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Precept Paper: Hrotswitha's "Dulcitus"

People do not often associate the Medieval era with "women's rights." Most people either hold a highly romanticized view of the Middle Ages, full of chivalrous knights rescuing damsels in distress, or they hold a jaundiced view, blaming the religious and aristocratic elite for creating an environment hostile to women at every turn.¹ Neither view of women is particularly flattering or empowering. However, some scholars point to the monastic convents of the Early Middle Ages as beacons of freedom, where women leaders often flourished and exercised considerable influence despite widespread gender hierarchies that favored men.²

One such woman was Hrotswitha of Gandersheim (935-1001). Hrotswitha, whose name means "Strong Voice"³, was a member of the noble class and a "canoness of the Benedictine monastery of Gandersheim."⁴ As such, she was well educated and well connected, enjoying access to the intellectual and cultural climate of the court of Otto the Great.⁵ Hrotswitha of Gandersheim was the "first, Western nonliturgical playwright,"⁶ an innovative literary genius. In many of her dramas and epics she used polemics or comedy to comment on contested political and religious issues. This paper will explore how

¹ For an example of this view see Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M.M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Chapter 1

² Mark Ellingsen, *Reclaiming Our Roots: An Inclusive Introduction to Church History, Volume 1: The Late First Century to the Eve of the Reformation*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 212

³ Paul Rorem, "The Company of Medieval Women Theologians," *Theology Today Vol. 60, Iss. 1* (2003): 82-93

⁴ Marcelle Thiebaux, ed., *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 171

⁵ Thiebaux, 171

⁶ Thiebaux, 171

Hrotswitha used the genre of drama, along with her privileged position in society, to promote an elevated view of women in her play, “Dulcitus.”

“Dulcitus”⁷ tells the story of three young Christian women who refuse to submit to pagan ritual or the sexual advances of the provincial governor of Thessalonica under the Emperor Diocletian. As the story is based on historical events,⁸ Hrotswitha’s choice to write in dramatic poetry is significant. While she could have simply recounted the events, Hrotswitha chose to embellish and animate them. One might ask why? Because facts are inert, what changes people is imagination.⁹ “Tell someone to do something, and you change their life – for a day; tell someone a story and you change their life.”¹⁰

Hrotswitha uses the genre of drama effectively to subvert the predominant worldview of her day.¹¹

Hrotswitha’s main tool in her drama is juxtaposition: characterizing all of the men in the play as lustful, stupid, and impotent while characterizing the females as pure, intelligent and courageous. It is noteworthy that all male characters are seen in a negative light while every female character is seen in a positive light. In order to do this without ruffling any male feathers in Otto’s court, she happily portrays all of the men as Pagans and all the women as Christians¹², making their faith the focal point of the play, instead of gender.

⁷ also known as “The Passion of the Holy Virgins Agape, Chionia, and Irene

⁸ Thiebaut, 184 - “historical basis...points to the year 303 or 304... Their feast day is April 3”

⁹ I am indebted to Mike Metzger for this idea

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 40.

¹¹ See Wright, 40-42 for how Jewish prophets, and Jesus himself used story as subversion

¹² with the exception of Dulcitus’ wife, who shines through as the only enlightened pagan.

In the first sentence of her prologue Hrotswitha describes Dulcitus's actions with words like "stealth" and "lust."¹³ Dulcitus is, from the beginning, an example of carnal desire unchecked. His base behavior carries the action forward and provides tension. Hrotswitha humorously turns this defining characteristic into the means by which Dulcitus is humiliated. In Scene iv., Dulcitus attempts to take advantage of the Holy Virgins in the kitchen pantry, but confusedly ravishes "the pot... the skillet and the casserole" (202). Not only is he an "idiot" (202) but he also emerges as an "abominable worthless freak hanging around in... ripped-up filthy rags" (203). His impure lust has led to his loss of public dignity, leaving him "dazed, soiled, and tattered, like a rape victim."¹⁴ Later, in Scene xii., Sisinnius and his soldiers are the depraved perpetrators of injustice when they threaten to send Irene to the "whorehouse" (207).

