


# The “Mighty Voice of Gandersheim”: Hrotsvit’s Didactic Motivation in Her Plays

## “Gandersheim’in Aziz Sesi”: Hrotsvit’in Oyunlarındaki Eğitici Amaç

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### Abstract

The monastic author of the Saxon Imperial abbey of Gandersheim, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim was a notable woman playwright during the reign of Otto I, who had been crowned Roman emperor by the Pope in 962. Hrotsvit subverts notoriously misogynistic medieval literature and the negative literary depiction of women in her plays composed in the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. She substitutes the masculine tradition and pagan writers’ themes of shameless indecency of lascivious women with saintly women who verbally and intellectually defeat the male oppressors. Transfiguring the earlier depictions, she is devoted to evangelizing of the world and committed to reorienting the dramatic representation of women. Furthermore, she identifies herself with an educator and moralist and discloses an assertion of intention to constructs a didactic persona. This study analyzes Hrotsvit’s plays *Dulcitus* and *Sapientia* by discussing the ways in which Hrotsvit defies the literary conventions in male-authored narratives through her female characters, who simultaneously defy and subvert the male authority through rhetorical skills, moral and intellectual ability, and Christian wisdom. The aim of this study is to show that Hrotsvit elevates the depiction of women and to serve God and spiritual ends by writing.

**Keywords:** Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, medieval ecclesiastical literature, didactic literature, hagiography, female martyrdom

### Öz

Saksonya İmparatorluk manastırı Gandersheim’in manastır yazarı Gandersheimli Hrotsvit, 962 yılında Papa tarafından Roma imparatoru olarak taç giydirilen I. Otto’nun hükümdarlığı dönemindeki ilk kadın oyun yazarıdır. Hrotsvit 10. yüzyılın ortalarında yazdığı oyunlarda, kadın düşmanı olarak bilinen Ortaçağ edebiyatını ve kadınların olumsuz edebi tasvirini altüst eder. Eril geleneği ve pagan yazarların şehvet düşkünü utanmaz kadın betimlemelerini, erkek zalimleri sözel ve entelektüel olarak alt eden aziz kadınlarla değiştirir. Bu tasvirleri dönüştürerek, kendini dini öğretmeye ve kadınların dramatik temsilini yeniden inşa etmeye adanır. Dahası, kendisini bir eğitmen ve ahlakçı olarak tanımlar ve didaktik bir kişilik inşa etme niyetini eserlerinde açıkça ortaya koyar. Bu çalışma, Hrotsvit’in *Dulcitus* ve *Sapientia* adlı oyunlarını inceleyerek yazarın retorik becerileri, ahlaki ve entelektüel yetenekleri ve Hristiyan bilgeliğini kullanarak otoriteye karşı çıkan kadın karakterler aracılığıyla erkek egemen edebi geleneklere nasıl meydan okuduğunu tartışmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Hrotsvit’in kadın tasvirini yücelttiğini ve yazarak Tanrı’ya ve ruhani amaçlara hizmet ettiğini göstermektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Gandersheimli Hrotsvit ortaçağ kilise edebiyatı, didaktik edebiyat, hagiografi, kadın şehitler

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## Introduction

The monastic author of the Saxon Imperial abbey of Gandersheim, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim is considered as the “*first poet of Saxony, first female German poet, first female German historian, first dramatist of Germany and of Christianity an only female writer of the extant Latin epic*” (Gold, 1997, p. 42). Identified as the first woman playwright, her active authorship was likely between 960 and 975 during the reign of Otto I, who had been crowned Roman emperor by the Pope in 962. Her abbess was Otto I’s niece Abbess Gerberga II, whom she affectionately mentions as a “*patroness and authorizer*” and notable supporter of her writing (Berschin, 2013, p. 23). Living in Gandersheim, an imperial abbey of canonesses, and having close connections with the upper nobility help Hrotsvit build a profound historical and political knowledge and understanding. Her relationship with Ottonian dynasty and familiarity with the imperial politics encourage her to address some of her poems to Otto I and Otto II as an act of homage and define the subject matter— the clash of empire and Christian cause through the lives of the martyrs— in her plays composed in the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Hrotsvit subverts notoriously misogynistic medieval literature in which women are traditionally depicted as “*self-indulgent, lustful, treacherous, domineering, greedy, shrewish, prone to sin, and, most importantly, a constant danger to man’s salvation unless they are saints or chaste women in monastic orders*” (Wilson, 1985, p. 18). Hrotsvit feels compelled to respond to the negative literary depiction of women by asserting her purpose in the Preface to the Plays:

