



A Week in My Life as Hrotsvitha von Gandersheim

Madeline Howard

Baylor University



Epic Threads

University of Waterloo

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Artist's Statement

In keeping with the theme of acknowledging women's voices, I would like to recognize that this essay was inspired by Anne Carson's piece "Irony is Not Enough: Essay on my Life as Catherine Deneuve," which you can read in her fabulous collection *Men in the Off Hours*. As I progressed in my research on Hrotsvitha and contemplation of women's history, I increasingly identified with Carson/Deneuve and the eclipse that can occur between researcher and subject.

I originally wrote this essay for a workshop of non-classicists (hence the explanation of topics that many classicists are already rather familiar with). I wanted this essay to kindle conversations about writing for those who can't write about themselves, which can be the burden of historians and creative writers alike.

Except for the rearranged order of Hrotsvitha's/my schedule, this is an authentic account of possession. This piece allowed me to express the less sane but more compelling dimensions of life as a student of antiquity. Thank you for giving it your consideration as if it were a piece of respectable scholarship. I am immensely grateful that you lent an ear to these words.

A Week in My Life as Hrotsvitha von Gandersheim

tacet

ON Sunday, Hrotsvitha chats with her dear friend, and the dear friend's mother in the church parking lot. Wind paces around the parish. Hrotsvitha, though uncorked for a while now, can still sense her veil fluttering mothlike around her face.

Thesis work is the topic at hand, as it often is for Hrotsvitha and the dear friend. The dear friend's mother asks the polite questions people pose about writing that is destined to meet a rather modest number of eyes. Hrotsvitha shares that she is writing about herself. The dear friend's mother has never heard of *the* Hrotsvitha, so Hrotsvitha goes over her highlights. She calls herself “proto-feminist” in the process. The dear friend, who is writing about Cicero and could show you all the zodiac constellations in the northern hemisphere, makes a blistered face at this term.

“Well, the way she saw it, Hrotsvitha rewrote a comedic canon where women were literally enslaved to men and figuratively enslaved to sexual sin. She wanted to write women who weren't silent or sluts,” Hrotsvitha continues. “Her ideas about bodily autonomy are backwards by this century's feminist standards. But her women are intelligent, upstanding, minimally assaulted.” The dear friend's mother smiles and nods serenely, even at the ‘sluts’ part.

The blister bursts. “I wouldn't call her ‘proto-feminist,’” the friend, abstractly speaking, declares. “But I just hate the word ‘feminist’ lately. She certainly writes stories where women are women and men are men. Their femininity is their strength.”

Hrotsvitha changes the subject. So much for rewriting the silence and sluttery.

Wind sighs, stalks off. Hrotsvitha recalls that in Latin poetry, the wind is known to scatter even the best-meaning words of lovers.¹

lavanda

A medieval habit of our Hrotsvitha's is bathing by the light of a single candle. She is not fond of turning on the searing overhead bathroom light, or the overhead lights in any room for that matter. She has a predilection for lamps with yolkish bulbs. She likes the microwave glow on the stove.

8:00PM on Monday she lights the wick. Candlelight elides stretchmarks and ingrown stomach hairs and the tan line developing where Hrotsvitha shoulders her tote bag. Elision is good. Less time spent scrutinizing skin means more time spent in the scriptorium. Hrotsvitha lathers and leaves and does not think except about her next verse. It is a proto-feminist decision.

castimonia

The Hrotsvitha was a woman.² She lived in the tenth century in Gandersheim Abbey, a sturdy Romanesque church that still stands in Lower Saxony. She wrote hagiographies, epics, histories, and plays.

¹A few examples of gust-driven lovers in Latin literature: *irrita ventosae rapiebant verba procellae* (the gusty gales stole vain words), Statius' *Achilleid* 1.960; *sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti / in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua* (but what a woman says to a desirous lover / is best written in wind and quick water), Catullus 70; *sic ait et dextra crinem secat; omnis et una / dilapsus calor atque in ventos vita recessit* (so she speaks and severs her hair with her right hand; all at once / warmth slips away and the life withdraws to the wind), Virgil's *Aeneid*, 5.704–705. Translations are by the author.

