

HROTSVIT OF GANDERSHEIM TENTH-CENTURY POET AND PLAYWRIGHT

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Hrotsvit of Gandersheim was a tenth-century Saxon poet, playwright and historian, the first Western writer to adapt classical dramatic form and verse to Christian themes, and the first Saxon poet. Her extant works, completed by 973, comprise eight legends, six plays, two epics and a short poem, all written in Latin verse.¹ There are also six other surviving writings, consisting of two prefaces, two dedications, a letter to her patrons and an explanatory note. The earliest and most complete text of Hrotsvit's work is a late 10th-to-early-11th-century copy discovered in 1494 in the monastery of St. Emmeram in Regensburg, one of the premier 10th-century intellectual centers. It was found by Conrad Celtes, the leading German humanist of the time, who later published it in 1501 in Nuremberg.² It is thought to have been sent there by Gerberga, Hrotsvit's abbess. There are also several extant 12th and 13th-century copies of selections of her writings.³

Although there is no recorded influence on later medieval literature, there is reason to believe that her work was an inspiration to young women writing poetry in Regensburg in the 11th and 12th centuries.⁴ The preservation of Hrotsvit's work at St. Emmeram, an educational center and one of the most important sites of medieval illuminated manuscript production,⁵ surely afforded students, scribes and artists the opportunity to read her work.

After the 1501 publication, interest in Hrotsvit's work increased. There are 3 surviving 16th-century manuscripts, one each in Latin, German and Hungarian. Extant editions of various works printed in Germany include 2 from the 16th century, 3 from the

17th century and 7 from the 18th century. Two plays were published in England in 1793, and the first French translation of her plays appeared in 1835. Her works continued to be published in German, French, English, Hungarian, Italian and Dutch throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.⁶

Hrotsvit (c.935-1000) lived at the Benedictine Abbey of Gandersheim, established in 852 by the Saxon aristocratic ancestors of the 10th-century Ottonian dynasty. Abbesses were traditionally drawn from the royal family; Hrotsvit's abbess was Gerberga, niece of Emperor Otto I.⁷ Based in the northern province of Saxony, the Ottonians ruled Germany after the collapse of the remnants of the Carolingian dynasty at the end of the ninth century. After quelling many uprisings, some led by his own family, extending his rule into Italy, defeating the Hungarian Magyars in 955, and pledging military defense of the papacy, Otto I was crowned emperor by the pope in 962. His son and grandson, Otto II and Otto III, succeeded him as emperor, inheriting family insurrections and sustaining revolts by Slavic tribes and a crushing defeat by Saracens in 982 in southern Italy. Otto III died in 1002, ending the Ottonian dynasty.⁸ While the Ottonian period was hardly peaceful, the revival of a Western Christian empire, with its strong connection between Germany and Italy, created an intellectual and artistic renaissance that nurtured the talent of Hrotsvit.

Papal dependency allowed Otto I to extend his hegemony over the German Church. He established bishoprics, had clerics drawn from the high nobility and legitimized the widespread practice of bishops' performance of secular service for the crown. Indeed, his brother Bruno was simultaneously Duke of Lotharingia and Bishop of Cologne.⁹ Gandersheim, established by Otto's ancestors, was a royal abbey, directly

responsible to him, rather than the Church. As such, it enjoyed unprecedented independence. “In 947, Otto I freed the abbey from royal rule and gave the abbess the authority to have her own court of law, keep her own army, coin her own money and hold a seat in the Imperial Diet.”¹⁰

Hrotsvit’s status as a canoness at Gandersheim afforded her far more freedom than a cloistered nun. A canoness did not renounce the secular world; rather, she could keep her property, retain servants and remain a respected member of her family.¹¹ Daughters of Saxon nobility were sent to Gandersheim to be educated alongside Ottonian princesses. There they studied scripture and hagiography, were schooled in the liberal arts and read classical literature. Otto I’s enthusiasm for building a court library and expanding the libraries in his abbeys brought a far wider selection of classical works into the north than previously available.¹² In this atmosphere of royal protection, superior scholarship, and freedom from political and episcopal domination, Hrotsvit wrote. She treasured her window of opportunity for self-expression and penned 10th-century Europe’s most original synthesis of secular and spiritual themes.

