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## **"Clamor Validus" vs. "Fragilitas Sexus Feminei": Hrotsvit of Gandersheim on the Agency of Women**

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“CLAMOR VALIDUS” VS. “FRAGILITAS SEXUS FEMINEI”: HROTSVIT OF  
GANDERSHEIM ON THE AGENCY OF WOMEN

by

Caroline Jansen

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
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# “CLAMOR VALIDUS” VS. “FRAGILITAS SEXUS FEMINEI”: HROTSVIT OF GANDERSHEIM ON THE AGENCY OF WOMEN

Caroline Jansen, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2017

Hrotsvit of Gandersheim has generated interest among scholars of gender and sexuality due to her status as a woman and writer of Latin legends, epics, and plays in the Ottonian Empire. As the only prominent female playwright of her time, Hrotsvit presents an intriguing, complex treatment of female characters and their sexuality, particularly her plays, which rework both well-known lives of female saints and the tropes of the Roman playwright Terence’s comedies. One issue that has not been fully addressed, however, is the gendering of the heroines populating Hrotsvit’s plays—while some scholars refer to the characters as “overcoming femininity” others describe their heroic actions as manifesting an embracing of their femininity. However, these scholars do not seem to define fully what they consider to comprise the characters’ femininity, sometimes merely referring to “feminine weakness” as the defining trait of the gender, a very reductive treatment of how Hrotsvit and her medieval audience likely viewed gender. In this paper I analyze the gendering of Hrotsvit’s women in her plays during their trials and martyrdoms, and place it among the current scholarship on medieval female spirituality and chastity by analyzing the Latin diction and images used to describe the heroines of the plays. I argue that Hrotsvit imbues her female characters with agency and spiritual strength even while the female characters embrace bodily and spiritual femininity.

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Hrotsvit of Gandersheim has generated interest among scholars of gender and sexuality due to her status as a woman and writer of Latin legends, epics, and plays in the Ottonian Empire. Of this impressive body of work, Hrotsvit presents the most complex treatment of female sexuality and strength of character in her dramas. Indeed, as feminist scholars have embraced more positive readings of medieval virginity and feminine spirituality, Hrotsvit's plays have been read as "proto-feminist" works.<sup>1</sup> This position manifests itself when we assess the spiritual strength of the female characters who, by either overcoming or embracing the "womanly weakness" ascribed to them by social norms, are shown to be spiritually strong, particularly in terms of chastity, the virtue most commonly under threat in Hrotsvit's plays. Hrotsvit thus declares herself the "Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis" ["Strong Voice of Gandersheim"]<sup>2</sup> and equips her dramatic women with strong voices of their own.

One issue that has not been fully addressed by feminist scholarship, however, is the gendering of the heroines of Hrotsvit's dramas. While some scholars refer to the characters as "overcoming femininity" and thereby becoming more like men, others describe their heroic actions as enacting their femininity.<sup>3</sup> However, many of these scholars do not seem to define

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<sup>1</sup> Helene Scheck, "The Whore as *Imago Dei*: Being and Abjection in Hrotsvit's Rewriting of Thais," in *Sexuality, Sociality, and Cosmology in Medieval Literary Texts*, ed. Jennifer N. Brown and Marla Segol (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 7-32 (8).

<sup>2</sup> See H. Homeyer, ed. *Hrotsvithae Opera* (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1970), 233. All Latin translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. All Latin quotations are taken from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of the argument wherein Hrotsvit's women embrace their weaknesses or their weaknesses are turned into strengths, see Barbara K. Gold, "Hrotsvitha Writes Herself: *Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis*," in *Sex and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Texts: The Latin Tradition*, ed. Barbara K. Gold, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 41-71. Many authors cite weakness as being inverted as strength as a main feature of the plays, while others see a masculinization in overcoming the feminine

fully what they consider to comprise femininity, sometimes merely referring to “feminine weakness” as the defining trait of the female sex. Needless to say, such an assertion amounts to a reductive treatment of how Hrotsvit and her medieval audience appear to have viewed gender. Such discourse with its attendant problematic terminology exists alongside theories of female chastity in the Middle Ages as a whole, describing both a militant/masculine type of female spirituality in the early Middle Ages and a bridal/feminine type in the late Middle Ages;<sup>4</sup> some scholars even work with models that depict virgins as a third gender.<sup>5</sup> However, the work on medieval virginity, when it intersects with literary studies, tends to focus on the Katherine group or other late medieval English sources.<sup>6</sup> Such a limited scope of study does not fully take into account earlier continental sources such as Hrotsvit, whose work challenges these common paradigms and categories.

