REVELATIONS IN THE GREEN CHAPEL:

THE *GAWAIN*-POET AS MONASTIC AUTHOR

By

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this paper to my younger self…

"The best decisions aren't made with your mind, but with your instinct."
~Lionel Messi

"Always trust your instincts, they are messages from your soul.

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This paper would never have reached its mark, had it not been for the unwavering guidance and support of Professor Jeremy Glazier. His enthusiasm, from the very start, both surprised and delighted me. Professor Glazier's willingness to stay with me on this roller coaster ride leaves me eternally grateful! Thank you, Professor Glazier!

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"In the beginning . . . No man was higher in birth than any other, for all men were descended from a single father and mother. But when envy and covetousness came into the world, and might triumphed over right . . . certain men were appointed as guarantors and defenders of the weak and the humble."

~T*he Book of Lancelot of the Lake* (qtd. in Gies)

Chapter One

Introduction

To traverse back over the last 600 years and piece together scholarship that would illuminate authorship of a fourteenth century anonymous manuscript that included four poems written in traditional English rhyme and alliteration, is a vast, yet compelling undertaking. There has been much written by way of conjecture as to the identity of the poet of these poems, -*Pearl*-*Cleanness (Purity)*-*Patience*-*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*- found in what has come to be called the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript. Often debates include scholars who have changed their minds as to the date of authorship due to discrepancies after extensive research in philology, dialects, and historical content. However, these four poems were written in England with the same Northwest Midland dialect between 1350-1400 CE. And they are generally attributed to one author, who is usually known as the *Gawain*-poet (also referred to as the *Pearl*-poet). According to David Fowler, the discovery of another poem, *Saint Erkenwald*, which is written in the same dialect as the four mentioned above, is often regarded as a fifth poem written by the *Gawain*-poet (331). For the purposes of this paper, however, concentration will be given only to those four found together within the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript.

The earliest known owner of the manuscript was Henry Saville. He was a Yorkshire physician and an avid book collector who owned several volumes of books from many religious institutions in York, England. Saville inherited the medieval

manuscript from his Yorkshire ancestors, namely his father and grandfather (Fredell 11-12). It was then put in the hands of Sir Robert Cotton (1570/1-1631), who had acquired it sometime in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. The manuscript was catalogued among Cotton's volumes of books in his library, and after a devastating fire in 1731, all four poems were amazingly found intact, unlike many other significant literary works of the time that had turned to ashes in the blaze. The manuscript then made its way to Sir Frederic Madden in 1839, who translated *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (K. Stone). Since then, a considerable amount of light has been shed on all of the poems, with regard to translation, origin, and of course, attempts made to identify their elusive author. Manifestation of one clear definitive name, however, has not been specified to date.

During the time these poems were written in the fourteenth century, it was common practice to leave a work of literature anonymous, which could explain why the Cotton Nero poems were left unsigned. But there may have been other reasons why they remained so. There has been an abundance of scholarship written about the medieval time period, the Arthurian legend, and the quintessential courtly love of the time to help explain why they were left unattributed. Explicit spiritual and canonical writings and teachings on Christianity, which focus on the Bible within the texts, are especially enlightening, as the moralistic allegorical lessons that pertain to Christianity contradict the traditions being practiced in England at the time. These implications stemming from the philology, subjects, and form of all four poems, could help explain why the name of the poet is unknown. When determining these details together, it undoubtedly leads one to realize, pay homage to, and credit monastic authorship of the

poems found in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript. As Simon Armitage states, especially of *Cleanness* and *Patience,* the poems are of a religious genre which suggests the author "was a man of the church" (196). The evidence that follows will show that all four poems contain a Biblical theme, one that includes the pious acceptance of God in one's life. By this acceptance, an unadulterated journey through life on earth will follow, and a glorious entry into heaven will rightfully transpire.

The question this paper attempts to examine is not necessarily the identity of the *Gawain*-poet, but rather the prospect of the *type* of person who may have written the poems found together in the manuscript. The importance of knowing the type of person who wrote these poems, will lead to an unwavering understanding of the content of the poems. While a couple of names emerge as viable contenders for surrounding authorship, greater concentration and consideration will be given to the poet's purpose and possible reasons for not exposing his identity, and forfeiting staking claim to the wondrous virtue of the poems. According to Marie Borroff, a distinguished scholar and translator of three of the four poems, all four are written with a different subject and form, though she is one who believes all are undoubtedly written by the same poet (xi), and include traditional rhyme and alliterative lines (6).

Prominent scholar and translator of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Henry Savage, who began studying the *Gawain*-poet in the early part of the twentieth century, wrote "[we] cannot fail to notice the attention and respect which its hero, and consequently its creator, pay to the regular and orderly sequence of the services of the Church," as "the poet's eye was [undeniably] glued to the liturgical calendar" ("Feast" 537 & 538). Holy days, observances, and many references to saints and apostles, as

well as references to God and prayers (and answers to prayers), are prevalent throughout the poems. One specific of the *Gawain*-poet's use of monastic practice and Christian focus, comes from the lines, "A twelmonyth & a day;— / Now hy3e, & let se tite / Dar any her-i*n*ne o3t say" (*Gawayne* 298-300).

In translation:

> In a twelvemonth and a day
>
> He shall have of me the same;
>
> Now be it seen straightway
>
> Who dares take up the game. (*Gawain* 297-300).

According to Br. Raban Heyer, a Benedictine monk at the Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas, someone who is seeking to join a faith is tested for a full year as a novitiate. This is to determine if they are really meant for the religious way of life as they are seeking God. Once the full year is complete, and on the very next day (hence the "twelmonyth & a day"), that person would make a proclamation, take his or her vows, and begin a new life with God. But this is only if they are allowed to do so, after proving that seeking God is truly what they wish to do. "Twelvemonth and a day" is known as a canonical year and is the proof that shows a person is really serious about starting a new life with God. The *Gawain*-poet uses such phrasing in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to show how close he is to the religious way of life, for it is Sir Gawain in the poem who is the seeker of God, as he takes on the challenge of the Green Knight out of respect for King Arthur.

