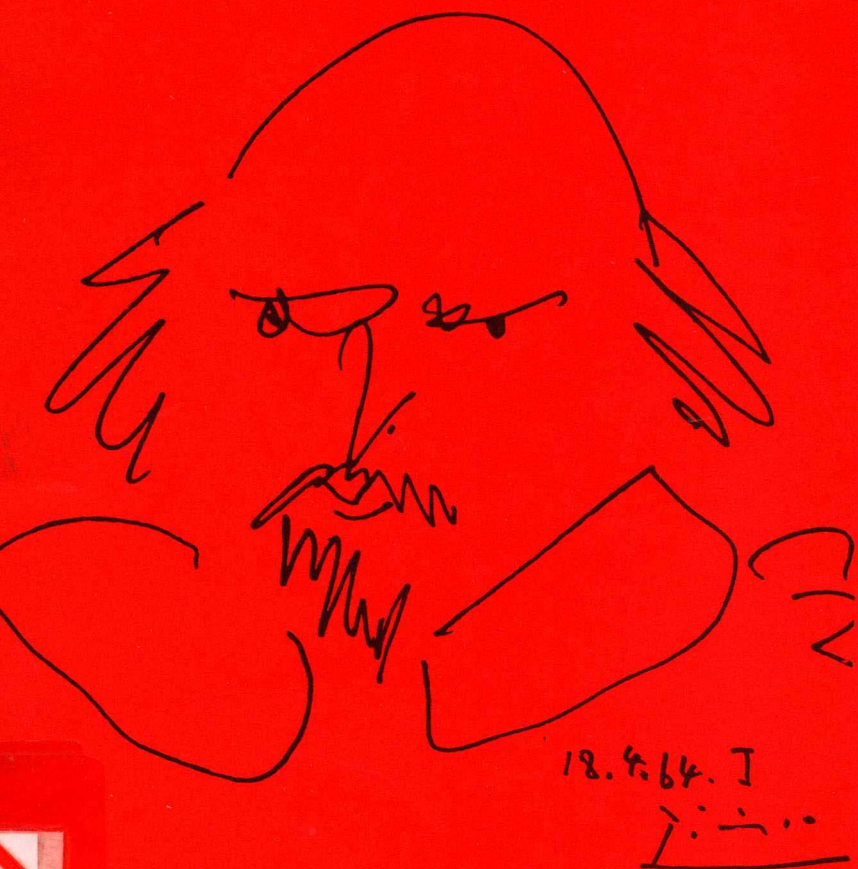


THE NEW SHAKESPEARE

Henry V



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KING HENRY V



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INTRODUCTION

The First Folio gives us the only authoritative text for *Henry V*, and it is happily a good one, being printed as we shall see almost certainly from the author's manuscript; while a 'bad quarto', which is helpful now and then to an editor, has also come down to us¹. In general, the play has received scant attention from scholars, and has not yet appeared in the invaluable *American Variorum*. I stand the more indebted, therefore, to Dr Duthie, who has prepared for me elaborate notes on the play, often approaching variorum fulness, together with a text based upon a fresh examination of the folio original. For what follows I must take full responsibility. But the fact that he had first traversed every step in the road greatly added to my speed and confidence; I have helped myself to his comments, as my Notes indicate; and I have adopted his text practically without change, the more readily that it is virtually a reprint in modern spelling of the folio text, punctuation and all, though with the addition of editorial stage-directions, mostly of my invention. Lastly, a comprehensive and masterly account of the historical events traversed in the play is now available in the three volumes of J. H. Wylie's monumental *Reign of Henry V*, 1914-29, the reading of which encourages us to believe that Shakespeare's account of the French campaign is substantially true to fact.