*“There are many Catholics, and we cannot entirely acquit ourselves of this charge, who prefer the vanity of pagan books on account of the elegance of their style, to the usefulness of sacred scripture. There are also others, who, devoted to sacred writings and spurning pagan works, yet read the (figmenta) phantastic fiction of Terence frequently, and while they delight in the sweetness of his style, they are stained by the knowledge of [exposure to] wicked events. Wherefore I, the Strong Voice of Gandersheim, did not refuse to imitate in composition him whom others are wont to read, so that in the same form of writing in which the shameless acts of lascivious women have been sung, the laudable chastity of Christian women may be celebrated according to the ability of my poor talent.”* (1972, p. 235)

Concerned about Terence’s sweet style that becomes a grave danger to the readers and a mask for his wickedness by telling “*fables, fictions*” (*figmenta*) rather than truth, Hrotsvit is determined to substitute the false depraved and weak women in Terence’s plays who are “*seductresses, usually harlots, almost invariably involved in love-affairs, frequently avaricious, and, unless married, weak*” with strong, chaste, virtuous, Christian women “*depicted as catalysts, not of perdition, but of salvation and betterment for their husbands, lovers, or would-be lovers*” (Wilson, 1985, p. 21, 19). She desires to supersede Terence, who “*educates badly*” (Zampelli, SJ, 2013, p. 152), and substitute the masculine tradition and pagan writers’ themes of shameless indecency of lascivious women with “*saintly and virginal women triumphing over the temptations of the flesh*” (Wilson, 1998, p. 65). Placing her own work in conversation with others, Hrotsvit explores the feminine ideals of excellence against the fictional denigration of women.

Justifying her decision to stylistically imitate Terence, yet embracing a different focus than that of him, Hrotsvit is committed to reorienting the dramatic representation of women. Addressing her audience in the Preface to the Plays, she claims that she will not “*refrain / from preaching Christ’s glory and strength as it works through His saints to the extent that He grants [her] the ability to do so*” (Wilson, 1998, p. 42). She assures the reader that it “*would be wrong: to deny God’s gracious gift to one; / and to pretend to have received a gift when one has received none*” (Wilson, 1998, p. 43). Deifying the mainstream idea of women’s supposedly intellectual inferiority through her “*little work,*” she states, “*The Giver of my talent all the more justly be praised through me, / the more limited the female intellect is believed to be*” (Wilson, 1998, p. 44). Expressing explicitly her desire to write, she underlines Christian responsibility and encourages her readers to follow the examples set by her. The devotion to the apostolic mission undoubtedly shapes her literary career within the Christian tradition.

Offering her authorial labor to the service of God, Hrotsvit calls herself “*Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis*” (*the “Mighty Voice of Gandersheim”*) in the Preface to the Plays,” which presents her as a precursor of Christ (Wailes & Brown, 2013, p. 3). Undertaking the task of reorienting the theatrical writing, though her intention was not production or presented on a stage, yet her plays were read aloud at court (Dronke, 1984, p. 57), she identifies herself with an educator and moralist and discloses an assertion of intention to construct a didactic persona. Transfiguring the earlier depictions, she is devoted to evangelizing of the world and envisions an audience for recognition and response in her intellectual and social circle, particularly the canonesses at Gandersheim and the Ottonian court. Redeeming the theatrical form, Hrotsvit expects to cultivate an emotional response from the audience invited to praise God through genuine Christian living. I argue that she intends to defy