Each poem, respectively, is a journey, or pilgrimage, and parallels Biblical journeys and doctrine set forth by individuals in the Bible. The characters in the poems have been on excursions teaching followers, as well as readers, moralistic lessons

through allegorical stories taken from scripture. If one is said to be on a pilgrimage throughout life, learning valuable lessons along the way, through blights and blunders, highs and lows, then one can also say that the eventual journey "home" to heaven, the "promised land," will occur. Sarah Stanbury maintains, through her interpretations of the *Gawain*-poet, that all four Cotton Nero poems contain one purposeful image, that of enclosed space. This enclosed space is meant to be what leads the "pilgrim" in each poem to their eventual "promised land." As Stanbury notes, the observer of each pilgrim on his/her journey only beholds what the poet shows. It is considered "a marker of vision" and we see the visionary in each poem, consistently moving, not staying static. She also states that the *Gawain*-poet sees man as a "sojourner" constantly crossing boundaries, which will eventually bring him to "spiritual wisdom and to a broader perspective" that defines humanity (479). The reader, or observer, lays witness to the enclosed spaces and recognizes that they exist partially because of a "multidimensional universe through which man voyages, and in which his knowledge is always incomplete" (480). Stanbury specifically discusses each poem, both individually and collectively, and how enclosed spaces effects the readers' interpretation of the poems. When interpreting them, the sense of movement is clearly evident, as the reader is led by the one journeying through life, seeking the "promised land." Similarly, Joel Fredell contends that although the poet may have written all four poems over the course of many years, possibly even decades, they depict a masterful and realistic "spirituality of struggle and penance, of journey and return" for all mankind (33). And it is exactly this journeying "home" that is evident among the characters in the poems, as readers get a sense of their pilgrimage, which will lead us all to trust in the spirituality of God and what

He has planned for us. The characters that the *Gawain*-poet has written about in his poems are essentially our guides that will lead us all to the promised land.

There are scholars who have gone to greater lengths to prove, among other things, single authorship. John Dale Ebbs, for example, affirms that the *Gawain*-poet has a particular style and uses what he refers to as "identical phraseology" (523). The text that follows helps to reinforce what Borroff, and many others conclude about common authorship, as it is clearly recognizable that the poet begins and ends three of the four poems with exact words and phrases, in each pair respectively. In *Pearl*, "Perle plesau*n*te to prynces paye, // Ande precio*us* perle*ȝ* vnto his pay" (I.1.1, XXI.5.1212)[1]; In translation, "Pearl, that a prince is well content // As precious pearls to his content. (*Gawain* I.1.1, XX.5.1212). In *Patience,* "Pacience is a poynt, þa*ȝ* hit displese ofte, // Þat pacience is a nobel poy*n*t, þa*ȝ* hit displese ofte" (1, 531); In translation, "Patience is a virtue, though vexing it prove // That patience is a great virtue, though vexing it prove" (*Gawain* 1, 532). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* "Siþen þe sege & þe assaut wat3 sesed at Troye, // Aft*er* þe segge & þe asaute wat3 sesed at Troye, / I-wysse" (*Gawayne* I.1, IV.2525-6); In translation, "Since the siege and the assault was ceased at Troy, // After the siege ceased at Troy and the city fared / amiss" (*Gawain* I.1, IV.2525-26). Although the beginning and ending of *Cleanness* does not indicate the same "identical phraseology" that Ebbs indicates above, like in the other three poems, its beginning and ending lines parallel the message regarding the importance of remaining clean and pure in God's eyes: "Cla*n*nesse who-so kyndly cowþe co*m*ende, // Þat we may serue i*n* his sy*ȝ*t, þe*r* solace neue*r* bly*n*ne*ȝ*" (I.1; XIII.1812); In translation, "He who

[1] All quotations from *Pearl, Cleanness, and Patience* come from *Early English Alliterative Poems.*

would acclaim Cleanness in becoming style, // That we may serve in his sight where solace never ceases!" (*Owl* 1; 1812). As Ebbs concludes, if all of mankind were to be impure, then they will all know the wrath of God (523). Like the messages set forth in all four poems, it is best to live a life following a moralistic set of beliefs and practices, rather than go against God and His teachings.

The poems found in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript can certainly teach the reader about how to live a life free from sin, while remaining loyal to God. It is in seeking God and the entrance into the promised land, that might guide the reader on a journey to heaven. While still on earth, however, one must seek God's grace and forgiveness in order to be rewarded. The forthcoming chapters will reveal, not only a synopsis and analysis of the four poems written by the *Gawain*-poet, but also will help to determine his reason for writing and remaining anonymous, while revealing the type of person he was. The monastic life, as the following evidence demonstrates, is one in which the poet knew personally and intimately.

Chapter Two

The Poems of the *Gawain*-poet and their Canonical Significance

The Biblical significance of the four poems that were found in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript are the reasons why the *Gawain*-poet wrote such missives. He was trusting in God and the prayers written within the poems, to bring some hope and salvation to the people in the Middle Ages. His poems are written in a way that holistically guide the reader through the events that take place in each of the poems, respectively. According to Jennifer Garrison, the *Gawain*-poet guides the reader by using poetic devices to make a claim that the Eucharist will result in a private divine transformation. God's followers should believe in both His presence and absence at the same time. This belief will lead the worshippers to focus their attention on that divine moment in which the "almost tangible [is] impossible to grasp" (53). This divine moment allows the worshippers to want more than that which they can grasp. The *Gawain*-poet's messages within his poems help to teach the reader to "recognize what it is he truly lacks: Christ" (53). Furthermore, the *Gawain*-poet is one who continually claims, in all four poems, that an internal moral compass is pertinent, and devotion to God and Mass imperative to one's own personal Christian beliefs (53). The events in the four poems can easily be recognized as allegorical messages that are rooted in the Bible, though they are often overlooked. The pilgrims on their respective journeys are all seeking to be united in Christ in the "promised land."