My study of Hrotsvit’s gendering of the female characters in her virgin martyr plays *Sapientia* and *Dulcitus*, especially during their trials and martyrdoms, contributes to the current scholarship on medieval female spirituality by focusing on chastity and virginity and by analyzing the Latin diction and images used to describe the heroines. Hrotsvit’s women do not readily fit into the militant/bridal, masculine/feminine dichotomies as noted above. Rather, their form of spirituality encompasses both bodily and spiritual femininity as well as autonomous agency and spiritual strength.

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weakness; for example, see A. Daniel Frankforter, “Hroswitha of Gandersheim and the Destiny of Women,” *The Historian* 41, no. 2 (1979): 295-314.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Evans, “Virginites,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21-39 (24).

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Such as Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150-1300: Virginity and its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

## Historical Context

According to some scholars Hrotsvit, a Saxon nun in the abbey at Gandersheim, was probably born around 935 and died around 1001 or 1002.<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have estimated her death to have occurred at the end of the tenth century after her last work was written in the 970s.<sup>8</sup> At the time the Holy Roman Empire was flourishing under the Ottonians, Hrotsvit was at her most active,<sup>9</sup> indeed, she was considered to be part of the “poetic and cultural foundation... in the Renaissance of Charlemagne and the Ottos.”<sup>10</sup>

While there is some debate over whether the abbey in Gandersheim was a Benedictine monastery or a community of canonesses—earlier scholarship refers to Hrotsvit as a canoness,<sup>11</sup> later to the abbey as Benedictine—the issue remains unresolved.<sup>12</sup> It is unclear, therefore, what measure of freedom Hrotsvit herself would have had living at Gandersheim as either a vowed religious under the Benedictine rule or a canoness. Established a century prior in 852<sup>13</sup> and founded by Duke Liudolf under the Carolingian king, Louis the German, the abbey maintained connections to Liudolf’s patrilineage, the Ottonian line that would rule the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>14</sup> Gerberga, the abbess during Hrotsvit’s time, was the daughter of Henry, the Duke of Bavaria, and thereby Otto I’s niece, a kinship that fostered strong ties between the monastery and

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Lyon Haight, ed., *Hroswitha of Gandersheim: Her Life, Times, and Works, and a Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: The Hroswitha Club, 1965), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Katharina Wilson, trans., *The Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), xiii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, *The Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Haight, *Hroswitha of Gandersheim*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Fonay Wemple, “Monastic Life of Women from the Merovingians to the Ottonians,” in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Rara Avis in Saxonia?*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Ann Arbor: Marc Publishing Co., 1987), 35-54 (43).

<sup>13</sup> Sister Prudence Allen, R. S. M., *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 760 BC – AD 1250* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 254.

<sup>14</sup> Haight, *Hroswitha of Gandersheim*, 4, 7.



the empire.<sup>15</sup> These connections were further established when Otto I freed Gandersheim from ecclesiastical control in 956 by placing the abbey under his royal jurisdiction.<sup>16</sup>

In 936 following the death of his father, Henry the Fowler, Otto I reigned as king of Saxony,<sup>17</sup> acceding to power after he won victories against Saxony's Hungarian and Slav neighbors and conquered the Lombards.<sup>18</sup> After subsequently being crowned king of the Lombards, Pope John XII crowned him emperor in 962.<sup>19</sup> His son, Otto II, was crowned co-emperor by Pope John XIII in 967, and ruled with him until his death in 983.<sup>20</sup> His Byzantine wife was then regent for Otto III along with her mother-in-law.<sup>21</sup>

The abbey of Gandersheim was home to many noble, well-educated women, and Hrotsvit herself was educated in Latin, both classical and medieval.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, she “learned philosophy from her abbess, Gerberga, and her teacher, Rikkardis.”<sup>23</sup> As Albrecht Classen observes, because many of the ladies at Gandersheim may have been canonesses, they must have had “real life experience” and exposure to secular literature rather than only ecclesiastical texts such as the Vulgate.<sup>24</sup> Based upon the wide range of classical literature Hrotsvit alludes to throughout her works, Gandersheim is thought to have had an extremely rich library, though due to a conflict in the fifteenth century, most of the manuscripts of the library have now been lost.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Haight, *Hroswitha of Gandersheim*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Wemple, “Monastic Life of Women,” 44.

<sup>17</sup> Haight, *Hroswitha of Gandersheim*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Haight, *Hroswitha of Gandersheim*, 9, 11-12. Classical writers of Latin from the pre-Christian Roman empire had a different style than patristic and medieval Latin writers of later centuries, who had a significantly changed and expanded vocabulary as well as some differences in grammatical construction. See Dag Norberg, *A Practical Handbook of Medieval Latin*, trans. R. H. Johnson (Paris: Éditions A. & J. Picard, 1968), accessed October 1, 2016, <http://homepages.wmich.edu/~johnsorh/MedievalLatin/Norberg/index.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, 258.

