Hrotsvitha, Hildegard, and the Nun who Resurrected Theater: Crash Course Theater #9

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there, my name is Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Theater, and last time we looked at how the liturgical drama, specifically a call-and-response section smuggled into the Easter liturgy, helped bring theater back to the West.

Today we'll look at another way theater got snuck back into the Christian world. Who did the sneaking? A canoness. What is a canoness? It's a fancy kind of nun. Not often known for their sneaking, right?

All those surprising sneaks took place in an abbey in an otherwise unremarkable spot in Lower Saxony, Germany. You can still visit it today if you want. Enjoy the half-timbered houses and, if you're old enough, raise a beer stein to Hrotsvitha, the loud cry of Gandersheim, the queen of medieval closet drama and the world's first female playwright. Well, the first we know about, anyway. I've heard there's lots of sneaking.

[Crash Course Theater intro]

Hrotsvitha was born in Saxony, around the 10th century. We don't know how she came to take the veil, because record-keeping wasn't really medieval Saxony's jam. We do know Hrotsvitha's name literally means "strong honor", but she decided it meant something more like "the clarion call" or "the loud cry", which, I mean, hey, all of these [are] very strong contenders, if you ask me.

At some point, she joined the convent at Gandersheim as a canoness, giving her the freedom to own property, keep servants, and wear whatever kind of wimple she wanted. Yeah, it's good to be the canoness. She studied under two women at the convent, including the abbess, and became exceptionally well read.

She read diversely: the Bible, sure, and the writings of the Church Fathers and the non-cannonical Gospels, but also contemporary histories and secular Latin greats too, like Ovid and Vergil. She even read our old friends Plautus and Terence, but those comedies were a little troubling for Hrotsvitha. So much lewd behavior. So she decided to write her own versions. We're going to talk about those in two shakes of a Saxon sheep's tail.

In addition to plays, she also wrote verse legends and histories – one about Otto I, the Holy Roman Emperor, and another about her own convent – all of them in careful meter. She's the first playwright of the Middle Ages, and if later woodcuts are anything to go by, her taste in wimples was, in fact, divine.

Rotswitha's plays are known as the Comaedia Sacrae, or "sacred comedies". Hrotswitha loved comedy. I mean, she loved God too, of course, but she also loved Terence, who you may remember was a more polite writer than his contemporary, Plautus – fewer dirty jokes, less adultery, but still based on secular subjects. And that made Hrotswitha worry that her love for them was somehow harmful to her faith and the faith of others.

She wrote in a preface that she know a lot of Catholics were "attracted by the polished elegance of the style of pagan writers" – so attracted that they might prefer Terence to holy scripture. This is maybe selling short how much weird violence and sex stuff persists in holy scripture, but okay, that's weird violence and sex stuff that's in a holy text, so point taken, I guess.

Hrotswitha warned that readers who were charmed by polished pagan elegance risked being corrupted by the wickedness of the matter. So she thought, "Hey, maybe I'll use my loud cry to write plays in the meter and style of Terence. Maybe they can be funny but also holy." We believe in you, Hrotswitha.

Care to guess what theme might interest a nun who has made herself a bride of Christ? That's right, chastity. If Terence is going to write about the shameless acts of licentious women, Hrotswitha is going to write about virgins, and also unchaste ladies who repent and embrace chastity. Basically, it's just a little bit of medieval slut-shaming.

It's clear that love and sex fascinate Hrotswitha. In her preface, she blushes to admit her work has forced her to think about "the dreadful frenzy of those possessed by unlawful love, and the insidious sweetness of passion – things which should not even be named among us." Sister, please! But she argues that only by coming to grips with lust can she demonstrate how much more wonderful the divine succor is of those who resist it.

Whether or not Hrotswitha's works were performed has been a subject of debate. Most scholars believe that Hortswitha wrote her plays to be read, a genre we call "closet dramas". After all, that's how she encountered Terence's plays, in book form not on stage. It's probable that her work was read aloud, and remotely possible that it was performed privately in the medieval period.

But since the late 19th century, her plays have been performed pretty often. At one point, the art collective The Guerrilla Girls – who are rad as heck and if you don't know them, Sarah did an awesome Art Assignment video on them – offered a prize to any theater who would switch out a Greek tragedy written by a man for one of Hrotswitha's comedies.

One of those comedies is called *Dulcitius*. Critics regard this as her funnies play, even though it describes the martyrdom of three young women. And yet, kind of a knee-slapper.