Pearl, which is the first poem found in the manuscript, is a monologue of a man mourning the loss of a pearl, which is also described as a girl, his "secret pearl." Borroff is certain that *Pearl* was written by a devout Christian, as it is heavily laden with "rich

allusions" of several Books in the Bible (111-112). According to Coolidge Otis Chapman, a distinguished scholar of medieval manuscripts, the *Gawain*-poet was deeply connected to the Bible and to its inner workings. He also studied the "theological problems in the minds of men in the medieval community," and was thoroughly versed in both sacred and secular literature ("Authorship" 346). Chapman argues that, much like in Dante's *Divine Comedy* of the early fourteenth century, the *Gawain*-poet, who was no doubt familiar with Dante, uses numerical Christian symbolism in *Pearl* to highlight the Book of Revelations, chapter 21. The number 12 (as well as its factors, four and three), is highlighted, and the poet uses vivid imagery when describing the twelve foundations, which according to Chapman is the "vision of the New Jerusalem" in the poem, the denouement of *Pearl* ("Numerical" 256).

The size of the land within the city is also numerically described using the number 12. The New Jerusalem is described and clearly indicates the importance of the number 12, with its direct correlation to the Bible with Jesus' 12 disciples, as well as the 12 Stations of the Cross that Jesus experienced prior to His death and subsequent resurrection. Twelve is mentioned twice: "Þe fou*n*dementeȝ twelue of riche tenou*n*; // Twelue forlonge space er eu*er* hit fon, / Of heȝt, of brede, of lenþe to cayre, (*Pearl* XVIII.993; XVIII.1030-31); In translation, "Foundation-stones twelvefold in team; // Twelve thousand furlongs spanned, each one; / Length, breadth, and height were measured there (*Gawain* XVII.2.992; XVII.5.1030-31). The numbers four and three are then written to further describe the city with its four walls and three gates. When multiplied they offer another symbolic twelve to further emphasize this number, "Þe cyte stod abof ful sware, // Vch pane of þat place had þre ȝateȝ, / So twelue i*n* po*ur*sent I con

asspye" (*Pearl* XVIII.1023; XIX.1034-35); "As long as broad as high foursquare / The city towered on twelvefold pier" // Three gateways set commensurate, So twelve I counted in compass wide," (*Gawain* XVII.5.1022-23; XVIII.1.1034-35). The *Gawain*-poet focuses on these significant numbers to not only vividly detail the beauty of the New Jerusalem, but also to subliminally highlight what Jesus did for all mankind.

The entire poem, including this impressive description of the New Jerusalem, is told by what Charles Moorman refers to as the narrator, who is the "central intelligence of the poem" ("Pearl" 74). The poet is always mindful of, and therefore guides the reader to be, in the presence of this narrator, as he allows for the interactions of the pearl-maiden and the narrator to be the primary muse of the reader's thoughts. So just as John the Apostle envisioned it, so too does the narrator, and therefore, the reader, "As Iohan þe apostel hit syȝ with syȝt / I syȝe þat cyty of gret renoun," (*Pearl* XVIII. 985-6); In translation, "As John the apostle saw it of old / I saw the city beyond the stream," (*Gawain* XVII.2.985-6). The beauty of the New Jerusalem is visualized, which is the major framework of this poem. It dispenses particulars to its readers, about homiletic parables and doctrine within the Bible, through the narrator's and girl's description of this sacred place (Moorman, "Pearl" 74). Furthermore, *Pearl* expounds upon the paradoxes of earth and heaven, of life and death, as the narrator shows the reader the "Earthly Paradise" and the "Heavenly Paradise, the complete antithesis of earth" on the other side of the water, which cannot be crossed (76). This is the main paradox of life as expressed by the poet, and can be understood as "the dreamer" in *Pearl* recognizing that which he lacks, Christ.

In Brian Stone's detailed introduction to the poem *Cleanness*, he explains that its homiletic theme is taken right from the Bible and that it specifically correlates to the Sixth Beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God." Stone contends that the poet is relating "cleanness" to mean "purity of life," with regards to sexual relations, as well as loyalty to God (47). This poem is recognized as a homily and is meant to teach the reader about three Bible parables: the Flood, the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Belshazzar's Feast. (48). The stories in *Cleanness* focus on sinners and the consequences of their sins with respect to their purity of heart and loyalty to God. This poem is a homily on a "grand scale" and provides a Christian compass at the very center of the poem. And in this place, this center, Christ is the highest form of purity, "the quality which, above all others, binds Man in sacrament to God" (48). If one remains pure in heart and loyal to God, and creates a life around this moral center, then one will be rewarded.

In *Cleanness*, the *Gawain*-poet includes another instance where the number three is emphasized, according to David Fowler. He contends that the poet responds to the three events described in the poem by describing in vivid detail the sins of the giants, the Sodomites before the city was destroyed, and Belshazzar's "defiling of the temple vessels" (331). Again, the symbolism of the number three represents the Holy Trinity. To further advance this point, Allen Frantzen asserts that the commonalities of these three events include not just that of sexual purity, but also respect for and behaving properly towards God (451). He states that, "[p]urity of heart means a life of sincerity, integrity of purpose, and freedom from mixed motives," which directly parallels monogamy in marriage, while at the same time speaking out against adultery (453).

During the medieval time period, the act of adultery was common among married people, and the *Gawain*-poet spoke out against it on more than one occasion. In addition to the notion of remaining pure in heart, Theresa Tinkle claims that God is warmhearted, even though He punishes the sinners. Christ allows people to see God "by healing their spiritual corruption--cleansing their heart's eye." So, although the *Gawain*-poet sends a message of disappointment for the sins made against God and against the self, with regard to sexual promiscuity, He is a forgiving God. There is hope and encouragement in the poet's message to love God by cleansing the spirit, which could effect justice and divine mercy (459). At the end of *Cleanness*, the *Gawain*-poet's message is clear,

> Ande cla*nn*es is his comfort, & coyntyse he louyes,
> & þose þat seme arn & swete schy*n* se his face.
> Þat we gon gay i*n* oure gere þat g*ra*ce he v*us* sende,
> Þat we may serue i*n* his syȝt, þ*er* solace neu*er* bly*n*neȝ.
> Amen. (1809-1813)

In translation,

> But cleanness is his comfort, and courtesy he loves,
> And the seemly and sweet ones shall see his face.
> May we go in gay garments and be granted grace,
> That we may serve in his sight where solace never ceases!
> AMEN (*Gawain* 1809-1813)

This directly relates to the premise, as stated above, that with the grace of God, man will have purity of heart and welcome Him in his life, for what is lacking in one's life is Christ.

