Feminist Approaches to Early Medieval English Studies

Trilling, Renee, Stephenson, Rebecca, Norris, Robin

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Trilling, Renee, et al.
Feminist Approaches to Early Medieval English Studies.
Amsterdam University Press, 2023.
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Metacritical Considerations
1 The Lost Victorian Women of Old English Studies

M. J. Toswell

Abstract
The focus here is on some of the Victorian women scholars who very significantly but without acknowledgment advanced the study of Old English: the fierce philologist Anna Gurney, who prepared and quietly published the first translation of the Old English Chronicle materials; the widow Mary Conybeare, who assembled and developed the rest of the material in John Josias Conybeare’s highly influential volume Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry, the atelier of women who did most of the work in the many editions of W.W. Skeat (his wife, his daughters, the translators Miss Gunning and Miss Wilkinson, and even T.O. Cockayne); and Elise Otté, who provided significant philological aid to her stepfather Benjamin Thorpe in the preparation of his editions.

Keywords: Anna Gurney, Elise Otté, Mary Conybeare, W.W. Skeat atelier

Many women—mostly in England, and mostly in genteel but not affluent households—accomplished a great deal for the field of Old English studies that has gone largely unnoticed. When this project began, examples of women scholars, acknowledged, more often under-acknowledged, and most often unacknowledged, multiplied rapidly. Mabel Day did much of the work of Israel Gollancz, with cursory thanks and occasional acknowledgments, including the completion of his edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight a decade after his death.¹ Ida Gordon, more obviously in the field of Old

¹ Murray McGillivray reminded me of this point in conversation. This project has been particularly collaborative, and I am very grateful to the many scholars referenced here and to many others who offered leads and advice. I gave versions of this paper to the Medieval Symposium of the International Association of University Professors of English (IAUPE) conference at Poznan

Norris, R., Stephenson, R., & Trilling, R.R. (eds.), Feminist Approaches to Early Medieval English Studies. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2023
DOI: 10.5117/9789463721462_CH01
English, produced her own excellent edition of the Old English poem *The Seafarer*. She was closely involved with the Leeds group of medieval scholars, including her husband, former teacher, and doctoral supervisor E. V. Gordon and his close friend J. R. R. Tolkien. The former Ida Pickles published one article based on her thesis in 1934, but after her husband's death in 1938 she completed his projects under his name, and went on to her own as well. To support her young family she was a lecturer, and eventually a senior lecturer, at the University of Manchester. Although she held a higher degree than her husband had when he moved from Leeds to become the Smith Professor at Manchester in 1931, it seems unlikely that Ida's scholarly abilities were properly acknowledged during or after her husband's lifetime.\(^2\) Similarly, W. W. Skeat points out in passing that Joseph Bosworth's second wife, the former Anne Margaret Elliot, did significant work collating manuscript readings for his work on the *Orosius*.\(^3\) More such scholars no doubt exist, and more work remains to be done on the scholars I have chosen to focus on here: Anna Gurney, Mary Conybeare, the women of the Skeat *atelier*, and Elise C. Otté.

Some work has been done to identify women whose scholarship was undervalued or ignored in the field of Middle English studies. There is, for example, the famous case of Hope Emily Allen inviting Sanford Meech to *co-edit* *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and his subsequent attempts to efface her existence from the work.\(^4\) Similarly, John M. Manly received much
acclaim and scholarly recognition for his work on Chaucer, especially on the records of his life and the text of the *Canterbury Tales*, but his colleague at the University of Chicago, and the co-editor of those works, Edith Rickert, remains unknown and largely unacknowledged. Mary Haweis singlehandedly made Chaucer popular in the nineteenth century with her stories and adaptations; and Caroline Spurgeon, an important Chaucer scholar in her own right, had to fight to be appointed the first woman professor of English in England, at the University of London.5

In the field of Old English studies, the groundwork has been laid. Several excellent theses, by Julie Towell, Robyn Bray, and Helen Brookman, lead the way.6 In the field of history of the language, there remains work to be done. For the backgrounds of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, research has found the male mental health patient who provided many citations, but not the many women who did the same (perhaps with less interesting back stories).7 The *OED* introduction points out that Lady Craigie, wife to the editor W. A. Craigie, revised the arrangement of the entries for *U* in 1917–1918, but the details of her work remain unheralded.8 Some women scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United Kingdom are maddeningly hard to identify because they are subsumed under surnames and the supposedly honorific “Miss” or “Mrs.” Here I hope only to give some hints about a few of their stories, and to point the way towards how to uncover more of them. We may perhaps in future references to the works they abetted or drafted offer their

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6 See Julie Ellen Towell, “The ‘rise and progress’ of Anglo-Saxon at the Collegiate Level before WWI,” 84–96, and Appendices 3 and 4 on Anna Robertson Brown and Mary Gwinn, 96–126.


8 For example, in addition to the work of Lady Craigie mentioned in the preface, the two women who did most of the work on Skeat’s edition of Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*, Miss Wilkinson and Miss Gunning, appear prominently in the prefaces to the dictionary fascicles. Skeat presumably recruited them to do work for the *OED* as well as for his own editing projects.
names too, so that although they were effaced in the original publications, we can restore them to their rightful places now, if we can winkle them out.