²For more about the Hrotsvitha, Babcock's (2025) translation includes a good overview.

She is the first woman poet of the land we now call Germany. She is the first woman playwright in the world. She wrote in Latin.

Despite the Hrotsvitha's prolificity, we don't know much about the woman who held the pen, but we do know the general way of her life. She was a secular canoness, which means that she devoted her life to God alongside a church-full of other spiritually-minded ladies. The 'secular' part of being a secular canoness means, however, that she did not commit to the complete set of monastic vows. She was chaste, but not necessarily celibate for life. She was contemplative, but she did not have to forego mortal possessions.

Like many canonesses, she probably worked as a tutor for the kids of the medieval elite. Living on nobles' largesse (and in all likelihood from quite wealthy stock herself), she would never have been compelled to marry out of material necessity and would have enjoyed access to an enviable library. I wouldn't call that a bad spot to be in for a woman in the tenth century.

attatae

Her students live in a nicer apartment complex than Hrotsvitha ever will. Every Tuesday, she enters the building five minutes early with her whiteboard under her arm and settles at their accustomed table in the lobby. Hrotsvitha pretends she belongs in a lobby with eight televisions and a coffee bar. Hrotsvitha pretends that the paint the landlords slopped over the stairwell in her complex just last week wasn't already dissolving where the drunks piss on it.

This week, the older student doesn't have a Latin exam, so the session is more relaxed than usual. The student, who has just moved from the Frankish kingdoms, wants to talk about the grocery store wares in Lower Saxony; sushi is of particular interest. Proud of her people's local specialties, Hrotsvitha asks if the student has tried sushi from H-E-B yet. The student nods her head with grim diplomacy. "Whole Foods sushi is much better. What's your favourite thing there?"

Hrotsvitha is embarrassed to answer. Doubly embarrassed that she cares what her nine-year-old student thinks. "I've never been to a Whole Foods."

The student's jaw drops and scrolls back up. "Really?"

"Really."

"How?"

"Never got the chance, I guess."

The student considers this. "That's just sad!" she concludes.

Hrotsvitha remembers she's the teacher. "Let's read about what Cornelia and Sextus are up to today." Before the session ends, the student asks Hrotsvitha if she can translate *lululemon* into Latin.

nomenclatura

A grammar lesson: Latin words have gender. "Gender," in the grammatical sense, just means difference.³ From the same linguistic root of *gender* come the words *genre* and *genocide*.⁴

When we speak of grammatical gender, we speak of sorting words by the differences in their last sounds. Words that end in gasps and hisses we slide to one side, words that end in snarls and chortles we slide to the other.

³"Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences," Saussure (1971: 120) tells us.

⁴See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.vv. "gender," "genre," and "genocide," respectively: <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/85.71801564>; <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2380920642>; <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1052801400>.

puella vox civitas probitas vela fulgor vir animus liber populus
 girl voice state goodness veil lightning man mind book Volk

And then there is a third category for ponderous sounds, gulped half-chewed.

naufragium caelum oppidum
 shipwreck sky town

These days, we call the gasp-words grammatically feminine, the snarl-words grammatically masculine, and the half-chewed-words grammatically neuter. Once you notice the kinds of persons and concepts each gender contains, you can see why we gave the differences those titles.

But I won't comb out this grammar lesson for any longer than necessary; we will get back to Hrotsvitha.

personae

Much to the Hrotsvitha's chagrin, her elite medieval students liked the comedies of Terence, a Roman playwright eleven centuries Hrotsvitha's senior whose plays were full of unchristian turpitude and lascivious ladies. Ghastly! Hrotsvitha set out to rewrite the Latin curriculum in a series of six dramas. Hrotsvitha's plays were an explicit takeover of Terence's tropes; she told us so in writing. She kept his comedic twists and happily-ever-afters, but converted the stock characters. Salacious sons became repentant rapists. Baffled old dads became desert fathers. Haughty prostitutes became virgin martyrs. I'll give you an example.