Patience is written in verse much like a sermon, and describes God as the patient one versus humans (i.e. Jonah) as the impatient ones. Patience was of the utmost importance with Christians during Jesus' time, as well as following the eight Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel. Once again, Borroff concedes that the poem was written by a poet who knew the Bible completely, who was a scholar paraphrasing the eight Beatitudes (82-3). Like in *Cleanness*, the Beatitudes are emphasized, and in this poem, they are personified,

> If we þyse ladyes wolde lof i*n* lykny*n*g of þewes;
> Dame pouert, Dame pitee, Dame penau*n*ce þe þrydde,
> Dame Mekenesse, Dame mercy & Miry cla*nn*esse,
> & þe*nn*e Dame pes & pacyence put i*n* þe*r*-aft*er*. (30-33)

In translation:

> If we would love these ladies and liken us to them:
> Dame Poverty, Dame Pity, Dame Penance the third,
> Dame Meekness, Dame Mercy, Dame Purity most pleasant,
> And then Dame Peace and Dame Patience put in thereafter; (*Gawain* 30-33)

The blessings that are bestowed upon those who follow poverty, pity, penance, meekness, mercy, chastity, peace and patience, are abundant, and the *Gawain*-poet makes this clear in *Patience*, as he states,

> Aȝt happes he hem hyȝt & vche on a mede,

Su*n*derlupes for hit dissert vpon a ser wyse:

These arn þe happes alle a*ȝ*t þat v*us* bihy*ȝ*t weren,

If we þyse ladyes wolde lof i*n* lykny*n*g of þewes (11-12; 29-30).

In translation,

Eight blessings in order, each with a reward,

Set singularly, in sequence, as suited each one.

These blessings were preached us in promise of bliss

If we would love these ladies and liken us to them (*Owl* 11-12; 29-30)

Patience signifies that one is rewarded in this life, as opposed to the next one, for having patience (Moorman, “Patience” 95). Moorman emphasizes the importance of this virtue, stating that the narrator in this poem should be looked upon as a “a man of firm opinion” and a preacher (90). The narrator’s role is not only to retell the tale of Jonah, but also to expound upon the virtues of patience and poverty, getting across to the reader the message that, although very difficult to endure, having patience is most wise and will please God (91). If patience is endured, then one will be rewarded in this life with what is lacking, Christ.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, according to Borroff, is the only “secular” of the four poems. It may not be considered a homily, like *Pearl* and *Patience*, but it certainly contains many Biblical references. The three successive days of hunting the deer, the boar, and the fox, respectively, in *Gawain’s* third fitt, parallel the three times Sir Gawain is pursued by Lady Bertilak, as he resisted temptation all three times (5-6). It would appear that the poet used numerical symbolism once again in *Gawain* with the number three, as it relates to Bible verse and the Holy Trinity. The parallels to the Bible

teachings is also metaphorically evident in the *third* fitt; when relating to the *third* hunt; the *three* days the Host and Sir Gawain exchange what they have gained on each day; and the *third* (and final) temptation and kiss to Sir Gawain from Lady Bertilak in conjunction with the "betrayal of Christ--by Judas with a kiss and by Peter *three* times before [the] cock crow[s]," as J. A. Burrow, a prominent medieval scholar, declares (43, emphasis added). The number three, as it represents the Holy Trinity, speaks to the *Gawain*-poet's devotion to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Another scholar, J. Furman Miller, likens Jesus' temptations in the gospels to the hunt scenes in *Gawain*, as well as to Gawain's temptations with Lady Bertilak. He suggests that the hunt scene was written as a way for the *Gawain*-poet to explain how there is a "loss of brotherhood of all creation," with regard to "the perfect harmony" that is present with Jesus and all of creation, including the "wild beasts" (27). The three animals the *Gawain*-poet chose for the hunt symbolize Jesus' temptations, while also representing the three times Lady Bertilak tries to seduce Gawain (28). Moreover, Miller makes a connection to Adam and Eve's three temptations in the Garden of Eden: Lust of Eyes, Lust of Flesh, Pride of Self (29). The number three is indeed significant, as it connects to well known Biblical teachings. The *Gawain*-poet made great efforts to help readers at the time, who were well-versed in doctrine, to right the wrongs in their own lives. Sir Gawain, through a bit of "Christian magic," journey's through his ordeal, making it safely back to the King's Court by his "exacting virtues of patient fortitude, truth, piety, and chastity." He is not only a hero in Arthur's court, but also, more accurately, a saintly, Christian one (McAlindon 9). *Gawain* is a poem that was written about the men of the time, as the

poet attempts to separate the saved from the damned (Clark and Wasserman 6). It is one of morals and values, with the question of judgement at its center.

As indicated above, the *Gawain*-poet focuses all four of his poems on the character or reader seeking God. What he manifests in different ways, he fuses together with the one thing he feels is necessary for all of humankind: journeying through this life on earth while putting God first above all things and others. When Christ is sought by humanity, the minds and hearts of all people come together in worship.

But while journeying through life, praying for the return to God, was it possible for those living during the Middle Ages in England to feel safe enough to express themselves, even if it meant speaking out against the monarchy? If people took a chance and spoke out anyway, what, then, became of them? Does the outcome irreproachably explain why the *Gawain*-poet has never been conclusively named? Or was it merely an oversight, a “sign of the time” in medieval England, that he remained anonymous? In the upcoming chapter, efforts are made to answer these questions, and connect reasons why the *Gawain*-poet wrote and remained anonymous, with regard to the medieval ways in King Arthur’s court, and how it effected Christianity at the time.

Chapter Three

Christianity and the Medieval Ways in King Arthur's Court

The medieval customs in King Arthur's court played a major role in Christianity during the Middle Ages. Writers had to make certain that what they wrote was in support of the English rule and the Church. Although it was common practice for writers to give God the credit for their works, since He is seen as the author of all, the "ultimate originator of Creation," according to Brill Anke Timmerman (93), other reasons like, speaking out against England or the Church, could also explain why works were left unattributed. Timmerman also suggests that Middle English poetry differs from a spiritual or canonical model, and that when poems were written and manuscripts created, they would often include authorship in ambiguous places on the pages, like in the title, or with an identifying mark or inscription (94). As previously stated, there have been many attempts at identifying the author of the Cotton Nero poems, though no one has been credited, even when attempts were made to identify him through ambiguous places, colophons, or otherwise.