Anna Gurney (1795–1857)

In 1819, the first translation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was published in England, by someone identified on the title page simply as “A Lady in the Country.” The soubriquet hid Anna Gurney, the younger half-sister of Hudson Gurney, and youngest child of Richard Gurney and his second wife Rachel. Hudson Gurney was a gentleman-scholar in Norfolk, based to the north of Norwich, but very involved in the learned currents of his day as the long-standing vice-president in charge of publications of the Society of Antiquaries. He probably helped arrange publication for his young sister of a couple of pieces in Archaeologica, and he must have overseen her first steps in foreign and medieval languages, given that he was already a grown man when their father died in 1811. Eight years later, she published her translation. Gurney states in a brief preface that her work was well advanced when she learned that a full collected edition, with translation and notes, was about to be published. Her work had perforce depended on printed texts and not manuscripts, but she went ahead with publication, but “for private circulation” in a form which might be “convenient for reference.” The edition to which she referred, by James Ingram, did indeed emerge several years later, in 1823. However, it is worth noting that although Ingram said he was producing a collective edition of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, his work has never garnered many plaudits. It could even be argued that it wrongly overshadowed Gurney’s forceful and solid translation. Eric Stanley, for example, states:

Among the very best translators from Old English is Anna Gurney, whose life, as recorded by DNB, was impressively triumphant, and whose work has received recognition from Norman Garmonsway in an excellent study.9

The “impressively triumphant” life to which Stanley refers is a genuinely remarkable tale. Gurney was paralyzed when a toddler and had very limited

9 E. G. Stanley, “Translation from Old English: ‘The Garbaging War-Hawk’, or, The Literal Materials from Which the Reader Can Re-create the Poem,” reprinted in A Collection of Papers with Emphasis on Old English Literature (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987), 83–114, at 104. Stanley later points out that only the school of translators who look to Miss Gurney as their model avoid the dangers of “poeticizing literalism” (108).
mobility, such that she spent her life in a wheelchair. She learned many languages, established a school with her partner Sarah Buxton, accomplished a significant amount of scholarly work, bought and learned to use a Manby mortar to save sailors from a shipwreck, engaged in political and religious disputes of the time both inside the influential Gurney family (two brothers served as MPs) and outside as she strongly influenced parliamentary debate on issues surrounding the abolition of slavery.  

The family was a Quaker one, but Anna Gurney’s decisive and incisive mind shows an independence of thinking even beyond the Quaker norms. Her cousin Elizabeth Gurney Fry worked for prison reform; Anna worked hard on the emancipation of slaves in the British Empire, but otherwise focused quietly in Norfolk on learning and writing. Many scholars came to her at Northrepps Cottage near Overstrand, or corresponded with her extensively. For example, Sir Francis Palgrave and Gurney had a lively correspondence, and he writes a dedicatory epistle to her in his History of England in the first volume, focused on the early medieval period and published in 1831.  

He might first have been introduced to Anna Gurney as the son-in-law of Dawson Turner, a close friend of Hudson Gurney’s, but the letters they exchange suggest they developed their own highly engaged scholarly and personal relationship. Many letters to and from her survive in other archives; she was clearly a treasured and indefatigable correspondent as well as a fine and independent-minded scholar.  

Gurney’s papers in the Norwich County Archive demonstrate that she intended to revise her translation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, since they

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12 The Gurney Archives are deposited with the Norfolk County Record Office in Norwich; the catalogue is at http://nrocat.norfolk.gov.uk/, accessed July 3, 2015, and I am grateful to the archivists for access to the collection.
include an unbound copy sporting marbled end-papers and marked throughout with her own relatively extensive notes in the margins. For example, she underlines “Emperor” twice on page 2, and writes “Caesar” in the margin, but later crosses out the note. Later on the same page for “overcome in a terrible battle” she has a very wavy underline, and in the margin “griesly” (presumably for “grisly”) and below that in pencil “grievous.” Most pages have similar entries, correcting small points or offering translations with greater nuance. Gurney was a notable scholar, and it seems clear that she was contemplating the publication of a revised translation. However, that is not what happened to her translation. We have no evidence from her letters or notes as to what transpired, but it would appear that she permitted John Allen Giles (1808–1884) to use her work, with only the slightest hint of acknowledgment. J. A. Giles has perhaps a claim to be an early journeyman scholar, willing to prepare whatever work a press might want. He himself claimed in a trial in 1855 that he had published 120 volumes, which is a substantial accomplishment for someone not yet fifty. In the late 1840s he seems to have produced nearly ten of these, one of which, in 1849, was a translation of Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle produced for Bohn’s Antiquarian Library. In the preface, Giles makes two illuminating remarks. First, he acknowledges that Gurney provided the translation that he uses as the basis for his own work:

More than 120 years passed before this historical record [the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle] again attracted the notice of the public, or the labours of an editor. It was then translated into English throughout from the text of Gibson by a learned lady still living, Miss Gurney; to whom, both my enterprising publisher and myself are largely indebted for her kindness in facilitating the present edition, and to whom we gladly take this opportunity of acknowledging the debt. Miss Gurney’s translation was printed for private circulation, and did not receive the final polish of the fair translator, who was deterred from bestowing further labour upon a work which was shortly to be undertaken by one of our ablest antiquaries.

Gurney’s translation is presented here by Giles as lacking polish, and also presented as a document which facilitated this work. Giles kindly

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13 See Norfolk Record Office, Gurney of Bawdeswell Collection, RQG 410.
and patronizingly acknowledges the debt to Gurney. Giles’s implication, of course, is that he has provided the polish, and taken the rough-hewn work of Anna Gurney and made it into something worthy of publication. Later in the introduction Giles adds a further annoying and illuminating comment, as he admits that he used Petrie’s edition with its collations of the six manuscripts, but that this edition only went to 1066:

But, as the edition of Mr. Petrie extends only to the year 1066, it has been necessary to form a text for the latter portion of the Chronicle from other sources. To effect this the translation of Miss Gurney, has, with the consent of that amiable lady, been taken as a ground-work, and numerous additions, variations, and notes, have been introduced by a collation of her text with that of Dr. Ingram. 16

In other words, Giles lightly revised Gurney’s translation by reference to Petrie’s Latin edition collating six manuscripts while saying that he was doing a new and idiomatic translation, but after the year 1066 he simply used Gurney’s text, with some collation to the pre-existing edition of Ingram. Once again, the patronizing tone is in evidence referring to Gurney as “that amiable lady.” The correspondence between Gurney and Giles does not survive, which is unfortunate. Gurney’s surviving letters do suggest a woman of great generosity and goodness of soul, but there is an elegance and scholarly precision to her writing that was wholly lacking in Giles. She probably regretted letting him have access to her work. 17

Anna Gurney only published a few pieces of scholarship, although it is clear from the notes of her executors that they found large quantities of translations and analyses in her files after death. It seems particularly unfortunate that the forthcoming publication of an edition of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle by James Ingram, former Rawlinson Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford and about to become president of Trinity College, Oxford in 1824, meant that she decided not to publish her translation but simply to make it available in private circulation. Few copies survive, as a result. And then, having been so carefully polite about not stepping on the toes of James Ingram, it seems the more annoying that the prolific John