Dulcitius is based on and named after an historical figure, the Roman governor of Macedonia in the last 3rd and early 4th century known for persecuting Christian women, and the young women in the play are actual Christian martyrs. Though, IRL, they died a century before Dulcitius came to power, so Hrotswitha has taken some liberties.

Take us there, Thought Bubble!

Emperor Diocletian wants to arrange marriages for three virgin sisters: Agape, whose name means "love", Irena, whose name means "peace", and Chionia, whose name means "snow", which basically means "purity". Diocletian tells the sisters they have to renounce Christianity. They don't wanna, so he locks them up, and he sends Dulcitius to question them.

Dulcitius sees them through a window, decides they're all super hot, and asks them to be locked up in the kitchen so that he can, um, visit them. Why he needed to assault them in a kitchen specifically, unclear. The sisters, understandably, don't want to be perved on by Dulcitius, so they pray, and their prayers work.

When Dulcitius enters the kitchen, he thinks that the pots and the pans are the sisters, so he starts hugging and kissing them, which covers him in soot. When he leaves, the soldiers see his blackened face and think he's a demon, and so do the people at the palace. And, I mean, in a sense they're not wrong. He gets the snot beat out of him.

Dulcitius, fuming, he orders the sisters be stripped, but their clothes stick to them. Diocletian sends the torturer Sisinnius, who orders Agape and Chionia to be burned at the stake. They die, though miraculously their clothes and bodies are left intact.

Sisinnius then orders Irena, the youngest, to convert. She won't, so he tells the soldiers to take her to a brothel. Instead, she's

miraculously spirited away to a mountaintop. Sisinnius orders the soldiers to shoot her with arrows, and she dies, but she dies secure in her chastity and her faith.

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

So, see what I mean? It is a laugh riot! Okay, so it's no *What About Bob?*, but for a medieval Christian this is at least a happy ending.

The three sisters all end up dead, but the souls of Agape and Chionia are in heaven, and as Irena is dying she says, "I shall receive the martyr's palm and the crown of virginity. Thus I will enter the heavenly bridal chamber of the eternal king, whose is all honor and glory in all eternity." Listen, that's at least half as funny as, like, a third of all SNL sketches.

Anyway, you could argue that the crown of virginity isn't worth dying over, but because the sisters haven't been forced to compromise their bodies or their beliefs, they will receive eternal life. For Hrotswitha and her audience, that is sweeter than anything, and it's definitely sweeter than being raped by a soot-smudged Roman dolt.

It's worth noting that this emphasis on chastity suggests it was one of a very few ways that women could wield power in the Middle Ages, but this is likely more of a concern for present-day readers than for Hrotswitha herself.

And before we end today, we're going to look at one other medieval female playwright, Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard was born about a century and a half after Hrotswitha and also had a killer nickname: the Sybil of the Rhine.

She was more than just a writer; she was also a composer, a philosopher, a mystic, and a scientist, who took time off to found and run a couple monasteries. She also made up her own language. Basically, Hildegard was a boss.

One of her plays is the catchily titled *Ordo Virtutum*, which is Latin for "the order of virtues". It's the only liturgical drama that survives alongside its music, which Hildegard also composed. It is lovely.

The O*rder of Virtues* is the first surviving example of the medieval morality play, a genre we're going to look at more in depth in the next episode. It's an allegorical drama in which Anima, the human soul, has to choose between the Virtues and the Devil. Guess which side Hildegard is on? Yeah, it's kind of a no-brainer for Anima, too.

But the Virtues tell her that she has to go live in a body first. Once she does, the Devil shows her how much fun worldly stuff is. Only later, old and thoroughly repentant about all that worldly pleasure, is she allowed to return to the Virtues who, by the way, are Hope, Chastity, Innocence, Contempt of the World, Celestial Love, Modesty, Mercy, Victory, Discretion, Patience, Knowledge of God, Charity, Fear of God, Obedience, Faith, and Discipline, though her name is scratched out in the manuscript. But yeah, either way, big cast. Very tidy green room, though, super low-key wrap party.

As we saw in the last episode, the usual explanation for theater reemerging in the West is through the appearance of liturgical drama, but in the same century, a "loud cry" is heard across Lower Saxony. And a century and a half later, Hildegard answers the call.

Hrotswitha and Hildegard of Bingen's works have a firmly Christian worldview and intention. They create female characters with the power and patience and faith to make brave, chaste choices. So, a round of applause for them.

Next time, we take a look at the cycle plays, which is what liturgical drama turns into over a couple centuries. But until then, curtain.

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