<sup>24</sup> Albrecht Classen, “Sex on the Stage (and in the Library) of an Early Medieval Convent: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim,” *Orbis Litterarum* 65 (2010): 167-200 (173).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 169.

Since Hrotsvit herself cites the Roman playwright, Terence, as inspiration for her drama, it is clear she was steeped in classical secular literature.<sup>26</sup> Like Terence, she included dark, sexual motifs such as rape and prostitution, thus, according to Classen, “drawing on the very same vast storehouse of classical tropes easily available to her because of a first-rate education in the Gandersheim convent.”<sup>27</sup> Additionally, diplomats from Arab Spain visited the Ottonian court in Frankfurt from 935 to 938, making it likely that the women at Gandersheim heard reports of the martyrdom of Pelagius in Cordoba, including the purported homosexual advances of Pelagius’s murderers.<sup>28</sup> In writing plays that deal extensively with sexual threats, Hrotsvit demonstrates that she was educated not only in elements of Latin style, but also in the many varieties of sexual sin.

That Hrotsvit was at the beginning of a tradition of monastic education for women is notable in and of itself, but that she was steeped in the classical tradition is even more so since, according to Prudence Allen, “in comparison with the classical scholarly tradition, female dramatists and poets were relatively unknown.”<sup>29</sup> Hrotsvit may have kept her Latin playwriting generally secret for fear of being asked to stop, since she was entering into a male-dominated tradition.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless apparently she distributed her writings to “some unnamed men, most likely Benedictine monks in relation to the sisters’ monastery.”<sup>31</sup> Other scholars reject the “closet drama” theory, arguing that based on the dramatic conventions, style of dialogue, and structure of the dramas, they may have been performed either within the convent or even as early scaffold-and-place plays.<sup>32</sup> At the very least, most scholars agree there is a high probability of the plays

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 173-4.

<sup>29</sup> Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, 256.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>32</sup> See Edwin H. Zeydel, “Were Hrotsvitha’s Dramas Performed During her Lifetime?” *Speculum* 20.4 (1945): 443-456. For the scaffold and place theory, refer to David Wiles, “Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim: The Performance of Her

having been declaimed and possibly accompanied by mime.<sup>33</sup> Based on manuscript copies of her works found at St. Emmeran at Regensburg, it seems that her oeuvre was appreciated into the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but fell into obscurity until its rediscovery by German humanists in the fifteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

### The Plays

While Hrotsvit produced legends, dramas, and epics,<sup>35</sup> of special interest to me in this study are two of her six plays: *Dulcitius* and *Sapientia*. Though most of the plays take their titles from the names of the male characters, their plots are shaped mainly by the female characters; by the author's own admission, her dramas are explicitly constructed around virtuous women and their spirituality:

Sunt etiam alii, sacris inhaerentes paginis, qui licet alia gentilium spernant, Terentii tamen fingmenta frequentius lectitant et, dum dulcedine sermonis delectantur, nefandarum notitia<sup>36</sup> rerum maculantur. Unde ego, Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis, non recusavi illum imitari dictando, dum alii colunt legendo, quo eodem dictationis genere, quo turpia lascivarum incesta feminarum recitabantur, laudabilis sacrarum castimonia virginum iuxta mei facultatem ingenioli celebraretur.<sup>37</sup>

[There are still others, adhering to the sacred pages, who, although they despise other works of the pagans, 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.]

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Plays in the Tenth Century,” *Theatre History Studies* 19 (1999): 133-150. The convent drama theory is argued in Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Wilson, *The Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, xxviii.

<sup>34</sup> Wemple, “Monastic Life of Women,” 47.

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, *The Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, xiii-xv.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis and Short's dictionary notes that the word “notitia,” while meaning simply “knowledge” or a “knowing,” can also mean “carnal knowledge of a woman” in the phrase “notitiam feminae habere,” suggesting Hrotsvit intended a pun referencing the prurient nature of Terence's comedies.

<sup>37</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 233.

Writing to rebuke Terence's portrayal of women for the benefit of a Christian audience craving his entertaining drama, Hrotsvit draws attention to the themes of female chastity and female heroism from the beginning of the Preface. Though over the course of the six plays Hrotsvit describes various modes of female chastity, including repentant prostitutes and chaste wives as well as consecrated virgins, these themes are at their most extreme in the two plays recounting the martyrdoms of allegorical virgin sisters: *Dulcitius* and *Sapientia*.