Also common in medieval England was the organization and teaching of the Church. The society at large, its laws and economy, was governed by the Church and its teachings. Christianity was at the center of, and of daily existence to, the people in every town and village. The Church guided them from birth to death, and led them through all sacraments and liturgical days on the calendar throughout their lives. The Church was so powerful during the Middle Ages, that those who dissented were righteously punished or killed. During this time, according to Alixe Bovey, many people in England questioned the Church's teachings, and, therefore, did not attend services

on a regular basis. Based on the above commonalities prevalent during the Middle Ages, and while embracing the notion that the *Gawain*-poet was a man of the cloth, he most likely would have been happy to give God the credit for his poems. He was not someone who was a self-promoter, and more than likely he sat quietly observing mankind, in the hopes that the allegorical messages in his poems were embraced.

One particular message the *Gawain*-poet contends is the act of adultery and how it goes against God within the confines of a marriage. Legend has it that notions of courtly love were customary in King's Arthur's court, which, according to the famed scholar, C. S. Lewis, is a "sentiment . . . of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love" (2). During the Middle Ages, this must have been of significant influence to the *Gawain*-poet. These particular aspects of courtly love, during a time in which the poet lived, may have forced him to write his poems in an adverse response to the "immoral and adulterous" ways of courtly love, because "it was vigorously condemned . . . by the Church" (Moorman, "Courtly" 165).

Sir Thomas Malory, who wrote against the immorality present in the courtly love of the Middle Ages, wrote the first English novel, *Le Morte D'Arthur,* as a political prisoner (or as he refers to himself as a "knight prisoner") in the late 1400's (Wight). This was, of course, after the *Gawain*-poet would have written the poems that were found in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript. Charles Moorman calls attention to the "paradoxical nature" of Malory's courtly love story, stating that he took full advantage of it, wanting to highlight the fact that "adulterous courtly love" was an "evil," the main cause of the fall of Arthur's court ("Courtly" 165). Because of his outright and

determined opinion against courtly love and the common, traditional ways in which people were living in England at the time, Malory's novel and determinedly his views, supported the moralistic ways in which he felt people should be living. If this, then, is the case, the *Gawain*-poet was justified in remaining anonymous, as his poems focus on the ways in which a person should live life. This, according to the poet, is in line with the Bible and saintly ways, and not necessarily in line with what was common in England during the Middle Ages.

To reiterate, medieval England was a place of power for the Christian Church, and the *Gawain*-poet adversely responds to this in his poems by expressing thoughts that did not necessarily conform to the Church's teachings. Since the Church was organized in a way that did not allow followers to contradict its teachings (Bovey), one was considered a freethinker if one did not agree with the Church. The *Gawain*-poet clearly understood this when writing because he places the power in the hands of readers, and by doing so contradicts some of the Church's teachings regarding God and human salvation.

The missives written within the poems that his readers were absorbing, clearly indicate that the *Gawain*-poet was a man who believed in leading a life through God, while expressing some ways in which he may have lived during his own lifetime. The poet is sure to have at least been aware of the Dominicans and the many stories that abounded from the 13th century of the "mystical" ways of controlling the lust of the flesh and the challenge of remaining a virgin. Stories told about the Virgin Mary bringing forth "a girdle of chastity" are especially powerful and certainly impressionable (Murray 109). The story of Saint Thomas Aquinas, for instance, and the endurance he showed when

his family attempted to keep him from joining the Dominicans, by holding him captive and sending a woman in to seduce him, is especially telling. Thomas prayed for “divine intervention” and the angels came to him and “gird[ed] [him] in a belt of chastity” (109). Once this happened, his virginity was saved and violations of the flesh were never attempted on him again. Similarly, Reginald, who was one of Saint Dominic’s friends, was also challenged to remain chaste, but Mary came to him and anointed him, saying “May your loins be girt with the cincture of chastity” (109). The Virgin Mary, mystically encircling a belt around the middle of men, protecting their loins, and therefore spiritually securing their virginity, while blocking any “movement of lust,” is something that easily transfers to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The *Gawain*-poet includes the green girdle in the poem not only to accentuate the sacrament of remaining chaste, but also to emphasize the importance of Lady Bertilak remaining true to her spouse, instead of committing adultery, as was typical during the medieval time period. The girdle is no doubt symbolic for the *Gawain*-poet when writing these scenes with Gawain and Lady Bertilak. In the end, the girdle was also magical and protected Gawain from the Green Knight’s blows. Moreover, to parallel the Thomas Aquinas and Dominic stories, when Gawain faces the second temptation with Lady Bertilak, he prays to Mary to make him chaste,

> Þay lanced wordes gode,
> Much wele þe*n* wat3 þe*r*-i*n*ne,
> Gret pe*ri*le bi-twene hem stod,
> Nif mare of hir kny3t my*n*ne. (*Gawayne* XXV.1766-69)

And in translation:

Good were their words of greeting;

Each joyed in other's sight;

Great peril attends that meeting

Should Mary forget her knight. (*Gawain* 1766-69)

The *Gawain*-poet sees men as virtually corrupt, and everywhere he looks, there is instability, uncertainty, and dishonesty around him. There was great pandemonium with regard to religion, politics, and the social institution in England during the Middle Ages. The poem reflects that with its juxtapositions of Old Testament stories versus Christianity in King Arthur's Court; life versus death; punishment versus reward. Clark and Wasserman contend that the *Gawain*-poet, upon continued observation of the society-at-large, believes that the "Day of Judgement" was upon them all, with "the decay of chivalric knighthood" at the center of the turmoil (9). The *Gawain*-poet was hoping to restore faith within the court, and society at-large, by instituting a journey of enlightenment within his poems.