Henry V is a play which men of action have been wont silently to admire, and literary men, at any rate during the last hundred and thirty years, volubly to condemn. But even critics learn something from times like the present; or at least one humble member of the

¹ v. p. 111-13, below.

tribe imagines he has done so. Born in the penultimate decade of the nineteenth century, I grew up tutored by my betters to think of *Henry V* as a drum-and-trumpet show, thrown off by Shakespeare as a perfunctory concession to the popular taste of his age. But happening to witness a performance by Frank Benson and his company at Stratford in August or September 1914, I discovered for the first time what it was all about. The epic drama of Agincourt matched the temper of the moment, when Rupert Brooke was writing *The Soldier* and the Kaiser was said to be scoffing at our 'contemptible little army' which had just crossed the Channel, so exactly that it might have been written expressly for it. Details of the production have passed from my mind; but never can I forget the three hours' excitement which Shakespeare gave that audience. The truth is, he mirrors in his plays all sorts and conditions, not only of men and women, but also of national and social moods, so that any day one of them may suddenly become topical, even to the inflaming of political passions. Not many years since a performance of *Coriolanus* provoked a riot in Paris, which was followed by the dismissal of a cabinet minister. When, again, has *Troilus and Cressida* held English audiences spell-bound, except during the cynical years that divided the World War of 1914-18 from the World War of 1939-45?

But, indeed, the notion that there was anything perfunctory about *Henry V*, either for the dramatist or his original audience, will not easily survive consideration of the circumstances of its production. Sir Edmund Chambers sees it 'as the most complete expression of that heightened national self-consciousness, which is so characteristic a feature of the latter years of Elizabeth's chequered and anxious reign'; and finds it 'tempting to connect' its 'immediate inspiration...with the renewed stimulus given to the patriotic order of ideas by

the exploits of the Earl of Essex and his gallant company during the filibustering expedition to Cadiz in 1596 and the less successful island voyage to the Azores in 1597¹. One can, I think, press the topicality even closer home. In the eyes of ordinary Englishmen, of whom politically speaking Shakespeare was one, England at the beginning of 1599, when the play was taking shape, must have appeared to 'stand upon the top of happy hours'. The very real fears of a Spanish invasion, which had hung over the country for fourteen years and more, seemed suddenly lifted by the death of Philip II in November 1598; and, as tangible proof, it would appear, of this new-won security, there was being fitted out at the same time the largest and most elaborate military expedition launched from these shores during Elizabeth's reign, with the object of effecting the final conquest of Ireland². At the head of this force, which left England at the end of March 1599, was the young Earl; his appointment had been hailed with satisfaction by the whole country; and he made something like a royal procession through the streets of London on the day of his departure, when 'the people pressed exceedingly to behold him for more than four miles' space, crying out, "God save your Lordship, God preserve your Honour", some even following him 'until the evening, only to behold him'³.

A reflection of these memorable events has been commonly seen in the lines of the fifth Chorus which compare Henry's triumphal entry into his capital after Agincourt with the anticipated return of Essex himself. Some years ago I drew attention also to a close resemblance between Fluellen and Sir Roger Williams, the renowned Welsh soldier, with his professional pedantry, his quaint and forcible turns of speech, his vanity and

¹ *Shakespeare: a Survey*, pp. 139-40.

² Cheyney, *History of England*, ii. 473-4.

³ G. B. Harrison, *Elizabethan Journal*, iii. 13-14.

cool valour, who, as the familiar friend of Essex, would certainly have attended him to Ireland had he not died in 1595¹. But it seems hitherto to have been hardly realized how intimately associated with the Irish expedition the play as a whole must have been, both in inception and composition. It was the crushing defeat of the English by Tyrone at Armagh in August 1598 which finally persuaded Elizabeth that unusual measures were needed if Ireland was not to be altogether lost to her crown; and by November, that is, just about the date when Shakespeare probably first took the play in hand, active preparations for a large-scale invasion were already on foot. Thus, while he was at work upon it during the winter of 1598-99, the whole country was agog with the pressing and mustering of troops; it was being finished about the time the expedition sailed; and was certainly produced not long after, seeing that the lines above mentioned, referring to the return of a conquering Essex, would be out of date by about the end of June, when doubts of the success of the campaign were being freely talked of in London², and it was an Essex in disgrace who returned on 28 September. In a word, *Henry V*, so apposite in theme and spirit, as I and many others discovered, to the dispatch of a great expeditionary force in 1914, was actually written for a similar occasion in 1599.

Yet it would have been written in any case about this time, and the occasion was for Shakespeare a stroke of luck. The two Parts of *Henry IV* had been drawing large audiences in 1597-8, and *Henry V* was not only their sequel, but a sequel promised in their Epilogue,

¹ 'Martin Marprelate and Shakespeare's Fluellen', *The Library*, 1912. For a possible historical original of Fluellen v. p. 118.

