IV, 129–53. For an overview of the changes in verse style through the course of the career, see Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapter 5.

[20] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear" and "Macbeth," With a New Introduction by John Russell Brown* (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 405–6.