Hrotsvit’s erudition is evident in her writings. Her first book is a collection of eight legends, or hagiographic poems, seven written in dactylic hexameter, the verse of classical poetry. Her first poem, *Maria*, presents the life of the Mother of Christ and is based on the apocryphal Pseudo-Evangelium of Matthew. The second poem, *Ascensio*, on Christ’s ascension, is drawn from the Latin translation of a Greek narrative. Her third poem, *Gongolf*, is based on the legend of an eighth-century Frankish knight. The fourth, *Pelagius*, is an original account of the martyrdom of a tenth-century Spanish saint, executed by the Caliph of Cordoba. Hrotsvit based her poem on an interview with an

eyewitness. The fifth legend, *Theophilus*, and the sixth, *Basilus*, both based on Latin translations of the *vitae* of Greek saints, are remarkable because they inaugurate the Faustian tradition in the West. Sinners sell their souls to Satan and are redeemed by repentance. Her seventh poem, *Dionysius*, and her eighth, *St. Agnes*, recount the martyrdoms of these early Christians. *Dionysius* is based on a ninth-century French source, and *St. Agnes* on a fourth-century Latin account.¹³

The wide scope of her subjects and sources, from early Christian apocrypha through tenth-century Spain, is noteworthy because tenth-century hagiographers usually wrote about local saints:

Every Christian community seemed to want a written life of a saint that best represented it and with whom it could identify...The hagiographer therefore referred to saints' involvement with the history of a particular city or town.¹⁴ By not limiting herself to provincial subjects, Hrotsvit demonstrates the range and depth of her interests, her very privileged education, and her access to an extensive library. It is unknown at what age she entered Gandersheim, but her mastery of classical poetry and the relative sophistication of her first work, the legends, suggest that her education at Gandersheim began in childhood. Since royal convents admitted only the daughters of the aristocracy, we can also assume that Hrotsvit was of noble descent.¹⁵

A transitional note between the legends and her plays affords us a glimpse of her life and personality:

I found all the material I have used in this book in various ancient works by authors of reputation, with the exception of the story of the martyrdom of St. Pelagius, which has been told here in verse. The details of this were supplied to me by an inhabitant of the town where the Saint was put to death. This truthful stranger assured me that he had not only seen Pelagius...face to face, but had been a witness of his end. If anything has crept into my other compositions, the accuracy of which can be challenged, it is not my fault, unless it be a fault to have reproduced the statements of unreliable authorities.¹⁶

Her interview of a stranger from Cordoba, probably the Caliph's ambassador to the Ottonian court, could have occurred at Gandersheim or at the court itself,¹⁷ indicating the license she had to receive visitors and/or appear at court. She tells us that her other sources are ancient works by reputed authors, and that if the accuracy of her work can be challenged, it is not her fault, but that of unreliable authorities. Here, she indicates that authors of renown and/or later translators may have written inaccurate accounts. That Hrotsvit trusts her own contemporary source more than ancient authorities indicates her sharp intellect and self-confidence.

A brief analysis of *Basilus* provides insight into Hrotsvit's theology.¹⁸ Basilus, a fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, personifies the goodness and power of Christ on earth by defeating Satan in a physical and verbal struggle for the soul of a servant who has fallen in love with his master's daughter. The young woman has been pledged to cloistered virginity by her father. The Devil causes the couple to "burn in mad desire" in order to turn Christians away from Christ. The young man renounces Christ in return for marriage to the daughter. After their marriage, the young woman, realizing that she has sinned, brings her husband to Basilus. The young man repents and is forgiven by the bishop. Its principal theme is the compassion of Christ for repentant sinners and Christ's victory over evil.