² *Chamberlain's Letters* (Camden Society), p. 51. If this dating be correct, the 'wooden O' must be the Curtain Theatre; cf. note 1 Prol. 13.

and no doubt eagerly looked for. A turn in national affairs had unexpectedly placed at his disposal a miraculously happy hour for a play upon which he had long brooded, since he was already envisaging it in 1595 as the culmination of the historical series begun that year with *Richard II*. And it crowned the series, not merely because it filled the gap between *Henry IV* and *Henry VI*, but also because its hero was Henry of Monmouth, to Elizabethans the 'star of England' and the most glorious of English kings. Mr Masefield tells us that 'the play bears every mark of having been hastily written¹'. Yet other poets have gone wrong in criticizing Shakespeare; and I dare to think that had he at such a time set Arms and such a Man upon the stage in any off-hand or hasty fashion, he would have flouted a public not easily satisfied with second-rate productions. More, he would have belied and falsified the unmistakably genuine patriotism that burns in *King John* and *Richard II*, to say nothing of the admiration for Prince Hal which is evident in *Henry IV*². Shakespeare was often careless; often obliged through pressure of other work to offer his second best. But surely not in *Henry V*. The national emergency, the height of his great argument, the urge to equal if not surpass his earlier successes in historical drama, the quickened pulse of his own heart at the thought of England at war; all these would stimulate him to put forth his utmost strength.

But the spirit bloweth where it listeth, and resolution is no guarantee of success in poetry or drama; too often the reverse. Moreover, in chronicle-play the available material may be an obstinately limiting factor. Dr Duthie has suggested to me that, working forward from *Richard II*, Shakespeare found when he reached

¹ *Shakespeare* (Home University Library), p. 120.

² Cf. ch. iv, *The Fortunes of Falstaff*.

Henry V that it was both inadequate in quantity and unsuitable in kind for drama, which demands plot, inner conflict, and development of character; none of them readily distilled from the facts of Henry V's reign. Thus, he concludes, Shakespeare was forced back upon the episodical treatment, accompanied by frequent description on the part of a presenter or chorus, which we find. I think there is a good deal in this, while it is relevant to observe that Shakespeare was less free than usual to manipulate or depart from his historical sources, seeing that, as his direct reference to readers of the story implies¹, the facts he dealt with were probably better known to his hearers than those of any other of his chronicle-plays. Certainly, he follows Holinshed here far more closely than elsewhere. Yet intractability in the medium has often provoked the highest flights of art; and though I do not rank *Henry V* as one of the highest flights of Shakespeare's genius, I am bold to claim that in the writing of it he 'turned his necessity to glorious gain'.

If the greatest story in English history, as he and his contemporaries thought it, was ill-suited for normal dramatic treatment, then a new form of drama must be invented. Theme and hero clearly called for epic; and the problem was how to use the theatre for this purpose. It was solved by setting a series of heroic episodes or tableaux upon the stage, interspersed indeed for comic relief with lighter scenes, which introduce bragging Frenchmen (at times extraordinarily like Mussolini), rascally camp-followers, or a couple of French ladies making pretty fritters of English, but never for long distracting the attention of the audience from the contemplation of one figure, that of the great King, which, exhibited in a variety of moods and situations, dominates the play as Æneas dominates the

¹ 5 Prol. 1-6.

Aeneid. And the epical tone was emphasized by a Chorus, who speaks five prologues and an epilogue.

'In their sublimity and lyric fervour these monologues are unique', writes Dr Mackail; and he adds, 'we can hear in them, more certainly than elsewhere, more unquestionably than even in the *Sonnets*, the voice of Shakespeare speaking for himself, for his colleagues, and for his profession¹'. I am inclined to believe, encouraged thereto by Mr George Skillan², that this voice was actually heard by the spectators of 1599; that, in other words, the part of Chorus, which with its 223 lines is next in importance to the part of Henry, and which David Garrick was to regard as not beneath his dignity³, had been originally played by an actor called William Shakespeare. It is only a guess; but I find it helps me to understand Chorus and play alike, and think it may help others also. Certainly the diffident and apologetic tone, which the Chorus adopts throughout, and which sounds awkward, not to say ungracious, if interpreted, with most critics, as the impatience of an author girding against the resources of his theatre and the limitations of his actors, becomes at once natural and engaging when taken as a personal apology and plea by somebody who was author, player, and producer in one. And the lines of the Epilogue,

Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,
Our bending author hath pursued the story,

gain much if we see in our mind's eye the modest playwright bowing to his audience as he speaks them. In any case, Shakespeare's references elsewhere to the art of the theatre almost always include the art of the dramatist, and the Epilogue proves that they should be

¹ *The Approach to Shakespeare*, 1930, pp. 56-7.