17 Work remains to be done on Gurney. At her death, Lucy Rushmore (one of her executors) attempted a list of translations and analyses she had prepared and ready for publication. There are over thirty, which seem all to have been lost (RQG 412), and there is a separate entry for a translation of Snorri Sturleson’s Ynglinga Saga (COL 7/27).
Allen Giles would “borrow” her translation and use it for his publication. Since Ingram's edition was a two-column one with Old English on the left and a facing translation on the right, and presumably Giles had access to this text since he used it for the Old English when Petrie’s edition ran out, it seems striking that he chose rather to use Anna Gurney's text. It was the right call, as her translation is livelier and more accurate than that of the former professor of Anglo-Saxon. Yet, since Giles essentially just assembled the volume from an Old English text and Gurney's translation, it seems unfair that her work was not acknowledged as that of a translator, on the title page.

Mary Conybeare (1790–1848)

Well-known is the story about how John Josias Conybeare (1779–1824) assembled a wide array of poems in Old English, edited them, and translated them, partly while he served as Rawlinson Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford between 1808 and 1812, and then Professor of Poetry from 1812–1821. Similarly well-known is the fact that after his death in 1824 his brother William, a geologist of some distinction, completed the work of his magnum opus and in 1826 published the Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry, the first real attempt in England to present and translate the surviving poetry of the period.18 John Earle, a later Rawlinson chair, describes it in his book as having “had a great effect in calling the attention of the educated, and more than any other book in the present century has served as the introduction to Saxon studies.”19 Conybeare’s was the book on the shelves of the educated elite of the United Kingdom and North America, those who were interested in literature and the origin stories of the English. Longfellow had it, and so did William Morris. Robert Southey received his copy as a gift from Mary Conybeare, but used it and referred to it, as did the brothers Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm, and Sir Walter Scott. Conybeare’s contribution to Old English scholarship has often been underrated or dismissed, partly because Conybeare (like his brother William) was also a well-known geologist, and furthermore a beloved vicar, first in Cowley and later in Batheaston, publishing extensively in the field of theology as well. He did not focus solely on early medieval English topics, writing

also on early French poetry, and he was a scholar and antiquarian in the tradition of the Society of Antiquaries (though he did not join the Society, but merely published several times in Archaeologia). Conybeare was genuinely engaged with Old English, unusually for a Rawlinson professor at that time, but he was not solely interested in this field. However, at the unexpected end of his life his focus was on completing the Illustrations, which he had announced and set up a subscription list for nearly ten years earlier. He had published a sequence of articles about Old English poetry just after he left the Rawlinson chair in 1812 (all in 1813 and 1814), but in 1817 he sent out a letter to appear in The Gentleman's List advertising the future publication of Illustrations of the Early History of English and French Poetry and inviting subscribers to the publication, for the express purpose of building a school in Batheaston. The letter indicates that Conybeare planned to put together some lecture notes, many of his publications on Old English and early French poetry, and to assemble collations he had completed, for example of Beowulf. He also planned to include a French text he called Rout of Roncesvalles, now better known as the Chanson de Roland.

My concern here is the role played by Mary Conybeare in finishing and publishing her husband’s already-subscribed Illustrations after his unexpected death. Robyn Bray’s 2013 thesis about J. J. Conybeare is illuminating on this point, and is also the only scholarship on the topic. Bray usefully also provides transcriptions of correspondence, notably letters from William to Mary about the work, and has done much archival work investigating the background and the significance of the Illustrations.20 At Conybeare’s death, about eighty pages had progressed past proofs, and just over eighty more pages were typeset, as the preface of the book indicates. He was, Bray points out, in London overseeing the progress of the book when he died quite suddenly, apparently having an apoplectic fit one day in June and dying the following day. The letters Bray provides

20 See Robyn Bray, “‘A Scholar, a Gentleman, and a Christian’: John Josias Conybeare (1779–1824) and his ‘Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry’ (1826)” (PhD dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2013), available at http://theses.gla.ac.uk/4709/, accessed August 18, 2015. Bray’s thesis considers the preparation and publication of the book in very great detail, as well as the biographies of the two brothers and the reception history of Illustrations. She makes the argument about the importance of Mary Conybeare in the publication of Illustrations, but does not go as far as I do in wanting the widow to have publishing credit for the work. Partly, no doubt, that is because we have only the letters written by William D. Conybeare to his sister-in-law and not hers to him (as deposited in the Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service and edited by Bray). For all the information in this section I am deeply indebted to Bray’s thesis.
make it clear both that Mary had Latin and that she was unhappy about William's choices with respect to the texts in the volume. Only William's half of the correspondence survives, edited by Bray, but he is clearly answering very scholarly questions and responding to questions as well on the content of the publication. The letters also reveal that Mary used her own funds to pay what William considered to be a bill from the printer that she should ignore since legally he was responsible for the publication as the second author, and she, as the widow of the first author, was not. Elsewhere William claims that he has added only a hundred pages of the 382 that the book is being printed at, and that Mary should underwrite any losses on the rest. This contradicts the statement in the book's preface that at Conybeare's death only eighty pages were printed and eighty more pages typeset. By William's account, he added only a hundred pages to the 160 the preface lists, which means that about 120 pages are unaccounted for.