*Dulcitius*, perhaps the most well-known of all of Hrotsvit's dramas, recounts the martyrdoms of Saints Agape, Chionia, and Hirena who resist Emperor Diocletian's attempt to force them to worship the Roman gods. Dulcitius attempts to rape the three women but, confounded by God, he embraces pots and pans in the kitchen adjacent to their cell instead. When subsequent attempts to humiliate and violate the women fail repeatedly, God eventually allows them to be martyred. *Dulcitius* draws upon the traditional story of the martyrs Sts. Agape, Chionia, and Hirena, who typically appear as minor characters in *vitae* of St. Anastasia.<sup>38</sup> They receive more individual attention in Aldhelm's poem, *De Virginitate*, where Anastasia has only a cameo.<sup>39</sup> Hrotsvit omits St. Anastasia completely, but as Anna Katharina Rudolph observes, she adds a significant amount of *sass*—while the virgins speak deferentially to their powerful persecutors in the hagiographical sources, Hrotsvit's virgins speak with “audacious language” in the pithy style of Terence.<sup>40</sup>

The final play in Hrotsvit's oeuvre, *Sapientia*, describes three young girls—Fides, Spes, and Karitas—martyred by Hadrian in front of their mother, Sapientia. Before their martyrdom, however, Sapientia baffles Hadrian with mathematics by posing numerical puzzles when he

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<sup>38</sup> Anna Katharina Rudolph, “*Ego Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis* Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim: Her Sources, Motives, and Historical Context,” *Magistra* 20.2 (2014): 58-90 (63-64).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

simply inquires after her daughters' ages. Then Hadrian has each of the girls put to tortures that hardly seem to harm them, while they mock the pagan men on account of their inability to murder young girls: "O iudicem inpotentem, qui diffidit se absque armis ignium octuennem infantem superare posse!" ["Oh impotent judge, who despairs of conquering an eight-year-old child without weapons of fire!"]<sup>41</sup> Their mother Sapientia encourages them to be steadfast in their faith, until he kills each of them in turn. After the three have been martyred, Sapientia buries their bodies and dies while in vigil at their tombs. Hrotsvit's final play also draws on older hagiographical accounts. While the earliest accounts were Greek, there are Latin translations that seem to coincide with the Greek tradition (though they deviate from extant Greek manuscripts) and include a graphic scene of Hadrian's death finishing the tales.<sup>42</sup> John of Milan's version, however, departs significantly from originals in supplying details of the martyrs' origins and ending on Sapientia's death, similar to Hrotsvit.<sup>43</sup> Sources also vary dramatically in how the virgins respond to torture: while earlier versions depict the saints feeling but accepting bodily pain, later versions depict the saints as somehow physically impervious to the tortures.<sup>44</sup> Hrotsvit's virgins seem to belong more to the later tradition, but probably exist as one of the earliest versions of such depictions, based on the ordering by the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina*.<sup>45</sup>

In both plays, Hrotsvit emphasizes the agency of the female characters in directing the dramatic action through their subversive resistance to male, pagan persecutors. The opposition of the sexes portrayed in the narratives and the sexual threats present in the conflicts places a clear

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<sup>41</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 371.

<sup>42</sup> A. C. Dionisotti, "Translated Saints: Wisdom and Her Daughters," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16.2 (2008): 165-180 (172-175).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 170-171.

emphasis on chastity as central to feminine piety. This emphasis warrants investigation of prior scholarship done more broadly on virginity and feminine piety, especially with regard to heroism often claimed in the case of Hrotsvit's virgin martyrs.

### **Medieval Virginity and Gender: An Overview**

Ruth Evans summarizes the discourse on medieval virginity among scholars, describing the most popular model as a transition from “militant” virgins in the ninth to eleventh centuries to “bridal virgins” in the later Middle Ages.<sup>46</sup> In particular, she discusses the gendering of these forms of female chastity as a shift, as well, writing that the early, militant period was defined by the virgin as “virago,” that is, a “woman acting like a man.”<sup>47</sup> This seems to imply that these laudable virgins, and possibly women committed to chastity in general, are gendered masculine in this earlier period, that is, the period in which Hrotsvit is writing. Evans further complicates the issue by defining the gender of virgin martyrs, at least those in the Katherine group, not in terms of physical sex but rather through physically resisting their “repeated tortures.”<sup>48</sup> For Evans “the texts stage gender as fluid and performative: not as an essence but as a continual acting out of female sexual and social identity.”<sup>49</sup> On the one hand, this model denies the simple idea of a virgin's gender as equivalent to her sex while, on the other, affirms her as intentionally performing femininity.