² v. his thoughtful and suggestive acting edition of the play (pub. Samuel French Ltd.).

³ v. below, p. 1.

taken as doing so in *Henry V* likewise. But, it may be objected, why should the dramatist suddenly in 1599 begin apologizing for the incapacity of himself and his theatre to cope with a historical theme and battle-scenes¹, when such things had been one of their chief stocks-in-trade for the past half-dozen years? Nor does he make any bones later about confining the whole Roman world or cramming the very casques of Antony, Caesar and their legions within the 'wooden O' of the Globe playhouse. The answer surely is that here is no ordinary theme, but 'so great an object' that he honestly doubts whether he can compass it, and doubts the more that the nature of his material compels him to launch forth upon an untried form of drama. The diffidence of the Chorus is the expression of a genuine attitude of mind. When the self-assured Milton sets out upon his 'adventurous' flight, with intent 'to soar above the Aonian mount', that is, to excel both Virgil and Homer, he begins boldly 'Sing, Heavenly Muse!' Shakespeare, with aims far less ambitious, can only sigh, 'O, for a Muse of fire!' while he calls himself a 'flat unraiséd spirit', a mere cipher in comparison with the great 'accompt' he has to render. Yet one can detect, I think, beneath the surface of sincere humility an undertone of sly, almost Chaucerian humour, together with not a little innocent guile proper to the showman. We are here, says Master Chorus in effect, to commemorate England's finest hours, quite beyond the power of any dramatist, com-

¹ In this, as Aldis Wright observes, he was not entirely without precedent, since the Chorus to *Captain Thomas Stukely* (acted by Admiral's men, 1596) uses similar language of the battle of Alcazar:

'Your gentle favours must we needs entreat
For rude presenting such a royal fight
Which more imagination must supply
Than all our utmost strength can reach unto.'

pany, or theatre to represent truly; but if you, as good patriots, will lend your aid, by allowing for our limitations and contributing the full force of your own powerful imaginations, the play cannot utterly fail, since as you 'sit and see' you will be all the while

Minding true things by what their mock'ries be.

Such an appeal, reiterated no less than twenty-five times¹, and comparable in the sphere of theatrical art to that of a priest leading his congregation in prayer or celebration, would be the more effective for its ingenuous modesty, confirmed, as I believe it was, by persuasive tones of eager entreaty from the playwright's own lips.

But his material set Shakespeare another problem, more serious still, a problem not of form but of spirit. What is the 'idea' of *Henry V*? Ever since 1817, when Hazlitt, in a fit of republican and anti-patriotic spleen, stigmatized Shakespeare's hero as a brute and a hypocrite, Henry has been a subject of debate among critics². Let a modern representative of either side

¹ See an interesting letter by William Poel in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 15 Nov. 1928.

² The main English-speaking voices in this debate are: (i) *contra*, Hazlitt, *Characters*, 1817; Swinburne, *Study of Shakespeare*, 1880, pp. 112 ff.; Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 1903, pp. 155 ff.; A. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures*, 1909, pp. 256 ff.; Masfield, *Shakespeare* (H.U.L.), 1911, pp. 121 ff.; Granville-Barker, *From 'Henry V' to 'Hamlet'*, 1925 (in *Aspects of Shakespeare*, pp. 57 ff.); M. van Doren, *Shakespeare*, 1939, pp. 170 ff.; J. Palmer, *Political Characters*, 1945, p. 180; (ii) *pro*, H. N. Hudson, *Shakespeare's Life*, etc., 1872, ii. pp. 122 ff.; Dowden, *Mind and Art*, 1875, (ed. 1909) pp. 210-21; Raleigh, *Shakespeare* ('English Men of Letters'), 1907, pp. 186 ff.; H. A. Evans, *Introd. to Henry V* (Arden ed. 1903), p. xl; John Bailey, *Shakespeare*, 1929, pp. 129 ff.; Charles Williams, *Henry V* (in *Shakespeare Criticism*, 1919-35, World's Classics, 1936, pp. 180 ff.).