Also telling, adding another Biblical element to *Gawain*, are the lines used to represent the meaning behind how Sir Gawain lived, which parallels the celibate life like that of Saint John. According to J.A. Burrow, he was trying his best to refuse Lady Bertilak (40) and responds to her presumptions of him being otherwise committed to another woman, "3if 3e luf not þat lyf þat 3e lye nexte, / Bifore alle þe wy3e3 i*n* þe worlde, wou*n*ded i*n* hert, / Bot if 3e haf a le*m*man, a leue*r*, þat yow lyke3 bett*er*" (*Gawayne* 1780-82); In translation, "Who can be cold toward a creature so close by your side, / Of all women in this world most wounded in heart, / Unless you have a sweetheart, one you hold dearer" (*Gawain* 1780-81). To which Gawain responds:

Þe kny3t sayde, "be sayn Ion,"

& smeþely con he smyle,

"In fayth I welde ri3t non,

Ne non wil welde þe quile." (*Gawayne* XXVII.1788-91)

In translation:

“Lady, by Saint John,”

He answers with a smile,

“Lover have I none,

Nor will have, yet awhile.” (*Gawain* 1788-91)

In writing the poems in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript, the *Gawain*-poet, much like Thomas Malory, responds to the immoral ways in which the English monarch during the medieval time period were behaving. Respectively, *Pearl, Patience, Cleanness, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, were poems written to protect the people and encourage those who read them to trust in God while following The Ten Commandments. The overall allegorical messages that are communicated state that, evil and suffering are part of life for all of humanity, no matter how moralistic or ethical one may be. To accept death when grieving, means to have an understanding of a patient, forgiving, and merciful God. Furthermore, one’s own soul will remain pure and true to God if one practices having a moral center and accepts humility in oneself (Moorman, “Patience” 91). To be prepared for that suffering is a must, for “endurance is the most man can hope for” (92). These are the messages of the *Gawain*-poet. Ones that were in need of being taught at the time; ones that were poetically written; ones that had to go unattributed, for they were not fully in agreement with the English way.

Human salvation and one's acceptance of suffering, is only accessible through moral law. And according to Lawrence Beaston, this is a belief of theologian Robert Holcot, who is believed to have been associated with the *Gawain*-poet. Obeying the laws of virtue is the only way to save one's life. This belief is unconventional according to the Church, who believed that human salvation is dependent solely on God, not on human will and human actions. Original sin, according to the Church, is proof that human beings are not capable of honorable deeds on their own (15-16); however, the *Gawain*-poet, by remaining anonymous, put forth efforts to convey to readers, that actively living by The Ten Commandments and Eight Beatitudes, and living a good, honest life, will grant them salvation through God's grace. Ultimately, "All religious orders . . . are based on a single - indeed a simple - idea: namely the search for Christian perfection" (Evans 206). Humankind may never reach "perfection," but by merely attempting to live through God's grace, the *Gawain*-poet seems to be saying, is certainly the first step on the right path, which will eventually lead us to heaven.

Chapter Four

Author's Purpose, Reasons for Anonymity, and Names Named

So how is it possible that no one knew who wrote these four poems, and why do they remain anonymous to this day? Is it possible that someone in a monastic community wrote it, perhaps over many years? And could it be that the mere writing of such poetry happened without anyone really knowing about it, which kept the poet's integrity and humility intact? It is entirely possible that a monk could have written these poems, over the course of many years, which could help explain why there is such a vast discrepancy among scholars with ascertaining an exact date of when it was written, and of course why there is no known author attributed to it. So, if the *Gawain*-poet was in fact a monk, he would have written the Cotton Nero A.x. poems during inactivity, over a long period of time. Inactivity for him would not have amounted to much in any one given day, with his daily chores and obligations, so writing these four poems would have stretched on for several years.

The *Gawain*-poet, who is clearly devoted to Biblical teachings, could certainly have left his name off of the manuscript due to his devotion to God. He may not have felt it necessary, for his own sake, to sign his name in order to receive the credit for what he wrote. He, once again, was not interested in self-promotion. But he wrote through God and established the necessary moralistic lessons while doing so. This leads to a genuine purpose for the *Gawain*-poet to have written such beautiful poetry. As previously mentioned, Timmermann states that in the Middle Ages, God was given credit for works of literature because He is the creator of man, and man creates poetry and other works of art (93). This shows that the *Gawain*-poet had an understanding of

"God's nature, man's ability to comprehend him, and the relationship of the deity to mankind," because it is communicated in his poems through "rich" and "divine" vocabulary when referring to God in many ways, -Lord-Christ-Lamb-Father-Almighty- (Clopper 2). The frequency with which he uses these words, and how they were chosen especially for each poem, helps in understanding just how close to God the poet felt (4). Furthermore, Brian Stone contends that the *Gawain*-poet wrote *Cleanness* to mirror the Bible (47), but the same can be said for the other three poems as well. Biblical and moralistic teachings are present in all four, and can be looked at in a homiletic way, even *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The poems give "poetic form to holy writ" and "provide the reader with a doctrinal commentary" of his own growing visions and imagination (47). The *Gawain*-poet, in writing such virtuous and moralizing poetry, attempts to restore faith and "right" in the world with his messages of humility, patience, forgiveness, purity, trust, and acceptance.

According to the rules put forth by Saint Benedict, monks live a "life of balance, a life of virtue and true happiness." This effortlessly transfers to how the *Gawain*-poet wished to live, as he portrays these ways of living in his poetry. Furthermore, a monk's vows include, among others, a vow "Of obedience," when he turns over his will to a senior monk; a vow "Of Chastity," when he ceases his entitlement to marriage and family; and a vow "Of Poverty," when he gives up everything he owns and has nothing of value (Evans 206-207). If a monk were to take his vows seriously, and there would be no reason why he would not, these vows in particular, would certainly help explain why the poet had to omit his name from his poems. Medieval monks, after all, would have entered an abbey choosing to surrender their worldly goods, while adhering to a strict

routine. At the abbey they would have practiced in prayer eight times per day, and worked hard manual labor (Alchin). For the *Gawain*-poet to put his name on the poems, would have meant to claim something of value, earthly goods. By omitting his name from the manuscript, he would not have staked claim to them or acknowledged himself, so to speak, as the author. He was happy to give God the credit, while he continued to remain true to his vows, and at the same time helped spread Biblical teachings through his poetry.