The correspondence, even though only one side of it survives, reveals that an extensive negotiation is taking place, and that Mary appears to have her own set of materials, and possibly of proofs, so that both she and William are entering corrections and additions to the material. They also appear to have wrangled over the title page, with Mary wanting William's role to be saved for a page or so later in the volume. That is, she wanted her deceased husband to be the sole author listed on the title page. Mary lost that battle. Elsewhere in the correspondence, she does appear to have prevailed in another battle, this one an issue of scholarship. The sources of all the materials are carefully presented in the table of contents, and several pieces from *Archaeologia* are reprinted exactly as they appeared in publication, not revised as William wanted. The correspondence is fascinating, and Mary's input is clearly engaged and scholarly. That is, although it clearly never occurred to her to put her own name on the title page, Mary seems to have been very closely involved indeed in the editing, proofreading, and publication. She was also solely responsible for the distribution as she seems to have been the one who sent out copies of her late husband's volume to subscribers and to scholars in the field. She may well have had the editing of the missing third of the volume in her charge too, although the surviving documentation does not provide enough information. Her name should have been on the title page. We should, acknowledging the extent of her role as devoted widow and learned spouse, well able to engage in debate and negotiation with her husband's brother, list her as co-author now.
The Skeat atelier

An atelier generally refers to a studio in which a master painter leads a team of apprentices, assistants paid and unpaid, and other artists in the creation and completion of many works of art. For some products of the atelier, the leader will be obviously working hard, and for others the leader will simply organize and coordinate the work of subordinates. Invariably, an atelier is highly productive or it collapses, and it is always difficult to discern where the master has placed a brush on the canvas, and where not. W. W. Skeat (1835–1912) is perhaps more famous for his work in Middle English, especially his editions of Piers Plowman and Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, or for his successful championing of the English Dialect Society and its dictionary project, or for his involvement in the Oxford English Dictionary. For scholars of Old English, however, he is best-known as the editor of the one set of prose texts edited in the nineteenth century whose edition has only just now been superseded: Ælfric’s Lives of Saints in two volumes. I want to argue here first, that Skeat essentially ran an atelier for this project, and second, that this project could well serve as a model for how Skeat accomplished much of his scholarly publication. Moreover, I want to argue that most of the members of Skeat’s atelier were women and were not paid for their labor, but they should now be acknowledged for their work.

Skeat himself states in the last paragraph of the “Preliminary Notice” to volume one of the Lives of Saints:

The modern English version of the Homilies, though revised by myself, is almost entirely the work of Miss Gunning, of Cambridge, and Miss Wilkinson, formerly of Dorking, who with great perseverance have translated not only most of the text as contained in this first part, but nearly all of the remaining Lives belonging to the same series.

21 I worked with the Skeat archive in King’s College London for three stints—an exploratory visit in July 2016, during which I was helped by Adam Cox as Archives Assistant, then a week in March 2018 and two individual days in May 2018, when I was helped by Katrina DiMuro, Archives Assistant, and Lianne Smith, Archives Services Manager. I am very grateful for their assistance. It should be noted for the record that Skeat did also publish a synoptic edition of the vernacular gospels under his own name, which remained in use for over a century, but that work was the completion of a project begun by John Mitchell Kemble.

22 Ælfric’s Lives of Saints, vol. 1, ed. Walter W. Skeat. EETS o.s. 94 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1890), vii. The volume was originally published in two parts, o.s. 76 in 1881 (up to 256), and o.s. 82 in 1885 (to 553).
At the end of the preface to the second volume of the same work, Skeat makes a similar point:

Amongst these my chief thanks are due to Miss Gunning, of Cambridge, and the late Miss Wilkinson, for the preparation of the greater part of the English translation which accompanies the old text.\(^{23}\)

Skeat further refers to their “great perseverance and care” and notes that although he revised the whole text (including the six texts for which he did his own translation or used other translations), “the alterations made were, on the whole, inconsiderable.”\(^ {24}\) Miss Gunning and Miss Wilkinson, always a matched pair, also appear in the preliminary matter to several other Skeat productions: for example, volume six of his Chaucer edition has the following:

As regards the Glossary, I have much pleasure in recording my thanks to Miss Gunning and Miss Wilkinson, of Cambridge, who prepared the “slips” recording the references, and, in most cases, the meanings also, throughout a large portion of the whole work, with praiseworthy carefulness and patience. My obligations to these two ladies began many years ago, as they undertook most of the glossarial work of my smaller edition of the Man of Law’s Tale (with others); work which is now incorporated with the rest. It required some devotion to analyse the language of Boethius and the Romaunt, of Melibeus and the Parson’s Tale, all of which they successfully undertook.\(^ {25}\)

In other words, these “two ladies” prepared the glossary for Skeat’s six-volume edition of Chaucer. They are also among those thanked for preliminary work in the early fascicles of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and they seem likely to have been quite adept at the kind of detailed language work demanded by Professor Skeat.

Today, of course, the translators of the Old English text into a readable and readily comprehensible modern English version would be listed as co-authors, and the historical linguists who prepare glossaries tend to get

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23 *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*, vol. 2, ed. Walter W. Skeat. EETS o.s. 114 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900), liv. This volume was also originally published in two parts, with o.s. 94 to 224 in 1899, and o.s. 114 to 474 in 1900.


special recognition of their contributions. Special recognition does not, in the twenty-first century, mean a few generous comments near the end of the “General Introduction” of an edition with only one named editor. The Lives of the Saints was strikingly not an edition with a great deal of paratext: the annotations are few and are focused largely on the manuscript evidence for each homily, there are sparse textual notes indicating detailed collation of the manuscripts for the texts in the collection, and there is no glossary. In fact, the two volumes consist of a short introduction by Skeat, the transcription, the translation, and a scant ten pages in each volume of notes and references. Skeat says in his comments, as quoted above, that he revised the translations produced by the Misses Gunning and Wilkinson, but then he also indicates that those revisions involved “inconsiderable” alterations. We can, therefore, conclude based on Skeat’s own comments that Skeat is really not responsible for the translation. The Skeat Archive frequently includes notes on the manuscripts of the saints’ lives, and Skeat clearly did do considerable work in looking for these texts and seeing what parts of particular lives appeared in other manuscripts and other contexts. His introduction to volume 2 provides useful material on this, and sifts through the available published material on Ælfric, particularly on his corpus, by Dietrich and by Cockayne.