speaking for the rest. W. B. Yeats writes in a famous essay, inspired by Hazlitt but itself the inspiration of much later criticism, that

He has the gross vices, the coarse nerves, of one who is to rule among violent people... He is as remorseless and undistinguished as some natural force... Shakespeare has given him a resounding rhetoric that moves men, as a leading article does to-day. His purposes are so intelligible to everybody that everybody talks of him as if he succeeded. . . . Shakespeare watched Henry V, not indeed as he watched the greater souls in the visionary procession, but cheerfully, as one watches some handsome spirited horse, and he spoke his tale, as he spoke all tales, with tragic irony¹.

In the view of the 'Arden' editor, on the other hand, he 'stands before us the embodiment of worldly success, and as such he is entitled to our unreserved admiration'². This second statement would be almost unbelievable, were not its author clearly trying to outbid or to shout down a century of predecessors. Nearly all the critics, whether for or against Henry, are in fact agreed upon one point, that he typifies the successful Englishman, that the 'idea' of the play is, in a word, Success. Even Mr Granville-Barker sadly assents, and concludes therefrom that the writing of *Henry V* left Shakespeare disappointed with his hero and disillusioned with his art, since

he knew well enough that neither in the theatre nor in real life is it these 'embodiments of worldly success' that we carry closest in our hearts, or even care to spend an evening with... For behind the action, be the play farce or tragedy, there must be some spiritually significant idea, or it will hang lifeless. And this is what is lacking in *Henry V*³.

Now had Shakespeare, embarking on a heroic play, enquired elsewhere than in his own breast for the

¹ *Op. cit.* pp. 163-4.

² *Op. cit.* p. xl.

³ *Op. cit.* pp. 60-1.

meaning of heroic poetry, he might have found an answer in a little book called *An Apology for Poetry* by a favourite author of his, published in the year he produced his *Richard II.* To Sidney, as to every other Renaissance critic, the Heroical was the greatest of all the 'kinds' of poetry, and the heroical poet the loftiest of all poets,

who doth not only teach and move to a truth, but teacheth and moveth to the most high and excellent truth; who maketh magnanimity and justice shine throughout all misty fearfulness and foggy desires; who, if the saying of Plato and Tully be true that who could see Virtue would be wonderfully ravished with the love of her beauty—this man sets her out to make her more lovely in her holy-day apparel to the eye of any that will deign not to disdain until they understand.

Heroic poetry, it will be noted, is supreme for a *moral* reason, since it is above everything concerned with the greatest of men, whom it exhibits in action and in glory for our admiration and imitation. 'For', to quote Sidney once more,

as the image of each action stirreth and instructeth the mind, so the lofty image of such Worthies most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy, and informs with counsel how to be worthy¹.

No Englishman in story or chronicle was more likely to inflame the minds of Englishmen of Sidney's and Shakespeare's day 'with desire to be worthy' than Henry of Monmouth. Turning regretfully from the theme of Agincourt, the poet Daniel, another of Shakespeare's favourite authors, exclaims

¹ *Apology for Poetry*, p. 179, vol. i, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. by Gregory Smith. I modernize the spelling and punctuation. The words of 4 Prol. 50 may be a conscious echo of Sidney's at p. 197; v. note below.

O, what eternal matter here is found!
Whence new immortal *Iliads* might proceed¹;

while even a short extract from Edward Hall's long paean in his praise will make evident what Henry stood for in the eyes of Tudor England:

This Henry was a king whose life was immaculate and his living without spot. This king was a prince whom all men loved and of none disdained. This prince was a captain against whom fortune never frowned nor mischance once spurned. This captain was a shepherd whom his flock loved and lovingly obeyed. This shepherd was such a justiciary that no offence was unpunished nor friendship unrewarded. This justiciary was so feared, that all rebellion was banished and sedition suppressed. . . . He was merciful to offenders, charitable to the needy, indifferent to all men, faithful to his friends, and fierce to his enemies, toward God most devout, toward the world moderate, and to his realm a very father. What should I say? He was the blazing comet and apparent lantern in his days; he was the mirror of Christendom and the glory of his country; he was the flower of kings past, and a glass to them that should succeed. No Emperor in magnanimity ever him excelled².