the literary conventions in male-authored narratives with *“the creative talent granted by God”* while her female characters simultaneously defy and subvert male authority through rhetorical skills, moral and intellectual ability, and Christian wisdom. Through the act of writing, Hrotsvit’s intention is twofold: to elevate the depiction of women and to serve God and spiritual ends by writing. Therefore, her literary and didactic ambitions are neatly combined in her writings. The variety of dialogues as a pedagogical form indicates Hrotsvit’s educational mission and instructive purpose. Discussing Hrotsvit’s didactic literary form, which is not dry and dull but vibrant and alive, this study examines how she challenges female image as her pedagogical strategy through extensive use of dialogue.

Scholarship has mostly focused on the celebration of virginity as a central theme in Hrotsvit’s plays, whereas the topic of didacticism and female endurance seem to have been of slight concern. Stephen Wailes (2006) argues that Hrotsvit’s plays are *“about sexual purity, virginitas”* (p. 2) while Judith Tarr (1991) notes the thematic center of the plays and legends is sexual purity defined as *“perpetual and triumphant virginity”* (p. 147). Gary Macy (2013) remarks that Hrotsvit clearly and constantly praises virginity and continence within marriage (p. 67) since as Lisa Verner (2023) emphasizes, *“the loss of [women’s] virginity could very well annihilate [the] hard-won identity as a bride of Christ”* (p. 51). On the other hand, Barbara Gold (1997) proposes that Hrotsvit’s plays have autobiographical elements, which reveal her personal experiences through female characters (p. 45). I suggest that Hrotsvit’s self-reflection indicates the desire for individuality and disconnectedness from her predecessors such as pagan Terence, or Augustine and guides her creative potential towards undermining the literary denigration of women as her *“project was to change the roles of women on the stage from negative ones to positive ones”* (Case, 1983, p. 535). As a canoness, she steps into a rhetorical space traditionally defined as masculine and reverses the misogynic discourse by reconstructing the depiction of woman within the monastic hierarchy of excellence. Thus, Hrotsvit’s dramas become a *“vehicle for the redefinition of women’s qualities, characters and motivations”* (Gold, 1997, p. 42). Blending her liturgical lifestyle with historically true legends about saints and martyrs and providing a unique feminine perspective, Hrotsvit creates an alternative literature in which the image of women is eminently elevated.

According to Juanita Feros Ruys (2008), *“[A] text can be considered didactic if it was created, transmitted, or received as a text designed to teach, instruct, advise, edify, inculcate morals, or modify and regulate behavior”* (p. 5). The author clearly identifies herself/himself with an educator, and creates a self-coherent didactic persona throughout the text. Constructing a highly didactic voice, the author has a deliberate attempt to teach by leading the reader to a specific direction. In the didactic literature of the Middle Ages, the nexus between textual advice and actual behavior is interpreted through the power of literature to guide. Hrotsvit embraces this approach and claims her didactic authority through her experience as a monastic life where she advises the Christian living by divinely messages. She embodies the moral and religious authority of a monastery to provide further exhortation to emulate the examples that are set before the reader to follow. Writing fulfills her obligation to spread the faith and valorize the moral and hagiographic truth.