Then, however, we come to the question of the transcript. Kathryn Maude in a recent article quotes Skeat’s own comments provided above and concludes sarcastically that “[h]alf of the work in this edition, then, has been done by Miss Gunning and Miss Wilkinson, whose translations of the Lives run alongside the transcription made by Skeat.” My concern here is with the other half of the volume, beginning with the transcription from the manuscripts. Did Skeat do the transcription himself? It would appear not. The Skeat archive includes transcriptions of many of the Ælfrician saints’ lives, but the hand is not Skeat’s, nor is the layout and formatting his. A point worth pursuing is that Skeat seems to have served as literary executor for his former King’s College School teacher, T. O. Cockayne, who died by pistol shot in 1873. Early in his career Oswald Cockayne published on Greek and Latin, but for the last fifteen years of his life his focus was Old and Middle

26 Kathryn Maude makes the same point that I make here, using exclusively the evidence quoted here from a prefatory note to the Lives of Saints, in “Citation and Marginalisation: The Ethics of Feminism in Medieval Studies,” Journal of Gender Studies 23 (2014): 247–61, at 254.
27 Maude, “Citation and Marginalisation,” 254.
English, and he is particularly well-known for his three-volume *Leechdoms*.\(^{29}\) Some of his notebooks for this edition survive in the Skeat Archive; his hand for transcription and annotation is particularly striking: crabbed, elegant, using Old English letter forms for difficult letters, very upright, and quite difficult to read. Precisely the same hand transcribes the manuscripts of the Ælfric saints’ lives, and into very similar notebooks to those used for the medical material.\(^{30}\) Moreover, Skeat acknowledges that he had Cockayne’s transcriptions of these texts, and more, that he used them, in the preface to volume 2. He explicitly describes them as having “two drawbacks,” the first being the use of Old English characters and the second that marks of contraction were disregarded (Cockayne, following the classical tradition, probably silently expanded abbreviations). Skeat concludes, “Otherwise, it is extremely correct; as might have been expected.”\(^{31}\) Earlier in this paragraph Skeat notes that the transcription for this volume was lost in large part and had been re-transcribed. He states explicitly: “in default of other help, I made the transcript of sections 33–36 myself.” These sections are the last four texts of the volume, the lives of Euphrosyne, Cecilia, Chrysanthus and Daria, and Thomas. They account for ninety pages of the volume (forty-five subtracting the translation), and Skeat considers it noteworthy that he had to make the transcription himself for just about one-quarter of the volume. The conclusion is relatively obvious. Skeat clearly did not ordinarily transcribe the texts he published (since he clearly provides this information here as something unusual in his experience), save where he explicitly says. Maude asserts that Miss Gunning and Miss Wilkinson did half the work of the publication with their translation and she implies that Skeat did the other half. In this she appears to be wrong, though she would no doubt be

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30 The Skeat Archive includes many notes and notebooks which are by Oswald Cockayne, and I suspect as many as three or four boxes in the archive were Cockayne materials that Skeat did not feel comfortable jettisoning, while he happily got rid of his own preliminary notes and drafts. Part of the transcription of the Ælfric lives of saints is at 4/2/1 and 4/2/2, in Cockayne’s hand and with a pencil collation written in above, also in a very neat hand. 4/2/3 has some translation from Ælfric, but the hand is small, neat, and pointed—not Cockayne, nor Skeat. This box consists of many matching bound notebooks, also including transcriptions from the *Liber Scintillarum*. There are also a number of looseleaf letters addressed to Cockayne here and in some later boxes.

irked to learn that in addition to not doing the translation, Skeat also did not do nearly all the transcription. He had Cockayne’s superb work, and he appears to have had other help as well.

Before returning briefly to Skeat’s translators and glossary-makers, I want to discuss some of that other help that Skeat had. George Parker of the Bodleian Library transcribed many manuscripts for Skeat, including *Piers Plowman*, *Joseph of Arimathea*, various songs and ballads, and much more.32 His wife, Frances Parker, seems also to have done some work; she contributed a list of Oxfordshire words to the English Dialect Society, and then produced a far longer supplement for an issue involving five different reports on dialects in different areas of Britain, which then required a glossary, prepared by her husband.33 Parker’s daughter also seems to have done transcriptions, though possibly not for Skeat.34 In the archive, Skeat’s own hand is rather large and a bit sloppy; he often used pencil, and marked sections that he had already sent to press and had had returned with blue pencil to avoid confusion. The archive in general has transcriptions and notes in many hands. Often, fair copies of texts that Skeat published, clearly being returned by a press after use, are definitely not written by Skeat. Two more specific pieces of evidence also appear in the archive: first, a set of British library tickets in the name E. Brock accompanies some transcripts,35 and second, a letter to Skeat in 1890 appears from someone he was attempting to recruit as a manuscript assistant.36 The

32 For example, Skeat Archive 4/9 includes a transcript from Bodleian Library MS 16 in an envelope labelled from George Parker to Reverend Professor W. W. Skeat.
33 My thanks to Matthew Townend for pointing me in this direction. Skeat provides the information in his “Introduction” to *Series C. Original Glossaries*, English Dialect Society (London: Trübner, 1881).
34 According to the editor, Miss A. F. Parker transcribed the relevant manuscript in 1890 “under the direction of her father, Mr. George Parker, senior assistant in the Bodleian Library. My sincere thanks are due to her for the fidelity and skill with which she accomplished a difficult task”: see *John Bale’s Index of British and Other Writers*, ed. Reginald Lane Poole with the help of Mary Bateson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), xxvi.
35 Box 4.18. E. Brock seems likely to be Edmund Brock, who edited the “Alliterative Morte d’Arthur” as *Morte Arthur, or The Death of Arthur*, EETS o.s. 8 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1871), and other texts as well. Andrew Breeze is investigating Brock’s work.
36 The letter is at 17/3, and the proposal appears to have been to collate a transcription with four other manuscripts. The writer, in Vienna, provides Skeat with the hourly rate to be charged, and an estimate of the time the job would take. One example of the other material in the archive is a notebook with Q&A materials by four women (Miss M. Ellis, Miss C. Ellis, Miss Douglas and Miss Thomas) on various medieval topics, each answer lasting a couple of pages, and then notes by Skeat on the authorship of various medieval texts. The notebook is at Skeat Archive 17/9. The women seem to have been students.
Skeat atelier, then, included a broad range of individuals who completed the transcriptions for Skeat, after he had identified and taken notes on the manuscripts.