Gender, however, is not purely conceptual with no relationship to the body; many scholars have explored the implications of bodily femininity on the gender performance of virgins. Bodiliness, in particular, bears importance to the study of virgins whose main virtue—chastity—is intimately connected to their bodily behavior. Scholars such as Caroline Walker

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<sup>46</sup> Evans, “Virginites,” 24.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Bynum see the physical sex of female bodies as essential to women's spirituality, especially in their capacity as mothers, thus providing a feminine gendering of the spirituality of virgins. For instance, Walker discusses Catherine of Siena's fascination with the image of breastfeeding from a motherly Jesus, or Ida of Louvain's self-association with Mary nursing Jesus.<sup>50</sup> This fixation on female bodily functions forms a central aspect of the performance of femininity by virgins and married women alike. On the other hand, Kirsten Wolf, in discussing the trope of physical torture of virgin martyrs, asserts that the "transcendence of the body and the means of severing ties with Eve, whose transgression bound women to the pains of childbirth... was achieved through the struggle for sexless perfection, through virginity."<sup>51</sup> She continues to say that this deliberate rejection of the female body for spirituality constitutes an embracing of masculinity, and is the defining feature of a virgin's gender.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, examining bodily femininity's impact on the gender of virgins can lead scholars in two opposite directions.

Other scholars have taken inspiration from these explorations of female bodiliness, if only to assert a non-binary gendering of virgins. Sarah Salih writes: "Theoretically, in a period which acknowledges gender to be a social category, virginity can quite easily be described as a third gender, and occasionally is."<sup>53</sup> Salih reviews alternative gendering by introducing Karma Lochrie, who deals with the "unbounded" nature of female bodies and how, by being "corrected" by the "integrity" of virginity they are "enclosed" and thus, essentially, regendered in some

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<sup>50</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 166-167 (270).

<sup>51</sup> Kirsten Wolf, "The Severed Breast: A Topos in the Legends of Female Virgin Martyr Saints," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 112 (1997): 96-112 (106). Wolf's article is particularly interested in the severed breast topos, arguing that the severing of a virgin's breast during her tortures represents her masculinization. She particularly cites St. Fides in an Old Norse *vita* as an example of this topos. Fascinatingly, however, Hrotsvit seems to subvert this topos; when Hadrian attempts to sever Fides' breasts, Fides lactates instead. Far from removing a physical sign of bodily femininity, Hrotsvit emphasizes it. I will discuss this more below.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, 2.

way.<sup>54</sup> Lochrie explains in her monograph that her model of femininity depends upon construing the feminine as the “flesh,” namely the “principle of disruption in the human psyche.”<sup>55</sup> This “excess” produced by the flesh, and the “dangerous accessibility” of the female body is “corrected through moral and physical enclosure.”<sup>56</sup> Yet that very “accessibility” allows for a form of spirituality articulated through unbounded language about their access to the divine.<sup>57</sup> Salih notes that this analysis could imply “virginity as potential regendering,”<sup>58</sup> but she expands on this work further to claim:

[T]he medieval female religious virginity is arguably either a minority gender identity, or a locally specific inflection of ‘woman’; like any gender, it must be continuously performed and continuously read. ... It is imagined as bodily wholeness, a wholeness which cannot be found on the body’s surface but is instead produced by a range of symbolic practices.<sup>59</sup>

Virginity, in this view, is initially located in femininity, but constitutes a performance intended to “correct” certain undesirable feminine traits associated with the female body.

### **Marriage and Motherhood**

Though virginity is a major motif in Hrotsvit’s dramas, not all of her heroines are virgins, such as Sapientia, who is mother to three virgin daughters. Moreover, the metaphors of motherhood and marriage played crucial roles in constructing a particularly feminine sanctity in the Middle Ages, even in reference to virgins. Despite the crucial role of mothers and spiritual mothers in medieval religion, these modes of sanctity have appeared to generate less interest among scholars than virginity.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid 7-8.

<sup>55</sup> Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 38.



One key role that motherhood plays in the construction of female sanctity is the spiritualization of maternity, which allowed virgins to be understood as mothers, at least metaphorically.<sup>60</sup> Giselle de Nie locates the origin of this idea in the work of Origen, who described a “fecundity of the soul” wherein the soul gives birth to Christ in the world by way of the seed of the Word.<sup>61</sup> De Nie draws upon Peter Brown’s work on the individual’s intimate relationship to saints in late antiquity, when a cherished saint “could act almost as an ideogram for one’s own soul.”<sup>62</sup> Expanding upon this theory, de Nie explores how “the image of the Virgin mother” could metaphorically represent an individual’s soul “in various types of female holiness: that of the virgin, the mother, the widow, and the whore.”<sup>63</sup> She notes that biological sex does not inhibit both men and women from imitating “metaphorically” the roles of the opposite sex.<sup>64</sup> In her analysis, she discusses Thaïs, the protagonist of Hrotsvit’s play *Pafnutius*, specifically as enjoying a mystical marriage with Christ, and connects the idea of spiritual motherhood to the transforming image of virgins as female brides and mothers rather than male fighters.<sup>65</sup> Mitigating this positive reading of feminine spirituality, she insists that though “mother” could indicate a mode of sanctity, “there was no model of feminine fortitude except that of becoming a man.”<sup>66</sup>