Indebted to classical literature, Hrotsvit depends on apocryphal stories of Christ and the Apostles as well as martyrs’ legends to extend the faith through the overarching theme of Christian responsibility. In addition, she is fascinated by the history of the Roman Empire and adopts ancient texts and Christian source materials and refashions them in dramatic form within Ottonian history. For example, perceiving pagan people in the east and Muslim Kingdom of Spain as a political and religious threat, Hrotsvit relays on *“an [oral] account of the martyrdom of a young Spanish Christian at the order of Caliph Abd al-Rahman III in July 925”* to constructs *Pelagius* (Stevenson, 2013, p. 57). This strategy enhances the author’s authority as the writer by increasing her power of persuasion. Appropriating various ancient materials, she substitutes male heroism with female piety and wisdom. Women in Hrotsvit’s plays, *Dulcitius* (also known as *The Martyrdom of the Holy Virgins Agape, Chionia, and Hirena*) and *Sapientia* are the symbols of strengths and endurance, religious and moral fortitude, and Christian ascetic ideals. They refuse to yield to male desire, resist temptations, and persist on their Christian faith. By attributing heroic characteristics to Christian women, Hrotsvit *“recue[s] herself and the others of her gender from the perdition and obscurity to which they have been confined”* (Gold, 1997, p. 51). By doing so, Hrotsvit attempts to educate her audiences through the resilient female characters who are true Christians and strong believers. Their heroic defiance and endurance set an example for her audience since Hrotsvit emulates the desirable behavior. In this regard, her works have ascetic intentions and are didactic and dedicated to the edification of people as emphasized in the beginning of the Preface, Hrotsvit offers *“this little book [...] for correction and advice”* (Wilson, 1998, p. 46) and informs readers about her pedagogic motive in instructive literature.

### Dulcitius

*Dulcitius* was adopted from *The Acts of Christian Martyrs* which *“was recorded in the Fourth Century, based on historical*  
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*edicts of Diocletian and records of the trial and punishment of the women*" (Case, 1983, p. 538). The play depicts three Christian virgins— Agape (Love), Chionia (Purity) and Hirena (Peace) who defies pagan authorities with spiritual plight to the Christian faith. They are offered noble marriages by Emperor Diocletian if they renounce their faith. Their civic and religious participation is enforced by patriarchal desire; however, they reject secular, pagan marriage since their forthrightness stands in front of physical and spiritual violations. According to Maud Burnett McInerney (2003), the representation of the virgin-martyr in the work of Ambrose and Prudentius prior to Hrotsvit is a *"pure symbolic object, perfectly passive and perfectly silent"* (p. 11). Hrotsvit, on the other hand, subverts the similar tendency during her time with assertive women verbally expressing their allegiance to Christ. They are passionate and intellectual who *"defy [his] decrees and words"* (Wilson, 1998, p. 39). Agape fervently objects Diocletian's proposal, exclaiming, *"We cannot be compelled under any duress / to betray Christ holy name, which we must confess, / not to stain our virginity"* (Wilson, 1998, p. 45). She resists the male authority audaciously and confidently by asserting her loyalty to Christ. Furthermore, undermining the authority of the male ruler, Agape becomes the manifestation of female resistance and courage. However, Agape's *"renouncing the practices of ancient religion"* and *"follow[ing] the useless, new-fangled ways of the Christian superstition"* (Wilson, 1998, p. 46) is considered as madness and a threat by Diocletian. Rejecting the old order, Agape takes the role of a preacher and warns Diocletian about his blasphemous language. Diocletian dismisses Agape and Chionia and orders Hirena to *"bow [her] neck to the gods, set an example for [her] sisters, and be the cause for their freedom!"* (Wilson, 1998, p. 46). Hirena, however, questions his order saying: *"What dishonor is more disgraceful, / what disgrace is any more shameful/ than when a slave is venerated as a master?"* (Wilson, 1998, p. 46). Harassments of male tyrants to destroy female bodies only reiterate their weakness and despair in the face of female strength and endurance.