A story from Terence:

A young man is inflamed with desire for a beautiful woman (a slave). The young man disguises himself as a eunuch and sneaks into the handmaids' chambers. On the women's wall, the young man sees an image of Jupiter raping Danae. The young man decides to follow his god's example. The young man and his friend have a laugh about it later. The beautiful woman turns out to be a freeborn woman and her violation matters somewhat. But the poor young man's stroke of bad luck⁵ is forgiven.

A story from the Hrotsvitha:

A young man is inflamed with desire for a beautiful woman (a Christian in a chaste marriage). The young man's friend says that he should move on to easier objects. The young man tells his friend that his culture furnishes good examples of audacious courting.⁶ The young man sneaks into the beautiful woman's chambers. He professes to the beautiful woman that he will stop at nothing to possess her body. The beautiful woman prays for death. God grants her wish. The persistent young man sneaks into the beautiful dead woman's tomb. A serpent bites the young man and kills him before he can unwrap the death-clothes. Saints pay a visit to the bodies. The young man and the beautiful woman are resurrected. The young man becomes a Christian.

You can see the twists.

Here's another twist. When she wrote about her mission to rewrite the old canon, the canoness re-named herself. She was no longer Hrotsvitha but *ego, Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis*. In English: I, The

⁵Why "poor young man"; why "stroke of bad luck"? The characters speak these phrases themselves. In the drama, the young man is described as *infelicem adulescentulum* (unlucky little man) and *miser* (poor). See Terence's *Eunuchus*, Act 5.4, lines 941–950.

⁶Friend says *rem difficilem petis* (you're after something difficult). Young man says *et non multorum ad audendum provocatus sum exemplo* (aren't I urged to this act of daring by the examples of many men). See Hrotsvitha's *Calimachus*, Act 1.2, lines 1–5.

Strong Shout of Gandersheim.⁷ *Clamor Validus!* A snarl and a chortle. A resoundingly masculine name. Feminine author, masculine authority.

It's a bold ruse for a woman who confides in the very same paragraph that she has to adapt Terence *iuxta mei facultatem* (according to my own capacity). Let it never be said that the Hrotsvitha spared modesty.⁸ It should be remembered, though, that Hrotsvitha was a woman who dealt in ironic conceits.

retorta

In addition to writing about herself, Hrotsvitha writes about a whole host of men. She prefers the politically confounded and sexually frustrated ones. The latest is St. Augustine, for whom Hrotsvitha feels a tenderness that most people who read his thoughts on babies do not seem to share.

On Wednesday, an email confirms that what most people feel about Augustine does not matter at all. A conference has invited Hrotsvitha to share her recent research on *Confessions*! As soon as she sees a subject line that says Congratulations, Hrotsvitha runs an unseemly victory lap around the department and tells every professor with an open door about her accomplishment. She even knocks on her abbess' door despite knowing that her abbess is not in today. The wind is at Hrotsvitha's back. Her words carry.

The head of the department tells Hrotsvitha to get ready to do a lot of ring-kissing when she goes to give her talk. Hrotsvitha does not say that, with the way her life of chastity is going, she'll probably be thrilled to kiss anything.

While making dinner that evening, Hrotsvitha begins to feel guilty, which often happens at inappropriate times. Her conscience sags when she listens to too much music, for instance, but she feels little remorse for her thoughtless utterances. She would work on it if a feeling were really something one could work on.

This time, the guilt comes from finding a man so much more interesting than herself, even if he is a saint and the Hrotsvitha never earned that title. Augustine's words just have a beauty that Hrotsvitha's don't. And beauty, to borrow an analogy from Augustine, is the weight that brings Hrotsvitha's soul to its natural resting places.⁹

"Augustine may have disliked his rhetorical predecessors, but he didn't feel a moral conviction to correct them," Hrotsvitha says to herself while rummaging through her roommates' food to get to her cherry tomatoes in the back of the fridge. "When the great authors of your tradition are writing about raping and trading and abandoning the kind of person you are, it's probably harder to focus on beauty."