In discussing motherhood and virginity under the Carolingians, Ineke van’t Spijker, like de Nie, argues that biological maternity took on spiritual significance. Unlike the conception of motherhood in late antiquity, van’t Spijker asserts that by this later period, “biological ties

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<sup>60</sup> Giselle de Nie, “‘Consciousness Fecund through God’: From Male Fighter to Spiritual Bride-Mother in Late Antique Female Sanctity,” in *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (New York: Garland, 1995), 101-161, (101).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” *Representations* 2 (1983): 1-25, 20.

<sup>63</sup> de Nie, “Consciousness Fecund through God,” 103.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 138-139, 150.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 150.

function as a substratum rather than as an obstacle” to sanctity. To make her point she describes the mother St. Rictrude mourning her daughter on the Feast of the Holy Innocents.<sup>67</sup> Analyzing the holy women of Carolingian monasteries, both virgins and mothers, van’t Spijker argues that “ordinary family relationships were incorporated into the marriage to Christ, rather than being annulled. ... The distinction between unmarried virgins and mothers remains: the first are the *Sponsae Christi*, but the second can share in that status on the basis of family ties.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, Hrotsvit, writing in the cultural legacy of the Carolingians,<sup>69</sup> is likely to have been influenced by Carolingian depictions of spiritualized familial ties.

Though only one prominent woman in Hrotsvit’s plays is a mother, Sapientia, the image of the holy mother or “sancta mater” was especially significant in the Ottonian period and likely to have influenced Hrotsvit greatly.<sup>70</sup> Ton Brandenburg, in tracing the development of different views of St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, noted that Anne’s image transitioned to that of an “ancestress” largely during the Ottonian period when “married women and widows from the prominent Ottonian dynasty were fulfilling an important role in religious and social life.”<sup>71</sup> This included even Oda of Gandersheim, the wife of Liudolf, the founder of the abbey at Gandersheim.<sup>72</sup> These women were not as ascetic as previous saints, but instead lived “a worldly life in harmony with the Christian values.”<sup>73</sup> Not surprisingly, the depiction of that life largely

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<sup>67</sup> Ineke van’t Spijker, “Family Ties: Mothers and Virgins in the Ninth Century,” in *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (New York: Garland, 1995), 165-190, (178).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>69</sup> Wilson, *The Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, xiii.

<sup>70</sup> Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker and Mireille Madou, Introduction to *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, 3-30 (New York: Garland, 1995), 23.

<sup>71</sup> Ton Brandenburg, “Saint Anne: A Holy Grandmother and Her Children,” in *Sanctity and Motherhood: Essays on Holy Mothers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, 31-65 (New York: Garland, 1995), 43.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

centered around their roles as “exemplary wives and mothers.”<sup>74</sup> One may question the relevancy of the specific image of “ancestress,” as Sapiientia’s daughters die as virgins; nonetheless, it is relevant that there was a popular acceptance of holy mothers under the Ottonians.

### **Hrotsvit and Gender**

While useful for context on female spirituality, not much of the discourse on female chastity intersects specifically with studies of Hrotsvit. Moreover, the question of how the gender of the heroic women in her plays is characterized has only been implicitly rather than explicitly discussed. In general, scholars have been more interested in what to make of the violence inflicted on the women in the plays, and in studying these topics, they have dealt only tangentially with how the heroines are “gendered,” asking whether they are masculinized in their heroics, feminized, or somehow characterized according to a non-binary third category. What does it mean to “perform” a specific gender? To these scholars, the answer varies, but many simply define masculine as strong and feminine as weak, with little attention to other characteristics that may tell us more about the gender of the heroines of Hrotsvit’s plays.