They are turned to the Roman functionary Dulcitus, captivated by their beauty, commands them to be taken to a pantry with a lustful intention. To abuse the virgins as he wishes, he enters the kitchen, yet instead of the virgins, he kisses pots and pans blackened himself with soot and is eventually beaten by the palace guards who mistake him for the devil. His impulse to rape them and uncontrolled sexual desire become self-destructive as he is punished by his wife's rejection, public ridicule, and disgrace. His failed rape attempt refers to the failure of the objectification of patriarchal desire. Ashamed of his failure and to regain his dignity, he orders women to be *"publicly stripped of all their clothes, / so that they experience similar mockery in retaliation for ours"* (Wilson, 1998, p. 49), and they too experience public humiliation in their nudity. But, the soldiers *"labor in vain"* and *"sweat without gain"* as the virgins' *"garments stick to their virginal bodies like skin"* while Dulcitus *"snores in his seat"* (Wilson, 1998, p. 49). He is foiled by heavenly intervention as the punishment cannot be carried out by the soldiers. Christian obedience and perseverance of the powerless are rewarded through the public humiliation of the powerful as Hrotsvit states:

*"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."*  
(Wilson, 1998, p. 41)

Humor that frustrates their formidable opponents operates as resistance. The virgins are handed over to the Count Sissinus who orders Agape and Chionia to be burned alive and Hirena's confinement in a brothel as a way of corporal and spiritual corruption. The dead virgins' bodies miraculously are not corrupted by the fire and remain completely intact as a divine answer to Agape's prayer before they are thrown into the fire. Once again, the male oppressors become the object of mockery.

Hrotsvit emphasizes the integrity of the soul versus the dissolution/violation of the body through the ordeals of the virgins as Wilson (1998) suggests, *"The attempted imprisonment, punishment, or annihilation result in liberation and the retention of the heroine's virginity"* (p. 61). The actual imprisonment is having a soul, which is blind with idolatry and surrounded by false gods. When Sissinus asserts, *"If you are so polluted in the company of harlots, you can no longer be counted among the virginal choir,"* Hirena stands strong, since for her, one cannot be guilty as *"unless the soul consents freely"* (Wilson, 1998, p. 51). The heartrending death of her sisters does not discourage Hirena who fearlessly utters, *"The more cruelly I will be tortured, / the more gloriously I'll be exalted"* and adds *"whatever punishment you design, / I will escape with help Divine"* (Wilson, 1998, p. 51). The excessive and brutal torments are ineffective and only facilitate Hirena's exaltation and increase her glory. Hirena *"shows herself to be made of tougher stuff than her male antagonists have anticipated, and she emphasizes the role reversal by attributing conventional feminine weakness to them"* (Newman, 1013, p. 298). Disappointed due to her resistance, Sissinus *"knew this before; / for on no possible score / can she be moved to adore [their] gods, nor can she be*



*broken by terror*" (Wilson, 1998, p. 51). On the way to the brothel, a stain upon chastity, two strangers, who are likely angels take her to a mountaintop which is inaccessible to Sissinus, thus he aims to "*string a bow, and shoot an arrow, and kill that witch!*" (Wilson, 1998, p. 52). Hirena joyfully announces Sissinus's defeat, exclaiming, "*Wretched Sissinus, blush for shame, and proclaim your miserable defeat because without the help of weapons, you cannot overcome a tender little virgin as your foe*" (Wilson, 1998, p. 52). Sissinus is blushed with shame and forced to remain on the lower part of the mountain while Hirena is exalted as a symbol of glorious courage and eternal blessedness. The eternal salvation as the medieval theology's emphasis is conveyed through the prayers of her. The honor and pride of the virgins are protected while pagan persecutors are mocked and humiliated. Furthermore, conventional feminine weakness is attributed to male antagonists while the political and social folly is underlined by Hrotsvit to show the futility of opposing God.

Hrotsvit juxtaposes the eternal place of Hirena and Sissinus through the color-coded comparison at the end the play. Hirena's death reminds us the Crucifixion of Christ while for Sissinus "*this is a cause to grieve, / because [he] shall be dammed in Tartarus for [his] cruelty, / while [she] shall receive the martyr's palm and crown of virginity; / thus [she] will enter the heavenly bridal chamber of the Eternal King, to whom are all honor and glory in all eternity*" (Wilson, 1998, p. 53). Referring to Tartarus, the deep abyss, and the dungeon of torment, Hrotsvit points out the punishments for evildoers. While Hirena is rewarded with eternal bliss, Sissinus's final destination is Tartarus referring to his eternal damnation. The closure of the play indicates that Christianity prevails Paganism and is approved by miracles of Virgins against evil pagans Diocletian, Dulcitus, and Sissinus.