The Hrotsvitha had to spend so much of her life as a writer stooped down, scraping off the crust of filth that generations of male ink had spat on women's composite literary image. Being the first woman poet and playwright was hard on the knees. Who was Hrotsvitha to judge? Hadn't she learned anything from reading *A Room of One's Own* last fall?

Still, she prefers Augustine, who knows a thing or two about guilty pleasures, to her own plays any day. Hrotsvitha eats a guilty bowl of pasta and brushes her guilty teeth before dreaming guilty dreams about her ex-boyfriend, who once said that she acted like she knew everything about Augustine.

⁷The rest of Hrotsvitha's introduction, translated by Caroline Jansen (2017: 6): "There are still others, adhering to the sacred pages [who] still read the creations of Terence very frequently and, while they are delighted by the sweetness of his words, they are stained by the knowledge of impious matters. Hence I, the Strong Voice of Gandersheim, did not refuse to imitate him, so long as others devote themselves to reading him, by dictating these dramas, according to my feeble intellect, where the praiseworthy chastity of holy virgins is celebrated with the same style of dictation as those dramas where the foul lewdness of lascivious women was recounted."

⁸The idea of sparing modesty is a borrowing from Sallust, who writes *Sed ei cariora semper omnia quam decus atque pudicitia fuit; pecuniae an famae minus parceret haud facile discerneres* (but all things were always dearer to her than modesty; you could hardly tell whether she was less sparing with her money or her reputation) in *Bellum Catilinae* 24.3-4.

⁹*Pondus meum amor meus; eo feror, quocumque feror* (my weight is my love; I am carried by it wherever I'm carried), Augustine's *Confessions*, 13.10.

defuncto

Male authors of Latin literature can toy with the gender ruse, too, though they're more prone to bringing other people into it. When men do it, it's called metapoetics.

A famous (to classicists) example is found in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, an epic poem soaked with high-heaped bodies. The poem is so lurid that Lucan loathes to describe it. Its gore certainly makes one flinch.

At the heart of the poem, Lucan talks about himself. He calls himself a *vates*, a Latin word that intersects poet and prophet.¹⁰ It is the only word Lucan uses to refer to himself as a creator. In his narrative, two women share the title. The first is the Pythia, a priestess of Apollo. The second is Erictho, a witch whose spells even the gods tremble to hear. Witches and priestesses are womanly things. But Lucan disregards the usual differences between himself and the womanly things. Instead, he slides them all to the same side.

One thing the *vates* all share is that they speak unnaturally. Lucan himself speaks of the unspeakable, the Pythia speaks because she is forced to by an eruption of divine energy, and Erictho speaks through another's body, harvesting testimony from a corpse whose lungs were missed by the spear. Lucan sets the other two *vates* as warped mirrors of himself: like the Pythia, he can't not speak; like Erictho, we wish he wouldn't. A vatic capacity is supposed to be a gift, but with Lucan it seems more like shorthand for all kinds of communicative sins.

Sometimes you can read a furrowed brow in a line of verse. Talking for the dead seemed to keep Lucan up at night. But such was the muses' sentence, and Lucan had to write it.

amens

Early Thursday morning is for doing all the thesis work that our Hrotsvitha said she would before she sees her abbess again, which gets her thinking about herself more than usual.

Hrotsvitha is really beginning to believe that the Hrotsvitha is speaking through her. She won't tell her abbess this, because her abbess has already been nagging her about getting her auditory hallucinations checked out.

An explication of Hrotsvitha's beliefs on belief: While employed at a sprawling plant nursery, Hrotsvitha once worked in a house that was haunted. About ten years before Hrotsvitha started working there, the owner of the nursery wanted to set up a place on the property to house garden-themed home decor. The owner, a do-it-yourself kind of matriarch who exclusively wore overalls, decided to uproot a ramshackle old cabin from its resting place the next county over and bring it to the nursery. It turned out that the underbelly of the house had been hiding a family cemetery from the nineteenth century. Generations had been overturned in the moving process. The owner took the headstones of a young woman and an infant as souvenirs and placed them on either side of her new storefront's steps. Her employees claimed to see ghostly babies in the store's windows.