Such was the idea of heroic poetry at that time, and such was the traditional figure that confronted one aspiring to write a heroic poem on Henry V. Neither bears much relation to what we should to-day call the 'embodiment of worldly success'. Yet, as I shall now try to show to 'any that will deign not to disdain until they understand', they are to be found faithfully and brilliantly imaged in the mirror that Shakespeare held up in 1599.

Let me begin by removing a fundamental and initial misconception. 'Brute force, glossed over with a little religious hypocrisy and archiepiscopal advice' is how

¹ *Civil Wars*, 1595, iv. 6. The words are placed in Henry's own mouth.

² *Hall's Chronicle*, 1548, ed. 1809, pp. 112-13.

Hazlitt saw Henry's 'Virtue'; and the words take us to the opening of the play and down to the roots of the modern difficulties about it¹. Practically every critic since Hazlitt has assumed that the invasion of France is an act of pure aggression, which is first suggested to Henry V by the Archbishop, who, in order to avoid a wholesale expropriation of church lands, cleverly directs his attention towards another victim. Swinburne, for example, expands Hazlitt as follows:

The supple and shameless egotism of the churchmen on whose political sophistries he relies for external support is needed rather to varnish his project than to reassure his conscience²;

and Bradley, more temperate, though no less hostile, writes:

When he adjures the Archbishop to satisfy him as to his right to the French throne, he knows very well that the Archbishop *wants* the war, because it will defer and perhaps prevent what he considers the spoliation of the Church³.

Now the actual invasion may have been quite unjustifiable by modern Anglo-Saxon standards, and it is possible to deduce the whole business of the Archbishop from Holinshed's version⁴; while it was pro-

¹ A large number of modern historians seem to assume that hypocrisy was a conspicuous feature of the historical Henry's character; a baseless charge as Wylie shows (ii. 245).

² *A Study of Shakespeare*, 1880, p. 112.

³ *Oxford Lectures*, p. 257.

⁴ Nineteenth-century historians generally emphasize the 'archiepiscopal advice', and though Wylie (*Henry V*, 1914, vol. i, pp. 390-2) rejects the story altogether, he shows that the Salic Law was debated, with all the subtilty of scholastic argument, during negotiations between French and English commissioners, in which Bishop Chichele took part in 1413, and admits that Henry's claims were in fact 'monstrous' (*ibid.* i. pp. 153-5, 407).

bably Holinshed who led many of the critics astray. But history is one thing, drama another; and Holinshed's version is certainly not Shakespeare's. On the contrary, this is one of the few occasions on which Shakespeare departs from the chronicles, with the intention, I do not doubt, of guarding his hero from the very charges which modern writers have brought against him.

As Kingsford has shown, the story goes back to *Caxton's Chronicles*, 1480, which relates that the

bishops and men of the spirituality doubted that he [Henry] would have had the temporalities out of their hands: wherefore they encouraged the King to challenge Normandy, and his right to France, to the end to set him awork there, so that he should not seek occasions to enter into such matters.

Hall, an ardent Protestant, always on the look out for evidence of chicanery in the unreformed Church, seized upon this hint, associated the business with a debate in the Parliament of Leicester, 1414, and invented appropriate speeches for the Archbishop, the Earl of Westmorland, and the Duke of Exeter¹; Holinshed, as usual, borrowed from Hall, and thus the matter reached Shakespeare. He, however, though needing the speeches for reasons to be presently indicated, obliterated the anti-clerical implications of the incident, and entirely changed its relevance to Henry's claims on the French crown.

In the first place, it is clear from his text that before the Archbishop takes any hand in the affair at all, not only has the whole question of Henry's titles in France been broached, and, presumably in order to test the ground, a claim to 'certain dukedoms' already been lodged (the answer to which claim is brought by

¹ C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature*, pp. 120-1; cf. Wylie, i. 390-2.