There are some scholars who suggest that the women are masculinized. A. Daniel Frankforter, for example, describes “career virgins” as practicing “strenuous renunciation of their feminine natures,”<sup>75</sup> and claims in his article that Hrotsvit actually thought women were spiritually and intellectually weaker than men, but that “under the dispensation of grace made necessary by human sin, God reveals apparent strengths to be weaknesses and works through the lowly for the salvation of the mighty.”<sup>76</sup> Frankforter recognizes the femininity of the heroines to an extent; he argues that Hrotsvit examines roles of “virgin, wife or whore” and “in each role she

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Frankforter, “Hroswitha of Gandersheim and the Destiny of Women,” 296.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 315.

described a woman's progress toward integrity and self-respect."<sup>77</sup> It seems that Frankforter defends Hrotsvit's female characters as having agency and strength, implying that their fulfillment comes through a masculinization and a denouncement of their femininity, i.e. weakness.

Carole E. Newlands seems to hold a similar opinion. In her article "Hrotswitha's Debt to Terence," she asserts that Hrotsvit improved her hagiographical sources using devices from classical drama, especially those deployed by Terence.<sup>78</sup> Comparing Hrotsvit's women with the Roman playwright's, she finds that the playwright imbues her female characters with far more agency than Terence does, his female characters being "weak" and "exploited."<sup>79</sup> In the course of establishing this line of reasoning, she sets up a dichotomy of passivity and activity in the behavior of the repentant prostitutes Thaïs and Maria, protagonists of *Pafnutius* and *Abraham* respectively—claiming that their activity in working for redemption contrasts with their passivity as prostitutes, and that they "overcome their *feminae fragilitas*" in the narrative.<sup>80</sup> So too does she affirm that "Hrotswitha then seems to be suggesting that women have an important spiritual advantage over men, for, being physically weaker, they can achieve an even greater spiritual victory."<sup>81</sup> Here Newlands cites physical weakness rather than spiritual weakness, yet speaks of femininity and spirituality purely in terms of a weakness that must be conquered. She does not consider other aspects of femininity, or the possibility that femininity is being embraced rather than rejected.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 304.

<sup>78</sup> Carole E. Newlands, "Hrotswitha's Debt to Terence," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 116 (1986): 369-391, 370.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 377.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 390-391.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 371.

Though some scholars portray Hrotsvit's women as performing masculinity through overcoming weakness, most imply that the heroines embrace femininity. Florence Newman, for instance, asserts that references to feminine fragility only exhibit Hrotsvit's self-consciousness at entering a male tradition of writing.<sup>82</sup> Further, the femininity of the heroines is important and even emphasized for Newman because she sees the specifically male-female dialogue, typically between the female saints and their persecutors, as a "crucial element of her [Hrotsvit's] compositional style."<sup>83</sup> In *Sapientia*, for example, women's eloquent speech is used "as a means of establishing power relations."<sup>84</sup> To Newman, the female gender is not equivalent to feminine frailty, but femininity is nonetheless important to the characters' heroism.

Several scholars mention not only frailty but also the traditional feminine attribute of beauty as important in Hrotsvit's gendering of her heroines. Sandro Sticca, for instance, views femininity as essential in the heroism of Hrotsvit's women. Although he advocates for Hrotsvit's sincere belief in the inferiority of women, he ultimately argues that "Hrotswitha's revolutionary theology is precisely that of bringing about the fulfillment of her women's destiny in the integrity of their being, by making their frailty, their fragility, and their beauty, a source of strength against evil."<sup>85</sup> Therefore it is clear that he sees weakness, but also other feminine attributes, as essential to the heroines' "strength against evil."<sup>86</sup>

Barbara Gold takes a similar tack as Sticca. Though she rebukes scholars such as Sticca who take Hrotsvit at her word when the playwright complains of her own feminine weakness,

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<sup>82</sup> Florence Newman, "Strong Voice(s) of Hrotsvit: Male-Female Dialogue," in *A Companion to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (fl. 960)*, ed. Phyllis R. Brown and Stephen L. Wailes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 287-310 (289).

<sup>83</sup> Newman, "Strong Voice(s) of Hrotsvit," 303.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>85</sup> Sandro Sticca, "The Hagiographical and Monastic Context of Hrotswitha's Plays," in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Rara Avis in Saxonia?*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson, 1-34 (Ann Arbor: Marc Publishing Co., 1987), 9.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

reading Hrotsvit's humility as the humility topos,<sup>87</sup> she affirms her intention of glorifying feminine spiritual heroes. To Gold, Hrotsvit is "a woman who wants to rescue herself and others of her gender from the perdition and obscurity to which they have been confined and to celebrate women's chastity, beauty and worth; and a fighting hero who is a staunch champion of holy virgins."<sup>88</sup> Unlike many critics Gold specifies what she means by feminizing, claiming that Hrotsvit portrays women as spiritually heroic "within their traditional social roles as women," such as "mother," "wife," "sister," "niece," and "daughter."<sup>89</sup> This discussion is similar to Frankforter's description of female fulfillment within their social roles of "virgin, wife or whore,"<sup>90</sup> but ultimately, like Sticca, Gold concludes that Hrotsvit's presentation of female heroism does not strip them of femininity but rather turns "their weaknesses into strengths."<sup>91</sup>