After the lady who previously worked the haunted house quit to focus on caring for her suicidal boyfriend, Hrotsvitha was assigned to oversee the haunted house in solitude forty hours a week. When jam jars fell off the shelves mysteriously and snakeskins ribboned the rafters and the security cameras wept real water, it was hard not to believe in ghosts. Hrotsvitha took comfort in the store's giant decorative rosaries that were perpetually 20% off.

The coworker that claimed that the archangel Gabriel spoke to her told Hrotsvitha that the ghosts were a benevolent presence. The ghosts were happy to haunt a woman-owned plant nursery, because when the ghosts were alive women weren't allowed to do that sort of thing.

¹⁰For more on Lucan as *vates*, O'Higgins (1988) gives a very good overview that speaks on the topic more than I can.

To this day, Hrotsvitha has a hard time telling the difference between believing in something and feeling like she is believing in something.

Thursday afternoon, Hrotsvitha and her abbess meet to discuss Hrotsvitha's thesis. Hrotsvitha has just finished reading Terence's comedies. She tells the abbess that her favourite play was *Eunuchus*.

"Wow!" the abbess says. "That was my friend's favourite!"

Hrotsvitha's sleep-bleary mind slips, catches up. Yes, that's right; her abbess had first learned about Hrotsvitha because her friend used to study Terence. The abbess had told her this when the thesis work began. "He studied German, too, just like you," the abbess had said with a look that did not hide its wistfulness. It occurs to Hrotsvitha that this is the first time her abbess has referred to him simply as *my friend* and not *the dead friend*.

Hrotsvitha's lungs are getting crowded. It's not a bad feeling.

idolum

English decided a long time ago to talk about the paranormal with German words and the intellectual with Latin words.

For example, the word *ghost* stems from the Old English word *gast*, which ultimately comes from the Germanic *geiski*.¹¹ *Gaistaz* means a breezy kind of breath; a spirit that can be sensed. The verb *haunt* comes from the Proto-Germanic *haimatjana*.¹² *Haimatjana* means bringing something home and living with it. When Germans talk about spirit and home, they say *Geist* and *Heimat*. Hear the roots?

Meanwhile, even the word *intellectual* comes from a Latin word, *intellegerere*, which means understanding.¹³ *Inspiration* comes from the Latin *inspirare*, which means breathing in and is related to the English word *spirit*.¹⁴ And the word *idea* is related to the Latin word for ghost.¹⁵

I find it funny how the German spirit-concepts became the creaks in our door hinges, the wrinkles in our rationality. How the Latin spirit-concepts became the spark in our heart, our frenzied pens. How English couldn't settle for just one kind of supernatural stirring. How the Hrotsvitha would have breathed both breaths, too.

dictatrix

Hrotsvitha is surprised at the German conversation hour on Friday: The professor who introduced our Hrotsvitha to herself confesses that she has not remembered Hrotsvitha's name for months. The professor does, however, remember when Hrotsvitha performed in a production of Plautus' *Pseudolus* last year and didn't have time to change before sliding into her German seminar.

"Sie kam in einem griechischen Kostüm, einem wunderschönen griechischen Kostüm, und mit lauter Armreifen!" The table of German speakers laughs.

"Und geschminkt wie eine Dragqueen," Hrotsvitha adds.

In the play, Hrotsvitha had starred as a real bastard of a pimp. The role was originally a male one, but Hrotsvitha decided that this designation was flexible. As pimp, she carried a riding crop that was all sound and no sting and really hit her fellow actors with it in front of a live audience. The Hrotsvitha would have disapproved. Probably.

¹¹Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "ghost," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6509148342>.

¹²See Orel (2003), s.v. "xaimatjanan."

¹³Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "intellectual," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1094826918>.

¹⁴Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "inspire," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9942636289>.

¹⁵Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "idea," <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8812035482>.