Next, there is the participation of Skeat’s own family. The Skeat archive includes a considerable number of envelopes addressed to Mrs. Skeat, some from Oxford University Press with stamped indications that proofs are included. It seems likely that Skeat’s wife organized, and probably participated in, proofreading. Proofs went to her directly. Elsewhere, Skeat thanks his daughter, Miss Clara L. Skeat, for preparing an index of words for his The Science of Etymology. Several packages of proofs and other materials in the archive are also addressed to “Dr. B. M. Skeat,” with the same address in Cambridge as Skeat himself. This is Bertha Marian Skeat, Skeat’s first child, born in 1861. She was a student at Cambridge in the mid-1880s and completed her examinations in medieval and modern languages. She was not, of course, permitted to take a degree or to enter for an advanced degree at Cambridge. She appears to have obtained a teaching certificate in Cambridge, and a doctorate in Zurich, and later co-founded a school for girls, Balio School, in Sedbergh. Her thesis at Zurich was an edition of the Middle English The Lamentatyon of Mary Magdalyne, so she was well qualified as a medievalist. Proofs and other materials were also posted to her in Sedbergh, and some materials were mailed by her from Sedbergh, so she did some of the family work even while headmistress of a school. She appears to have handled issues of images and permissions, for the press addressed material along these lines specifically to her. In later life, Bertha continued her work in the family business, even publishing some work in the annals of the English Dialect Society. She never married and was buried beside her parents.

Skeat was apparently very much opposed to allowing women to study at Cambridge, stating that “[e]ven the B.A. degree would enable them to take 5 books at a time out of the University Library ... I am entirely opposed to the

37 For example 2/3 has Skeat’s edition of Chaucer’s Astrolabe, addressed to Mrs. Skeat at 16 Normanton Road.
38 Skeat Archive 13/4 proofs of The Science of Etymology. A note on p. x reads, “For the Index of Words, which I have carefully revised, I am indebted to my daughter, Clara L. Skeat.” The proofs themselves have occasional evidence of the Skeat scrawl, but quite a lot of very neat copperplate writing not only marking typographical errors but asking questions and probing the argument. I suspect that Clara did a lot of work on this volume.
39 Bertha M. Skeat published the thesis as The Lamentatyon of Mary Magdalyne (Cambridge: Fabb & Tyler, 1897). She dedicates the work “to my Father and my Mother” and in the short account of her life on the last page she lists “Professor the Rev. Dr. Skeat” first amongst the professors and teachers under whom she has studied and to whom “my thanks are specially due” (64).
admission of women to ‘privileges’ of this character.” Skeat’s attitude to the emancipation of women seems obvious here. But this view is contradicted by his treatment of his own family. Skeat had two sons (including Walter William, a prominent anthropologist noted for his work on the Malay Peninsula), and three daughters. All three of his daughters completed degree courses at Newnham College. Bertha, as noted above, also completed a doctorate at Zurich. The second daughter, Clara, is listed as a science teacher in 1901, and she continued to live in the Skeat home at 2 Salisbury Villas (today 27 Station Street) in Cambridge into her late thirties. The third daughter, Ethel Skeat, became a noted geologist, receiving a doctorate late in life from Trinity College Dublin for her contributions in the field. Skeat was also a founding member of a society pursuing the higher education of women at Cambridge, and he taught students at the nascent Newnham College as a member of its committee of management. Like his friend Henry Sidgwick, the principal founder of Newnham, Skeat may not have been a feminist and he certainly held contradictory views about the education of women, but his daughters probably did have his financial and emotional support in order to complete degree programs and work independently.

Michael Lapidge, in a fine study of Skeat, comments that his edition of the saints’ lives has not been superseded, and notes that “[i]t is rumoured that a large team of scholars is now contemplating the Herculean task which Skeat undertook and brought to completion by himself.” Although in a footnote Lapidge does refer to Miss Gunning and Miss Wilkinson, he has significantly overstated Skeat’s accomplishment here. This edition was not the product of one individual, but the work of the Skeat atelier. Skeat appears to have requested the destruction of all his personal papers and letters after

40 Skeat made the comments in a letter to Henry Sidgwick in June 1887, now in the Newnham College archives. I have not seen the letter, but it is much quoted (and the quotations vary significantly): see, for example, Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge: A Men’s University—Though of a Mixed Type* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), 89.


42 See *The Englishwoman’s Review of Social and Industrial Questions* 17 (January 1874), 42 and 79. I did not find Skeat’s name in the lists of those permitting women to attend their lectures, however. See also Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Newnham: An Informal Biography* (London: Faber, 1936), 91.

his death. There are scattered references to his sons ripping and tearing up all his correspondence. No doubt the evidence identifying Miss Gunning and Miss Wilkinson was there lost. One elegant handwritten translation of an Old English sermon survives in the Skeat Archive, which looks to be a version of Wulfstan’s sermon on the First Sunday in Lent, and could perhaps have been completed by any member of the Skeat family, or by Miss Gunning or Miss Wilkinson. Miss Gunning is always listed as being of Cambridge, but Miss Wilkinson is initially of Cambridge and later of Dorking. They are given as together contributing between 5,000 and 8,000 quotations for the first two letters of the New English Dictionary, and elsewhere a Miss J. E. Wilkinson and Miss Gunning of Cambridge are cited by J. A. H. Murray as reading books for the dictionary and extracting 7,500 quotations (which may well be the same accomplishment). The two women are unusual in almost always being listed together, and they also always seem to have done a great deal of work. Skeat was lucky to have them in his atelier, along with at least three women from his own family, and an extended group of transcribers and helpers he recruited through colleagues and friends. The surviving notebooks and materials in his archive clarify that his notes on etymology, his etymological dictionary, and his work on dialect all tend to be in his own hand. So also are notes on manuscripts and on which texts appear in particular manuscripts; it seems clear that he often did go through manuscripts in order basically to catalogue them, to list their contents for transcription, but only rarely to transcribe them himself. He found the materials, organized their transcription and translation, wrote introductions, and wrote the separate books and dictionaries about the English language that were his own genuine and individual contribution. Somehow, in future references to these materials, we will have to find a way to reference the Skeat atelier for works like the saints’ lives and the Chaucer and Piers Plowman editions.