Through the spiritual triumph of the virgins, Hrotsvit emphasizes the glorification of saintly life and Christian death and reconstructs the image of women by attributing heroic characteristic to the virgins who are defiant, smart, and articulate. They are outspoken, verbally defend themselves, and choose death and tortures over abandoning the Christian faith. Besides being virtuous and chaste, Hrotsvit's female characters also "*exhibit delightful verbal strength and power*" (Richmond, 2003, p. 136). In this respect, *Dulcitus* and *Sapientia* "*explicitly train the audience to embrace those values and follow the model presented in the performance*" (Classen, 2011, p. 242). Hrotsvit emphasizes the importance of submission to God and his orders and encourages women no matter how hard the situation, they should trust God with full heart. Praising the dedication to Christ, Hrotsvit shows that "*Martyrdom was essentially the subordination of the world to love of Christ*" (Wailles, 2013, p. 118). They achieve sanctity through martyrdom, and God's power inevitably confounds cruel, lecherous, and lascivious men.

### Sapientia

Appropriating the world of Roman antiquity as a central framework in her play *Sapientia*, Hrotsvit depicts the Christian persecutions under pagan emperors. In *Sapientia*, Hrotsvit does not emphasize sexual contamination but her emphasis is "*ideological*" (McNaughton, 1993, p. 11) as the corruption of Roman culture is due to the worship of malignant deities rather than Christian missionaries. Depicting the Emperor Hadrian's reign, the play presents the resolute Christian matrons as exemplary figures of moral and intellectual strength since they subvert the traditional gender stereotypes, and do not flinch in the face of oppression. As *Dulcitus* presents the conflict between pagan idolatry and Christianity, *Sapientia* is about a Roman matron who arrives to Rome with her three daughters, Karitas (Charity or Love), Spes (Hope), Fides (Faith), initially considered as a social and political threat for the state mainly because knowledge about their background is limited. Representing faith, hope, and charity, each sister as allegorical figures adamantly refuses to forswear her faith. *Sapientia* and her daughters use intellectual and verbal power which makes their opponents feel verbally and intellectually inferior as Spes states, "*Hand in hand, let us go and confound the grim tyrant*" when the girls are brought before the emperor (Wilson, 1998, p. 87).

The play opens with a theatrical conversation between the general Antiochus and the emperor Hadrian, a historical figure who situates the drama in time and space, about the threat to the peace of Rome. Antiochus affirms his loyalty and heroic service to Rome by stating to "*uproot immediately / and destroy entirely / whatever might harm the state, whatever might threaten its peace and tranquility*" and assuring Hadrian that "*whenever I discover anything that appears subversive or bring contention, / I do not hide it but bring it immediately to your attention*" (Wilson, 1998, p. 81). When Hadrian asks for a national security update, Antiochus informs him about "*a certain woman [who] arrived Rome, / not alone / but accompanied by her three little children*" (Wilson, 1998, p. 84), as a violation of political stability because of their religion. The emperor is beset by anxiety due to the enemies and asks in trepidation, "*Could the arrival of these three little girls possibly present a danger for the state?*" (Wilson, 1998, p. 84). Antiochus responds that a religious dissent is the most disruptive force for the harmony of civic peace. Rather than wars, invasions, or natural disasters, a religious opposition is considered the most disruptive force

against the civil concord.