Many writers left their works anonymous during the Middle Ages, due in part to the strict English rule at the time that prevented writers from writing anything that went against Church and State. For instance, according to Michael J. Curley, a Professor of English at the University of Puget Sound, the Latin poem, *The Prophecy of John of Bridlington,* is “a historical retrospect of English affairs” that began during the reign of Edward II through Edward III monarchy, and was left anonymous (361). Curley surmises that it was written in the middle of the 14th century. A friar thought to be connected to the poem and its author, who was heard reciting “its libelous stanzas,” which went against the English rule at the time, was hanged. Curley also states that this poem is a prime example of what was considered to be the chauvinistic ways in England at the time, and was also discovered to have prophesied future dealings in the country up to the year 1405 (361). The prophecy set forth in the poem is connected to the Augustinian monastery of Bridlington. Many scribes, including the *Gawain*-poet’s, were undoubtedly nervous about the consequences of writing against the English monarch and observed the same tradition of remaining anonymous. Although the author of *The Prophecy of John Bridlington* remains anonymous, Curley suggests that a John

or Robert Bridlington is attributed to the poem, though these have not been conclusively proven (362). The harsh punishment conducted by the English for simply quoting lines from this poem, could help explain why the *Gawain*-poet chose to remain anonymous.

Although any one specific name to identify the *Gawain*-poet has largely gone unfounded, there are scholars who have connected certain details surrounding the poet's life that help to bring marked names to the forefront. Chapman, who was also a Professor of English at University of Puget Sound a few decades before Curley, explains that because of a large collection of books found in the library of John de Erghome, that include references and names that parallel those used in each of the four poems, de Erghome, who was an Augustinian friar in York, is the *Gawain*-poet. King Porros of Inde found in *Pearl* and Morgan le Fay, and her "ugly old hag" description, found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, are just two references that align with names found in the *Gawain*-poems (347), " . . . an au*n*cian hit semed // Þe tweyne y3en, & þe nase, þe naked lyppe3/& þose were soure to se, & sellyly blered" (Gawayne II.948; 962-63). In translation, " . . . an ancient, it seemed // The two eyes and the nose, the naked lips,/And they unsightly to see, and sorrily bleared" (*Gawain* II.948; 962-63). Of course, the names used in the *Gawain*-poems that are also found in other books that were in de Erghome's library, does not prove that he is the *Gawain*-poet, but it does offer an appealing trajectory. Chapman also claims that there are many other references found in these books that may have influenced the *Gawain*-poet when he wrote, such as connections to families and happenings within the families in and around York (347). Incidentally, Curley explores de Erghome as poet, too, though he found a discrepancy of a 100 year difference with respect to when de Erghome lived (366). Furthermore,

Chapman comments on the moralistic virtues of de Erghome and his life, along with the lessons set forth in the poems, that coincide with the poems in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript. And based on similar alliterative and internal rhyming verses in the Cotton Nero poems, he also believes that the aforementioned poem, *The Prophecy of John Bridlington* was written by de Erghome as well, in 1370. He makes an argument regarding the dialect and its primary location in England previously stated by other scholars (347-8). Once again, no real tangible proof supports this claim, though it is certainly a logical one.

Another name that has repeatedly shown itself to be connected to the *Gawain*-poet, as Beaston also claims, is Robert Holcot. Philip O'Mara asserts that the *Gawain*-poet was very familiar with the Dominican priest and author, who lived between 1300-1349. O'Mara surmises that the *Gawain*-poet may have been his student ("Robert" 329). Holcot wrote *Moralitates*, which was written for medieval preachers to use for moral purposes, and includes prayers, old stories, fables, or "christological readings" (Slotemaker 232-3). The *Gawain*-poet would have been heavily influenced by these readings and wrote *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in *Moralitates'* likeness, expressing moralistic points with doctrinal purposes. Based on very similar parts and images Holcot uses in his own texts, such as a barefoot and armed green man and a deceitful woman, as well as similar plots, themes, and characterization, O'Mara claims these resemble what is in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The theological beliefs of Holcot are also reflected in the texts of the *Gawain*-poet, as they mirror Christian doctrine, with messages about good and evil, as well as salvation. O'Mara explores the beliefs of many of the 14th century theologians, but

stresses those of Holcot, commenting much on the theologian's teachings that are found in the *Gawain*-poems ("Robert" 329). Robert Holcot lived and possibly influenced the *Gawain*-poet in Richard Aungerville de Bury's residence in London. de Bury was the Bishop of Durham from 1333-44. Holcot lived in his home for six years, from 1336-42, where it is believed the *Gawain*-poet also lived during his youth, taking in Holcot's "way of looking at things" ("Holcot" 102). O'Mara claims that the *Gawain*-poet knew of the "chivalric conventions" and "commercial language" of the medieval time period, and wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a "courtly romance" with "touches of piety," while the other three poems "are devotional meditations, saturated in scripture and religious learning." This leads one to undoubtedly believe the *Gawain*-poet to be a priest. O'Mara also suggests that, after surviving the plague, which England suffered many bouts of in the 14th century, the *Gawain*-poet completed the four poems found in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript that perhaps Robert Holcot began. Holcot himself succumbed to the disease in 1349 ("Holcot" 104-5). This conjecture opens up a whole new direction for further exploration.

Although the identity of the *Gawain*-poet may never truly be uncovered, J. R. R. Tolkien, who was a significant scholar of the English language, specializing in Old and Middle English translation, in particular *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, has expressed points of interest regarding authorship of all four poems in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript. Tolkien claims that the *Gawain*-poet is someone who knew exactly what he was doing, intentionally writing tales, with all of its virtues, temptations, confessions, and "magic," and was interested in "problems of conduct and ha[s] given some thought to them" (89-90). He further states that not only was the poet intelligent,

but also a man who gave much thought to, and was “fully aware of what he was doing,” as he wrote “moral” poetry (91). This would stand to reason that the *Gawain*-poet, as stated by many other scholars, was a man who devoted himself to God. He saw the world in which he lived to be immoral and unjust, and by writing his poems, he was simply attempting to right the worst wrongs he had witnessed and observed in the space around him.