A further indication of Hrotsvit's intent is her characterization of the young woman. While Basilus fights with Satan and has the ecclesiastical power to forgive the husband, she is the true hero of the poem. Although her heart is described as tender and fragile, she is not tempted by a pact with the Devil; it would be futile. When she realizes that she has been deceived, she bravely accepts responsibility and strives to help her

husband. She “put womanly weakness aside and summoned manly strength to her prudent heart,” bringing her husband to the bishop and confessing their communal sin. Thus, she is the conduit of God’s grace and mercy. One of the principal duties of medieval religious communities was praying for the salvation of the founding families, who were the first beneficiaries of intercessory prayers. As the Ottonian empire expanded, 36 religious houses for women were founded in Saxony between 919 and 1024.¹⁹ The heroine of *Basilisus* may have been a source of inspiration for the women at Gandersheim and perhaps elsewhere.

The motif of female weakness and divine strength is introduced in the legend’s prologue:

Scorn he should not render at the writer’s weaker
gender
Who these small lines had sung with a woman’s
untutored tongue
But rather should he praise the Lord’s
celestial grace.

While she asks her readers to focus on the Lord’s grace rather than on her gender, she strongly suggests that her talent is God-given and should be praised. She cleverly deflects any derision of her as a female writer with the preposterous claim that she is untutored. Anyone able to read Hrotsvit’s work would appreciate the difficulty of composing in dactylic hexameter and would especially recognize the irony of writing in classical heroic verse while claiming to be weak and uneducated.

In her preface to the legends, Hrotsvit shares her circumstances and motivation for writing:

As it is, I am in dire need/for the support and help of many indeed/especially because I lacked all confidence and strength when I first started/and these verses crafted/ as I was neither mature in years nor sufficient in learning./ Neither did I dare consult the discerning/and show my drafts to the wise/or ask them for advice/so as not to be prohibited from writing on account of my rusticity. Thus, I first began to compose in secret, all alone/ struggling to write, then destroying what was poorly done,/ trying to the best of my ability, and with all my might/to put together a text – be its merit ever so slight -/using the writings I was able to gather here, in our Gandersheim Abbey.

I was first taught by Riccardis, the wisest and kindest of teachers, and by others thereafter, who continued my education/and then, finally by my lady of high station/Gerberga of royal blood, my merciful abbess, under whose rule I now live...It was she, who, other authors concerning/continued my instruction/offering me an introduction/ to the works of those writers whom she herself studied with learned men.

However difficult and arduous and complex/metrical composition may appear for the fragile female sex,/I, persisting/ with no one assisting/still put together my poems in this little work/not relying on my own powers and talents as a clerk/but always trusting in heavenly grace's aid/for which I prayed,/and I chose to sing them in the dactylic mode so that my talent, however tiny, should not erode/that it should not lie dormant in my heart's recesses and be destroyed by slothful neglect's corrosion,/but that, struck by the mallet of eager devotion,/it bring forth a tiny little sound of divine praise...²⁰

This preface confirms her education under the tutelage of females, the availability of a library, connection to the Ottonian court and her determination to write in secret without consulting any scholars. She asserts that although prosody or versification may be difficult for a woman to master, she with God's help, has mastered it. She acknowledges her God-given talent and determination to ply it in praise of God.