44 The archivists at King’s College told me that the family went through the archive and eliminated a lot of material, fulfilling Skeat’s wishes. They did not provide a reason.
45 The document is item 16/1 in the archive.
46 I made some preliminary efforts to identify these women, and found some tantalizing hints, but was really not successful. More research, given the stability of their locations, would repay the effort. Daniel Thomas provided me with the evidence of an anonymous reviewer of the edition of Ælfric’s Lives of Saints who never mentions Skeat but focuses entirely on the work of Miss Gunning and Miss Wilkinson in the British Quarterly Review 75 (1882): 259.
Elise Charlotte Otté (1818–1903)

Elise Otté offers an entirely different paradigm for analysis: she was the strong-minded half-Danish stepdaughter of Benjamin Thorpe. She appears to have found her work of preparing his Old English scholarship for him so annoying that in 1840 she left England for America to build a better life for herself. Some years later she briefly returned to work for him, but she then moved to St. Andrews in Scotland to work on scientific research, and she established her own research agenda, writing books on the history and culture of Scandinavia. For her, however, we have no archival materials to explore, and only the evidence of her life and publications, and what others said in print about her. Our principal source on her connection to Thorpe is Edmund Gosse, the poet and art critic who had deep connections to Scandinavian materials. His obituary of her, published in *The Athenaeum* on 2 January 1904, is our only direct source for Elise Otté as doing significant amounts of work on Thorpe’s publications in Old English. We have some corroborating evidence that she heavily criticized her stepfather and found his regime onerous, both in her sudden departure for America and in an addendum to Gosse’s obituary published by a woman who knew both Otté and Thorpe, E. S. Day. The story is an interesting one and will reward investigation beyond that provided here.

Otté was the daughter of a Danish father and an English mother, so she was bilingual from a young age. Her father died in Santa Cruz in the Danish West Indies when she was very young, and her mother returned to Denmark, where she met and married Benjamin Thorpe, who was there to study Old English with Rasmus Rask. There is extensive corroboration for Thorpe’s time in Denmark, which marked the beginning of his work in Old English (previously the only evidence we have about him is that he was a banker in Paris). He studied there for four years, and at the end of that time he published his translation of Rasmus Rask’s *Anglo-Saxon Grammar* in 1840.

48 Gosse wrote an obituary: “Miss Otté,” *The Athenæum* (2 January 1904), 15. I have not yet found other references to Elise Otté in Gosse’s very extensive publications; presumably he met her through his many Scandinavian contacts, though I can find no direct reference in, for example, *Sir Edmund Gosse’s Correspondence with Scandinavian Writers*, ed. Elias Bredsdorff (Gyldendal: Scandinavian University Books, 1960). Gosse’s extreme statements about the way Benjamin Thorpe oppressed and hounded his stepdaughter to do his work are somewhat refuted in some additional notes to the obituary sent in by E. S. Day, and published two weeks later, also in *The Athenæum* (16 January 1904), 82–83. Gosse’s views are reflected in the very useful website on Germanic Mythology at http://www.germanicmythology.com/scholarship/EliseOtte.html, accessed June 18, 2018. These views have recently been added to the Wikipedia entries for Benjamin Thorpe and Elise Otté.
1830. He also moved back to England with his new wife, the former Mary Otté, and his new stepdaughter Elise. Given that we have little outside information, it is perhaps worth noting that Elise Otté, aged twelve at the time of the move back to England, did not take her stepfather’s surname.

According to Gosse, Thorpe required his stepdaughter to learn several modern languages as well as Old English and Old Norse, and required that she help him with his scholarship. Since she was born in 1818, Otté was of an age to have been instrumental in Thorpe’s big publications in Old English in the late 1830s and 1840s, although Gosse unfortunately does not provide details. Thorpe published very heavily between 1830 and 1845, and since Gosse describes Elise Otté as helping him in his work from a “tender age,” it seems quite possible that she was involved in much of this work. Thorpe published mostly editions, the Junius manuscript in 1832, “Apollonius of Tyre” and his textbook for learning Old English in 1834, the Paris Psalter both prose and verse in 1835, the laws and institutes in 1840, gospels and also the Exeter Book in 1842, ten volumes of homilies from 1843–46, and so on. The workload is certainly a heavy one, made more explicable if Otté were carrying a significant portion of it. In 1840, as Gosse tells the story, she escaped, all the way to Boston. She studied physiology at Harvard, and her interest in science marks the rest of her life. We do have some independent corroboration of her activities at this point, from two of her diaries deposited with the John Quincy Adams archive in the Massachusetts Historical Society. In the materials with the archive she is listed as a private tutor who travels to New York and Canada with Adams and the Grinnell family in 1843. We have no authority other than Gosse for her decision to return to England and to her work with Thorpe, apparently in the mid-1840s, more specifically to help with the edition of the Old Norse poetic Edda (eventually published by Thorpe in 1866, although Gosse says 1856). The edition of the Edda may well have been in part her project, given her greater fluency in the relevant languages.

Gosse contends that about 1849 she escaped Thorpe again, this time to work with the Welsh physician George Edward Day when he accepted the Chandos Professorship of Anatomy at St. Andrews University in Scotland. From this point, we have excellent outside corroborating evidence for Otté’s independence and excellence as a scholar. She began publishing under her own name, notably with concise grammars of Danish and Swedish, and two

49 The Massachusetts Historical Society online catalogue ABIGAIL describes this as two volumes in a box, the “Elise Charlotte Otte Diary, 1843,” http://balthazaar.masshist.org/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First, accessed February 20, 2022.
histories of Scandinavian countries. She also translated and published works by several Scandinavian and German scientists, including Alexander von Humboldt. One further corroborating piece of evidence is available in this subject area as well: Benjamin Thorpe began work on a translation of part of Johann Martin Lappenberg’s history of England in 1834, but did not complete and publish the work until 1845, when Otté had returned.⁵⁰ After his death in 1870, Otté prepared a second edition of this work, and her prefatory “Note” suggests very close knowledge of what Thorpe included and discarded; note also her own inclusion of that discarded material, as well as revisions and the creation of chapters. The new edition is described on the title page as revised by E. C. Otté, and it was published in 1881.⁵¹ This volume is the only one I can find of Thorpe’s extensive œuvre in which Otté’s name appears anywhere; notably, it was published after his death, and could not have been published without Otté’s revisions. Moreover, although she is careful to be entirely calm and precise in her comments about materials left out and put in the previous version, the very fact that Otté comfortably alters the material in the translation suggests both her mastery of the material and her disagreement with Thorpe about its presentation.