Although the extensive scholarship of Curley, Chapman, and O’Mara make believable claims based on solid evidence, there is no further or definitive confirmation attributing authorship, exploring the names they suggest. As Henry Savage claims, although there are many detailed accounts as to the identity of the poet, the “foundations” are “flimsy” and should not be taken seriously. He states that “progress in scholarship is [more often] won by conjecture and surmise than by ‘flat’ discovery.” And by progressing, we look to the understanding of the language and dialect used in the poem, in order to ascertain a more pragmatic view of the poet. Savage states that by continuing to research the identity of the *Gawain*-poet, will only lead to more conclusive knowledge about him (“Sir” 148).

The substantial research that has been done on this subject is near impossible to link together, though the topic will undeniably continue to lure scholarly attempts at revealing the identity of the *Gawain*-poet, as it continues to be one of literatures’ great mysteries. While the literary world places importance on uncovering the true identity of the *Gawain*-poet, the real significance lies in the truth behind the type of person who wrote these poems, for the trust placed in the *Gawain*-poet for the missives he wrote, is what is of real value. Who else but a man of the cloth can help teach about the word of

God? Who else should be trusted to expound upon the many messages put forth about living a good life, one that would foster truth, nobility and kindness in others, free from sin? It is the answers to these questions that lead one to believe that the *Gawain*-poet was a voice box for God to help spread his good word. The *Gawain*-poet, as a monk, was the ideal kind of person to promote purity and faith in God, to people in all centuries. He was one who promoted having the presence of God in one's life, in order to obtain pure happiness and salvation in the afterlife.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In England, the Benedictine monks were “missionaries, teachers, scholars,” and during the Middle Ages, knew not only Middle English, but other languages as well, such as Latin and French (Evans 207). They were also avid writers and transcribers. When these qualities are combined, along with the knowledge of Christianity and the inspiration of nobility from King Arthur’s Court, it would allow a Benedictine monk to write poetry like *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* with ease, especially if its writing spanned across several years, perhaps even decades. It is hard, from the perspective of the 21st century, to believe that one could write such historical poetry, and include amazing depth and beauty, with descriptions of many vivid biblical references, and not want to take ownership of it. But if the poet were in fact, a monk, and was following the rules originally put forth by Saint Benedict, not to mention if he valued his life and the life of other influencers around him, he may have chosen to remain anonymous. The world is left with a literary masterpiece, nonetheless, which “. . . can be read as a brilliant plea for obedience and orthodoxy, a rejection of . . . wrong thinking” (Fredell 36). These poems are significantly proclaiming to the reader to consider having the discipline to stay unadulterated in heart and mind.

Of course, during any century, there are indeed troubled times and disruptions among people in different places all over the globe. And sometimes, something happens that affects the entire world, possibly leading one to believe that there are greater, unseen forces at work, willing people to stop and notice their surroundings and believe in something almighty again. At the time of this writing, the entire world has

been challenged for several weeks, and is amid a global health crisis. The deadly spread of COVID-19, the sickness caused by the novel coronavirus, has shaken the world to its core. When taking into consideration the *Gawain*-poet's messages of prayer, understanding, and forgiveness he conveys in his poems, it is easy to relate the times in which he lived with modern times such as these. His missives of prayers may have served people in the Middle Ages quite well, as England had been repeatedly cursed by its own plague during that time. Like in all centuries, viruses, crises, battles, and greed, are certainly things with which humankind has had to withstand. And like in all centuries, there are undoubtedly many prayers being said now more than ever, in the hopes that God will restore the world, as well as humanity's faith in it. Perhaps this is the larger plan at work here now. But amidst all of the hardships the entire world is now facing, despite poverty or wealth; celebrity or civilian; ethical behavior or immoral conduct; young or old; sick or healthy, people are united together, while struggling to cope with an invisible disease that threatens their very existence. It is causing everyone to stop, take notice, and reflect on one's life. It is expected that most are reflecting on the importance of prayer, family, and working to do their own part at stopping the spread of the disease by following state mandated "stay home, stay safe" rules. All are perhaps pondering what it is that's most important in life. What is it that is of most value? Hopefully, most would answer that health, family, being kind to others, and opening your heart to God are some of what is most important.

And perhaps many are returning to prayer, in the hopes that God will heal. In every time period throughout history, there has been a huge disparity among the royals and the commoners, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated. But as

most have observed with the spread of COVID-19, it does not discriminate. No one status group is immune, all are at risk. For the world, and its citizens, the feeling is universal. Battles fought, both externally and internally, need to cease, and peace needs to begin. Interestingly, a recent *New York Times* article notes that, in an effort to curb fears amidst the coronavirus concerns, Saudi Arabia has called a cease-fire with Yemen, which could quite possibly be the beginning of the end of a five year battle between the two countries. Although it may have been prompted by 150 members of the Saudi royal family contracting COVID-19, and the fear of it spreading (Hubbard), a ceasefire is a ceasefire. This could very well be the start of something global, causing a wave of peace treaties amid this rampant disease. It is also noteworthy to mention that this is happening when many people are celebrating Easter and Passover, when a reminder of Christ's sacrifice, resurrection, and freedom from both slavery and sin, are upon us. Just another reminder that all citizens of the world should have faith in something greater than themselves.

The Cotton Nero A.x. poems that were miraculously found amid literal ashes, are a true treasure for literary scholars and Christians alike. When considering the poems discovery, "kindly fate has preserved [them] from oblivion" (*Pearl* xiii). These poems are ultimately about the "loss of perfection" and one's own inclination to revert back to a place before the destruction of the world was caused by original sin (Fredell 34-36). And the *Gawain*-poet, in response to this, weaved into his poems the promise of hope, forgiveness, and salvation, when one is committed to living an authentic life with God. Just as He provided divine intervention in saving the manuscript from destruction in a fire, so too is He seen intervening now in many ways where people are turning back to

Him, showing gratitude for their health and for their lives, and asking for forgiveness. With God's grace, we, too, can reestablish ourselves among the ashes, and live our lives in a more graceful and pure way with God as our guide. The *Gawain*-poet was the type of person who placed his faith in God, and was someone who had hoped that his homiletic messages of journeying throughout life and staying connected to God, in the hopes of "returning" home, will help rescue all of humanity.

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