Her second work, the six plays, are the first known Christian dramas. Three portray martyrdoms under Roman emperors; two, the rehabilitation of harlots by hermits; and one, the repentance and conversion of a young Roman man in love with a married Christian woman. In the preface, Hrotsvit indicates that she has imitated the comedies of Terence, a second-century B.C. Roman playwright. The six comedies of Terence²¹ portray the predicaments of young men trying to balance their relationships with courtesans, innocent maidens whom they have raped and impregnated, and disgruntled fathers who expect them to marry properly. It seems incongruous that a canoness in a tenth-century Benedictine institution would not only read, but also draw upon, this subject matter; yet, at the Ottonian court, knowledge of classical literature was the mark of a scholar, and the ability to compose in classical verse established one's intellectual reputation.²² In the preface to her six dramas, Hrotsvit explains her use of Terence:

Therefore I, the Strong Voice of Gandersheim, have not refused to imitate him in writing/whom others laud in reading,/so that in that selfsame form of composition in which the shameless acts of lascivious women were phrased/ the laudable chastity of sacred virgins be praised/within the limits of my little talent...I had to contemplate and give a rendition/of that detestable madness of unlawful lovers and of their evil flattery,/which we are not permitted even to hear. But had I omitted this out

of modesty,/I would not have fulfilled my intent;/neither would I have rendered the praise
of the innocent/as well as I could, because the more seductive the unlawful flatteries of
those who have lost their sense,/the greater the Heavenly Helper's munificence/and the
more glorious the victories of triumphant innocence are shown to be,/
especially/when female weakness triumphs in conclusion./ And male strength succumbs
in confusion.²³

The two plays most Terentian in subject matter, *Paphnutius*²⁴ and *Abraham*,²⁵
each tell the story of a prostitute. The two heroines, coached to atonement by saintly
monks, achieve redemption by bravely practicing severe asceticism. In *Paphnutius*,
Thais, the courtesan, is an agent of Satan:

For she is not satisfied to be leading
A few men to eternal damnation –
She is quick to win every man over with
The temptations of her beauty.
And drag him to damnation with her.

While Hrotsvit includes the traditional view of Eve/woman as responsible for the
temptation of gullible man, she also celebrates female strength. Thais is ultimately
victorious, having earned her entry to Paradise. She, not her lovers, has conquered
immorality.

A third play dealing with lust, *Calimachus*,²⁶ is a close adaptation of a legend in
the second-century apocryphal Acts of John.²⁷ The heroine, Drusiana, is both victim and
victor. As the wife in a celibate marriage, she is horrified by the unsolicited advances of
Calimachus, an attractive non-Christian. Although completely innocent, she prays for
and is granted death in order to avoid causing scandal and becoming the ruin of a young

man. After she and Calimachus are resurrected by John, Calimachus repents and converts to Christianity. Then Drusiana insists that Calimachus' accomplice be raised as well. John declares that God has given her the grace to do so; Drusiana prays and brings the man back to life. Although initially believing that she should sacrifice her life in order to prevent another's spiritual death, both in life and death, she is an instrument of salvation, the one graced by God to overcome evil. Hrotsvit's predilection for countering women's inability to overcome an assumed weakness is no more evident than here.

The theme of female fragility vanquishing male power underlies *Dulcitus*²⁸ and *Sapientia*,²⁹ Hrotsvit's dramas about early Christian martyrs. *Dulcitus*, named for the Roman governor who ordered the execution of Agape, Chione and Irene (Love, Purity and Peace), has been substantially developed beyond early Christian accounts of the martyrdom.³⁰ For example, Hrotsvit adds Emperor Diocletian as a character, and in debate with him, has the youngest, Irene, insolently refer to Roman gods and their worshippers as slaves. Hrotsvit also inserts an erotic component with a leering Dulcitus locking the three young virgins in a pantry so that he can visit them at will. Then follows Hrotsvit's most comical scene, wherein the love-crazed governor becomes covered with soot as he embraces pots and pans instead of the real objects of his lust. Just before dying, Irene taunts her executioner by charging that without the help of weapons, he cannot overcome a tender little virgin; and she defiantly warns him that he will merit hell. In these scenes, we see Hrotsvit's delight in leveling the pagan power of a Roman emperor, governor and soldier, while extolling the courage of young Christian women. We may even possibly see Hrotsvit, herself, in Irene because in her writing she uses the work of the Roman Terence to dramatize the victory of Christian ideals.