They are right in their concerns since the woman subverts the established order and challenges the dominant male authority by gaining the trust and support of fellow women of the community. Antiochus reports how the woman “*exhorts [their] citizens and clients / to abandon the ancestral and ancient rites / and to convert to Christianity*” (Wilson, 1998, p. 81). Her religious ideals are shared and practiced by the Roman women as Antiochus proceeds, “*Our wives despise us so that they refuse to eat with us, / or even more to sleep with us*” (Wilson, 1998, p. 81). She primarily destroys patrilineal family arrangements. Estrangements of pagan husbands from the marital bed due to the new faith spreading like a disease in the society reveals anxieties about the potential dangers as the rulers Hadrian confirms, “*Nothing is graver, nothing more dangerous. The Roman Empire testifies to that fact, / infected everywhere by the moral plague of the Christian Sect*” (Wilson, 1998, p. 82). The rapid and unpredictable spread of Christianity is depicted through the analogy of a moral plague which defines the mother and her daughters as moral invaders and indicates the social impact of the religious conflict.

Roman women follow the teaching of the new woman and regulate marital relations by preferring continence to sexuality which is praised by Hrotsvit, who not only adopts but also imposes unequivocally the superiority of celibacy as the best form of Christian life, and this particular view of marriage as a virtuous alternative. Through the containment of female sexuality, she aims the promotion of celibacy in the society. Convert women, according to Hrotsvit, exemplify ideal female sexuality. Her disdain for sexuality within marriage shows that she reinforces the idea of spiritual rather than a cardinal marriage. This promotes Hrotsvit’s theology that abstinence from sex purifies not only body but also spirit. It is sacred and divine as well as subversive. Furthermore, women’s banishing their husbands from the marital bed is a proud assertion of autonomy in the family, the main component and the cosmos of the whole society. They take control of their bodies against secular and pagan patriarchs. Women who take vows of continence and reject sexual intimacy with their spouses in the domestic sphere represent unwavering Christian women standing against Paganism in the public sphere.

Fides, the eldest is tortured and beheaded first and severe tortures and beheading follow Spes and Caritas, while Sapientia is forced to watch the tortures. Their tormented bodies, however, are the manifestation of God’s grace, and Christian redemption rescues them from worldly degradation. Christian truth is opposed by political power, yet solidarity of Christian women is underlined by Hrotsvit as at the end of the play, when Sapientia brings her daughters’ remains to bury them with “*noble ladies*” and dies praying after forty days. The matrons who are converted to Christianity by Sapientia accompany in fulfilling an excruciating duty for a mother at the brutal site by giving her comfort and hope. Like Hrotsvit, Sapientia becomes an influential teacher and cultivates wisdom in a tight-knit community of women similar to the holy sisterhood within the walls of Gandersheim. Hrotsvit emphasizes the communal participation in the liturgy and uniformity of collective worship by underscoring the idea of building up a Christian community and pursuing the Christian ideal through communal maternal tenderness.

The struggle between Christianity and Paganism is illustrated through the opposition of female autonomy and masculine authority between the pagan husbands and Christian wives. It demonstrates how “*Sapientia’s matrifocal family lacking the pater familias of the ancient household, threatens the very nature of the patriarchal Roman state*” (Kline, 2004, p. 80). It is indicated that women can be the agents of progress and social transformation by embracing the ideals first, practicing it at home, and spreading the message to the society later. Shaping the morality of the society, the power of women and their potential of making the profound changes in the society are emphasized. Hrotsvit underlines woman’s spiritual and intellectual willingness of accepting novel ideas in Christianization of the nation since Roman women start questioning the ancestral and ancient rites of the Roman Empire. The disobedient wives against their pagan husbands indicate how Hrotsvit’s encourages continence within the marriage and the expansion of the Christian faith to the new souls and societies as a crucial responsibility.