Hrotsvitha kept the pimp character's male name even while playing him with a red lip. The Hrotsvitha might have found this amusing. Maybe.

silentium'st

It is a tragic fact for those who study antiquity that ancient women do not usually speak for themselves. There are plenty of women in Latin and Greek letters, but they are, for the most part, written by men. In short, women get talked about but do not themselves talk. Written women often act less like people and more like female forms of men's concerns. There's a reason why those who study Latin letters can distinguish women of paper (*scriptae puellae*) from women of flesh.

Though it's hard to completely paper over half of history. Women mark the margins of the stories men write about them. Amy Richlin writes about the margins in *Arguments With Silence*, a text she describes as a "constant search for the women just out of hearing."¹⁶ Why strive so hard to strike up a conversation with the mute? "I feel a sense of duty to the dead, to tell their stories as best I can," Richlin writes, "in telling women's stories, I am working toward a society that remembers women."¹⁷ Narrators of women's history are in the funeral business. They lay a wreath on the blank spaces.

Perhaps, like Richlin, the Hrotsvitha sensed the silence that encompassed her as a woman writer. Perhaps that is why she called herself a shout.

pythia

The only other people at the library at 9:00PM on a Saturday are students whose future careers are much more lucrative than Hrotsvitha's. Hrotsvitha has plans to plagiarize all night long. The words she reads and the words she hears all cook down into the words that cover her pages and cross her lips. She writes all day and invents nothing, and she finds this beautiful.

Hrotsvitha likes to think that she is reincarnate or possessed. That someone in the past did not get to say all the things they wanted to, but through a serendipitous process of linguistic patchworking and weathering, found their voice replicated in her. When Hrotsvitha opens her mouth, it is not even she that speaks, but Roman slaves who made roof tiles¹⁸ or trafficked fellatrices whose names were bywords.¹⁹ Or maybe Hrotsvitha's voice belongs to someone even less known, a nameless peasant from a distant country whose language neither Hrotsvitha nor the Hrotsvitha ever knew existed. Someone who couldn't even carve her name in a roof tile.

Hrotsvitha's body is not her own. Now that's an idea Hrotsvitha's virgin martyrs could get behind.

grege

Because so much of Latin's intelligibility depends on proper difference, non-Roman Latin speakers are compelled to choose Latin or Latinized names that are different from the names assigned to them in their mother tongue. Some, like the Hrotsvitha/*Clamor Validus*, invent names. But many people search history and dust off others' titles.

¹⁶Richlin 2014: 12.

¹⁷Richlin 2014: 14.

¹⁸Richlin discusses said slaves and their roof tiles in *Arguments With Silence* (2014: 12).

¹⁹For these bywords, see "Appendix 3: A Catalogue of Possible Prostitutes at Pompeii" in Thomas McGinn's *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel* (2004).

I'm in that borrowing crowd. For respectability's sake, I go by Eumachia. Eumachia was a very wealthy Pompeiian woman who appears to have been widowed.²⁰ She was a patroness and a priestess. Buildings bear inscriptions of her works. She is all the things people don't think ancient women could be: business savvy, independent, beloved. She has words to her name. But she is the exception rather than the rule. Eumachia staffed her household with silence. Erasure styled her hair. Her sons were nursed by figments in infancy and grew up to have dalliances with apparitions in alleyways.

Before I was respectable, I went by the name of a fictional prostitute. I still have a heart for her.

abscondita

Before going to church on Sunday, Hrotsvitha reads a *New York Times* article about Presbyterian women who want to forfeit the right to vote. They call for household votes, cast by husbands. Fathers and brothers and uncles would vote for the unmarried. Hrotsvitha gets the sense that she's too pious for the feminists and too feminist for the pious.

Like every week, Hrotsvitha drives the dear friend, whose perspective on women's suffrage Hrotsvitha chooses not to interrogate. They settle into the pews between the veiled heads of other friends. Hrotsvitha sings hymns off-key with a voice fully hers and fully not: a Christian arithmetic. Wind flails against the stained glass like a sick bird. Hrotsvitha will fly her kite later.

²⁰For more information on the Eumachia, see Longfellow (2014).

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