In *Sapientia*, Hrotsvit presents an even stronger dichotomy between “weak” Christian women and powerful Roman men. *Sapientia* (Wisdom) is the mother of three girls, Faith, Hope and Charity, ages 12, 10 and 8. Although the youngest of Hrotsvit’s heroines, they speak the most insulting and provocative words to authority figures in her dramas. Twelve-year-old Faith declares to the Emperor Hadrian: “It is your foolishness I deride, and I mock your stupidity.” In response to Hadrian’s sentencing her to immolation in a furnace, eight-year-old Charity fires back: “What an impotent judge, who cannot overcome an eight-year-old infant without the force of fire.” They are subjected to horrific tortures, yet bear them painlessly, drawing strength from their mother’s prayers and exhortations to be strong.

Sapientia’s knowledge is also a foil for Hadrian’s ignorance. When he asks the ages of her daughters, she responds with a long discourse on number theory based on the work of Boethius, a sixth-century Roman philosopher.³¹ When he admits to being perplexed, *Sapientia* praises the Creator for giving mankind the ability to understand science, thus affirming the rewards of belief in the true God. *Sapientia*’s delight in showing up the emperor intellectually reflects Hrotsvit’s pride in her own education and talent. By inserting sixth-century mathematics into a second-century dialogue, Hrotsvit cleverly underscores her dramatic license to showcase her intelligence and achievement. Here, we see Hrotsvit reflected in *Sapientia* as we did in *Irene*.

The strength, intelligence and piety of Hrotsvit’s heroines sharply diverge from the tenth-century Church’s opinion of women. In a pastoral letter of 966, Rather, Bishop of Verona, who for many years resided at the Ottonian court,³² wrote that no woman

should approach the altar or touch the cup of the Lord.³³ Atto of Vercelli directed that women should not bring offerings to the altar and that nuns could not carry incense, touch sacred vessels of holy vestments, but they could sweep the floor. Furthermore, Atto included a rule that learned and intelligent women should not presume to teach men.³⁴ As a dramatist and poet, Hrotsvit found a way to negotiate her immense talent through the maze of patriarchy. The “strong voice” of Gandersheim educated her audience in the worthiness of women and the rewards of Christian practice by packaging her lessons in artistic form and offering them in the traditional posture of female humility.

In her letter to the patrons of her book of plays, Hrotsvit writes:

To those imbued with learning and abounding in virtue, never jealous of others' success/but, as befits the truly wise, wishing others the best,/Hrotsvit of little learning and worth,/wishes everlasting joy and present mirth./ I cannot marvel enough at the extent of your laudable condescension and I cannot sufficiently requite your magnificent good will and your affection's generous magnitude/in worthy attestations of gratitude/on account of my own worthlessness, because you, who are profoundly nourished by the study of philosophy, and have long been the most outstanding among learned men, found the little work of a worthless woman worthy of your admiration,/and encouraging me with fraternal affection/you praised the Giver of the grace working through me. You judged me to have a little portion of literary knowledge, whose subtlety far surpassed my woman's intellect.³⁵

Here, she acknowledges the praise and encouragement of learned men, most probably court intellectuals, while disparaging her own talent, education, intelligence and worth.

In light of her status as the only playwright at the Ottonian court and its admiration of her work, Hrotsvit's abject self-deprecation must be viewed as deliberate irony. Indeed, she has indicated this in her characters. In *Dulcitus*, Diocletian refers to the three martyrs as “vile young women,” and Irene calls herself “a tender little virgin.” In *Sapientia*, Hadrian refers to the four heroines as “little women.” Just as these vile little women personify Hrotsvit's aim to present female weakness triumphing over confused

male strength, so too do Hrotsvit's creations triumph over patriarchal assumptions.³⁶ To describe her work, learning and worth as "little" is mischievous. She knows that she is creating a totally new art form and draws attention to this through absurdly excessive derogation.