The Holy Virgins are the antithesis of the crude Roman officials. At every point in the play they embody purity,¹⁵ offering themselves up for martyrdom to protect their virginal state. When Governor Dulcitus tells the soldiers of his plan to woo them, the soldiers reply that they are "firm in their religion" (201). Not only do the Holy Virgins protect their own purity, but God seems to help them in miraculous fashion. God confuses Dulcitus in the kitchen pantry, makes their clothes stick to them (294) and sends two mysterious men (perhaps angels?) to save Irene from the whorehouse (208). Their purity even extends beyond the sexual realm; the bodies of Agape and Chionia are miraculously saved from the disfigurement of the fire (206).

¹³ Hrotswitha, "Dulcitus," in *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, ed. Marcelle Thiebaux (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1994), 198-209 – All future references to the primary text will be cited in text (page #).

¹⁴ Thiebaux, 221

¹⁵ Choinia, the name of one of Holy Virgins, means "purity"

Hrotswitha juxtaposes the portrayal of inferior, stupid men with that of witty, intelligent women. In Scene i., the witless Diocletian is slow to understand Irene's clever designation of the pagan gods as slaves (200). In Scenes iv-vii, Dulcitus is completely oblivious to his own physical appearance, and his unsuccessful attempt at wooing the Holy Virgins, until his more astute wife explains how the "Christians... made a dunce out of [him]" (203). Sisinnius shows his own ignorance of the nature of holy purity (206) and suffers sardonic taunts from Irene before finally helping her receive "the palm of the martyr, the virgin's crown" (209).

Another dichotomy in "Dulcitus" is between the powerful peace and speech of the Holy Virgins and the impotence of the pagan men. In the play, the women derive their power from their faith in Jesus Christ while the men are left powerless, suggesting the ultimate impotence of their "gods." Scene i. is filled with irony as the Emperor of the most powerful government on the planet is powerless to compel the Holy Virgins to offer sacrifices to his gods. He pleads with them to worship the "established" cult, and give up the "futile novelty of the Christian superstition" (199). The dramatic irony of this exchange would be obvious to all. Within a generation of Diocletian, Christianity was destined to become the established religion of Rome and the pagan cult would be viewed as superstition. Irene reinforces the power dichotomy by telling Diocletian that her "head is anointed with the unguent of a king" (200). Ultimately, Diocletian gives up and sends the girls to Dulcitus.

The impotence of Dulcitus takes on a more erotic connotation, as he is unable to take advantage of the women sexually, despite his attempts. Later, in Scene viii., he falls asleep in his chair as the soldiers attempt to strip the Holy Virgins (204) – hardly the

action of a virile man! Diocletian aptly points out that the women were making a mockery of the roman gods (204), particularly by demonstrating their impotence and powerlessness. Sisinnius and his soldiers are ultimately incapable of harming the Holy Virgins in any way, except by helping them attain blessed martyrdom. Meanwhile, the Holy Virgins prove themselves altogether courageous, powerful, intelligent and pure throughout the play.

Hrotswitha very effectively uses these dramatic elements to subvert the predominating worldview of her day. One can draw a parallel with later modes of subversive art. Many early satires were unintelligible to those who did not “get the joke.” It is claimed that slaves in America encoded messages within their spiritual songs. “Wade in the Water” for example may have been sung in order to warn fugitive slaves to get off dry land. Art, and stories in particular, can be effective where a less subtle form of activism may be dangerous or impossible. For those who desire to see change in their society, this is a valuable lesson. Culture is upstream from politics. This means that it is often more effective to change the culture than it is to try to change the laws.¹⁶

Hrotswitha, as a woman in the early Middle Ages did not have the political power to legislate gender equality. However, she was not powerless. She used her literary genius, and her position of relative affluence and political importance, to introduce stories that had the power to change the imaginations of those who saw them performed. It is easy to imagine a visitor to Otto’s court, upon witnessing Hrotswitha’s play, rooting for Agape, Chionia, and Irene, thereby participating (knowingly or unknowingly) in radical social activism.

¹⁶ Scottish philosopher Andrew Fletcher observed, “Let me write the songs of a nation, and I don’t care who writes the laws.”

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