Hrotsvit focuses on edification of society as well as individuals by depicting the emerging Christian community in conflict with the political power of paganism. Hrotsvit counters their assumptions and prejudices with her female characters who subvert the conventional roles allotted to women. They are tough, fearless, steadfast, and brave contrary to the accepted belief and representation of their image as weak, fragile, and delicate. She undermines the flaws attributed to women through Hadrian and Antiochus’s inability to comprehend the intellectual knowledge of Sapientia, who delivers a lecture as a form of feminine rhetorical power and wisdom when Hadrian asks about the girls’ ages, which confirms their lack of intelligence while revealing feminine scientific wisdom. It indicates that Christian women not only beat Pagan prosecutors and violate high-status male privilege with a strong spirit but also with subtle intellect and deep knowledge. Their embodiment of heroic qualities helps them ultimately triumph over their male persecutors through which Hrotsvit edifices

her audience about feminine excellence and Christian values over the male authority and Paganism.

### Conclusion

Being a well-educated member of a female community in Gandersheim, a wealthy and distinguished convent sustained by the imperial family, Hrotsvit in the role of the first woman playwright, plays an important role by demonstrating a new perspective through preaching and teaching. In the history of Western Theatre, her dramatic compositions perpetuate the Christian conversation between the author and audience. Drawing on a rich array of historical and contemporary resources, Hrotsvit confirms that Christendom must be defended and extended through literary and political efforts. Through role models who are diametrically opposed to those of prior male writers, she glorifies chastity trumping over male wickedness and presents diversified alternatives to the calumnious literary depictions of women in popular pagan literature. Imbued with Christian tradition, she inserts herself into the patriarchal and misogynist male world to ostensibly venerate women. She combats noxious effects of the misogynistic male authors by replacing female depravity with female virtue. Her method of teaching is informed by the experience of her own womanly existence to define the meaning and value of women's existence and experience. She sees herself as divinely gifted, empowered, and mandated to instruct and teach people the principles of Christianity. Her alteration of the canon under the domination of exclusive male authorship is revolutionary as she places women at the center of the action so that the male dramatic representation of women is radically reversed.

Hrotsvit reshapes medieval literature by redefining the representation of women with not only moral virtues but also universal characteristics of courage, strength, wisdom, and steadfastness. The heroines in the plays are virgin martyrs, the highest state of holiness and models of Christian living, furnished with an armory of moral and religious precepts. Providing guidance and direction for her audience, she devotes her life to the spiritual uplifting, and this pedagogical purpose is undertaken by her female protagonists presented as an exemplar of the values. Teaching by example brings ideal behaviors into superior focus. The reader is expected to be inspired by reading the heroines, who appear to be exemplary disciples attaining Christian virtues, overcoming all challenges, and restoring the ideals of Christian virtues. The drastic, ascending, and prolonged torments inflicted upon the bodies of virgins increase their perseverance and shows that they are capable in defense of their opinions and beliefs. Her insistence on female virtue and heroism disempower the masculine authority as Christianity is defended by feminine power while Paganism is represented by cruel, lascivious, male patriarchs. Men who challenge the chastity of women verbally vanquished or often spectacularly foiled.

Her deep belief in the power of literature to corrupt/edify the reader underpins her condemnations of misogynist tropes of women. Her primary objection to Terence is his literary ability to corrupt and degrade the reader through distorting image of women. Establishing herself as a serious competitor to secular classical authors, she aims to discredit the disparaging lessons of misogynist writers, influencing readers' minds and actions. As an authoritative and impartial teacher, Hrotsvit believes the efficacy of instructional literature, conveys her concerns for the moral and spiritual formation of readers, and leads them in the path of righteousness. Through her plays, she creates opportunities for spiritual transcendence and provides religious instruction and inspiration. Crafting her persona as advisor in her plays, she speaks candidly with an authorizing didactic strategy to shape the present, society, people's thinking, beliefs, and practices. She exemplifies female disregard of the male privilege through her literary transgression into misogynic literary domain. Hrotsvit dexterously rectifies the damaged image of woman through carefully constructed gender roles and redefines the boundaries of patriarchal literary tradition and its very limitations.

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