Although Hrotsvit draws encouragement from her patrons, she recognizes that the wellspring of her inspiration and self-assurance is God's grace:

I do not deny that by the gift of the Creator's grace I am able to grasp certain concepts the arts concerning/because I am a creature capable of learning,/but I also know that through my own powers, I know nothing./ I also know that God gave me a sharp mind...and that, thus, the Giver of my talent all the more justly be praised through me,/the more limited the female intellect is believed to be./ This alone was my intention in writing, my only thought;/this alone was the reason why my work was wrought.³⁷

Here she tells her patrons that it is her calling to glorify God through her work. She recognizes that her sharp mind and creativity are God's gifts and that she must use these gifts to praise the divine Giver. With a characteristic twist, she asserts that the more limited the female intellect is assumed to be, the more God is praised through her work.

She also draws inspiration for some of her characters from Christ, explaining in her preface to the plays that she preaches "Christ's glory and strength as it works through His saints to the extent he grants me the ability to do so."³⁸ We clearly see Christ in the female martyrs, in the resurrected Drusiana and Calimachus, and in Abraham's and Paphnutius' rescue of sinners. While Hrotsvit does not specifically refer to the Holy Spirit in her explanatory writings, she does acknowledge that grace works through her, thus indicating that she believes her work is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

It is quite a stretch for Christian women embarking on the 21st century to fully appreciate the effort of a Saxon woman striving one millennium ago to assert her voice as

strong and valid. Yet, there are many parallels between Hrotsvit and us. We share the privilege of education, the self-assurance that comes from thinking for ourselves and the discernment that God's Holy Spirit works in humankind apart from gender. Hrotsvit met her challenges on her own terms with self-confidence, perseverance and humor. We, one thousand years later, must do the same.

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¹ Katherina Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), p. 2, 9.

² Anne Lyon Haight (ed.), *Hrowsitha of Gandersheim* (New York: Hrowsitha Club, 1965), p. 42-43.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 43-46.

⁴ Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), p. 83.

⁵ Timothy Reuter (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999), p. 225.

⁶ Haight, p. 47-77.

⁷ Wilson, p. 5-7.

⁸ Historical background is from Reuter, p. 233-266.

⁹ Ibid., p. 252-253.

¹⁰ Wilson, p. 6.

¹¹ Heinrich Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century*, trans. Patrick J. Geary (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 227, 230.

¹² Reuter, p. 189.

¹³ Sources and descriptions of Hrotsvit's legends are taken from Wilson, p. 9-10 and Eleanor Duckett, *Death and Life in the Tenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 255-259.

¹⁴ Reuter, p. 197.

¹⁵ Wilson, p. 5.

¹⁶ Haight, p. 18-19.

¹⁷ Dronke, p. 57.

¹⁸ The translation is by Wilson, p. 21-28.

¹⁹ Fichtenau, p. 148-149.

²⁰ Wilson, p. 19-20.

²¹ Palmer Bovie (ed., trans.), *Terence: The Comedies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

²² Fichtenau, p. 291.

²³ Wilson, p. 41.

²⁴ Larissa Bonfante (trans.), *The Plays of Hrotswitha of Gandersheim* (Oak Park: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1986), p. 105-146.

²⁵ Wilson, p. 66-80.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 54-65.

²⁷ This legend can be found in Bernhard Pick, *Apocryphal Acts of Paul, Peter, John, Andrew and Thomas* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1909), p. 161-175.

²⁸ Wilson, p. 45-53.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 81-97.

³⁰ One account can be found in Herbert Musurillo (trans.), *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 281-293.

³¹ Wilson, p. 85.

³² Dronke, p. 56.

³³ Fichtenau, p. 105-106.

³⁴ Suzanne Wemple, "Women from the 5th to the 10th Century," *A History of Women in the West*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1992), p. 190.

³⁵ Wilson, p. 43.

³⁶ Dronke, p. 78.

³⁷ Wilson, p. 44.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 42.