More work needs to be done on Otté and her career as a translator and as unacknowledged assistant for her stepfather. There are problems with Gosse’s obituary, given the very excessive and overblown nature of his claims, and given his own career as a polemic poet and thinker.⁵² He seems to have used only hyperbole to describe Thorpe’s “tyranny” and his “oppression” of his stepdaughter, forcing her to aid in his work. After all, she did choose to return to Thorpe’s home after she trained as a physiologist at Harvard, and after she had earned her own living as a private tutor for some years. Moreover, E. S. Day, the daughter of George Edward Day (Otté’s employer for her scientific work for some decades), corrects many points in Gosse’s rather tendentious obituary, including his misunderstanding about the group of scientists that Otté worked with in Scotland, her parentage and

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⁵⁰ Johann Martin Lappenberg, *A History of the Anglo-Saxon Kings*, trans. Benjamin Thorpe (London: John Murray, 1845). Thorpe’s “Translator’s Preface” provides the information about when he started the work. It is certainly the case that when he started the work Elise Otté was in his house, but 1844 would be early for her return to England even according to Gosse’s timeline.


age at the time of her death, and where she first lived in England as a young child. Day states that Otté did not live with Thorpe when she emigrated to London with him and with her mother (which seems unlikely on the face of it since she was at best twelve), and she also argues against Gosse’s claims with respect to the state of Otté’s health. On this point she states that Otté did not suffer back injuries from nursing Day in his last years but rather had a spinal curvature which developed decades previously. She finishes with comments on Benjamin Thorpe, her “dear old friend”:

A bookworm and an oddity he certainly was, but he was much more than that. I visited him and his charming wife from 1862 until the time of his death; and whatever his stepdaughter found him, to me he was the kindest of hosts, making me free of his library, and giving up many hours in order both to interest and please me. It is not every old scholar of over eighty who will take pains to make learning beautiful in the eyes of a schoolgirl, as I then was.53

On Otté, therefore, some further research seems necessary to me. The trustworthiness of Edmund Gosse is a point to pursue, since George Edward Day’s daughter found so very many errors of fact and interpretation in his obituary, which is our clearest evidence for Otté as helpmeet to her stepfather. One or two other notices of Otté’s death look simply to have been brief versions of Gosse’s comments, and are in no way original. The DNB entry is also a Gosse effort, although with some further material in its second iteration, especially on her Scandinavian knowledge. Certainly, later in life Otté demonstrates considerable historical knowledge of Denmark, Iceland, and Scandinavia more generally.

We do know from Elise Otté herself that she held strong views on suffrage, and the evidence of her independence of mind and movement corroborates her firm, if somewhat stilted stand. She published her comments in the 1879 volume *Opinions of Women on Women’s Suffrage*. Her highly logical argument on the matter takes up the question of those women who do not want suffrage and might see having the right to vote as “burdensome and distasteful.” First, she points out that similar comments might apply to men but “no one would for a moment pretend that any such individual contingencies could be advanced as reasons why Englishmen should not retain their constitutional right of having a voice in the election of those who legislate upon the questions which most closely affect the interests of

each individual member of the community." She states that should women suffer from this ignorance and indifference, then “it would seem the more imperative that they should be made participants with men in the exercise of those electoral duties and privileges to which Englishmen are wont to point" to claim their enlightened and superior state.54 Women should get the vote so that, like men, they can complain about the difficulty of exercising it prudently and judicially. Elise Otté was a sharp and independent thinker, listed in the suffrage volume as a figure from literature and the arts, and the author of *Scandinavian History* “& c.”—evidence that she saw herself as a serious academic.

On the question of whether Elise Otté should share in the publication credits of her stepfather Benjamin Thorpe, a firm conclusion cannot as yet be reached. She certainly had the languages and the historical knowledge, and it would appear that she did not speak well of Thorpe and felt that he did take advantage of her work. Certainly, for the first edition of the Lappenberg translation she should be listed as co-editor, given the certainty with which she produced the second edition and made her editorial decisions (although the counter-argument that Thorpe prevailed and presented the translation as he wanted it would certainly be available). But for some of Thorpe’s other works, further evidence is necessary. I think that evidence can be found, though not by me.

The business of scholarship involves sharing ideas and sometimes work of various kinds; most of us entrust our work to others before we even submit it for publication, in the hope that our more egregious errors will be caught for us, and our awkward syntactic and lexicographical moments highlighted. In revising this chapter, I was able to take advantage of two very careful readers and their queries, before the paper ever went into submission. We all have stories about situations in which insufficient credit was given for ideas and for words by one scholar to another whose work was borrowed or read unofficially. And perhaps we all recognize that the strong can prey on the weak. Many universities now have explicit policies about how graduate student work does not belong to the supervisor and the details of attribution must be clearly laid out. Certainly, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, where my first case study began with Anna Gurney, her behavior in stepping back and offering only a private circulation of her translation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was exemplary—perhaps too exemplary. Mary Conybeare was content to do

54 *Opinions of Women on Women’s Suffrage* (London: Central Committee of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage, 1879), 25.
a lot of work behind the scenes and as the devoted widow wanted only *J. J. Conybeare* on the title page of her husband's last work, also perhaps too exemplary an approach. Elise Otté, made of sterner stuff, took her opportunity to revise her stepfather's work and to get her name on the title page, although her only opportunity came after his death, and it seems possible that she should have more credit for her accomplishments on Benjamin Thorpe's Old English editions. And Walter W. Skeat, the grand Victorian patriarch, acknowledges the work of others on his productions, but in prefaces and introductions and never on the title page. Were it not for those acknowledgments, we would not have the names of the women who did the lion's share of the work for his publications—so at least he recognized their contributions. But now, in the twenty-first century, we can do better than that.

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