Similarly, Prudence Allen, in her massive work, *The Concept of Woman*, which traces the Catholic idea of gender from the pre-Christian ancients into the modern period, analyzes Hrotsvit's "concept of woman" mainly through her analysis of *Sapientia*; describing Sapientia's baffling of the emperor with mathematics and her daughters' defiance of their tortures and pointing out three inversions of "pagan philosophy" about gender in the plays.<sup>92</sup> First, the women resist Antiochus's flattery, although he assumed that they would capitulate to it easily due to their "feminine fragility."<sup>93</sup> Second, the women prove the superiority of their rational minds compared to the men.<sup>94</sup> Third, the brute, physical strength of men cannot overcome the strength of a woman's will, and therefore, "the concept of woman is revealed as containing wisdom,

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<sup>87</sup> Gold, "Hrotswitha Writes Herself: Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis," 46.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>90</sup> Frankforter, "Hroswitha of Gandersheim and the Destiny of Women," 304.

<sup>91</sup> Gold, "Hrotswitha Writes Herself," 51.

<sup>92</sup> Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, 261.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

virtue, and strength.”<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Allen notes that the women in the play are allegorical embodiments of the virtues of Wisdom, Faith, Hope, and Charity and concludes that the conquest of these figures signifies the superiority of philosophy accompanied by Christian virtue over pagan philosophy devoid of divine revelation.<sup>96</sup> Allen’s attention to the femininity of the allegorical heroines of *Sapientia* clearly differentiates between femininity and an idea of fragility, ascribing strength of will, rationality, and Christian virtue to Hrotsvit’s female characters.

Finally, other scholars have embraced the non-binary gender theory that Salih describes. Lisa M. C. Weston, for example, uses much of the same language as Karma Lochrie regarding regendering and closing “pervious, excessive, and susceptible” bodies.<sup>97</sup> Weston primarily claims that “Hrotsvit’s engagement with the erotic facilitates her (re)writing of her own monastic identity and subjectivity.”<sup>98</sup> Discussing the virgin heroes of Hrotsvit’s plays in particular, she writes: “virginity... tacitly appropriates the patriarchal control of female lives. This appropriation presents a potential political, even cultural threat, and that threat gives rise to the violence and martyrdom so central to their stories.”<sup>99</sup> As such she also interprets virginity as the “purging” and “closing of the body,” which complements Lochrie’s claim that this “closing” constitutes a regendering from female, a gender associated with open or “leaky” bodies.<sup>100</sup> Weston seems to suggest the women, particularly the heroic virgins, are neither feminine nor masculine but nonetheless somehow regendered. This moves beyond the simple binary construction of weakness/feminine and strength/masculine, a dichotomy that so many scholars embrace.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Lisa M. C. Weston, “Virginity and Other Sexualities,” in *A Companion to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* (fl. 960), ed. Phyllis R. Brown and Stephen L. Wailes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 267-286 (269).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 270.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

However, this model appears to abandon femininity wholesale in doing so. My study offers another view by challenging the unfortunately ubiquitous gender dichotomy and suggesting that Hrotsvit's women enact a more complex picture of femininity.

### Methodology

In this study, I argue that the virgin martyrs of Hrotsvit's dramas are feminine. Though it is true that the physical weakness of women is exemplified as an aspect of femininity in the plays, especially as a way to glorify God over the apparently physically strong male aggressors, I suggest that Hrotsvit's understanding of femininity encompasses both feminine bodily nature and apparently female spiritual gifts embraced by the heroines in their tribulations. I would support this by examining the Latin words describing the women in moments of heroism to see how they are gendered, not in the sense of grammatical gender necessarily, but the associations and overtones of the particular words with respect to gender, as well as the images associated with them. For example, in *Sapientia*, Antiochus uses very gendered language in disparaging Sapientia and her daughters: "fragilitas sexus feminei facilius potest blandimentis molliri" ["The fragility of the feminine sex can more easily be softened by flattery."] <sup>101</sup> Besides the open reference to the female sex, the verb "mollio" has gendered overtones; according to Lewis and Short's Latin dictionary, the verb does not only mean "soften," but to "render effeminate or unmanly" or "to unman." <sup>102</sup> Additionally, Hadrian refers to them as "tantillarum... muliercularum," ["such trivial, little women,"] appending a diminutive to both "mulier" (woman) and "tantus" (of such a size), resulting in an extremely condescending, gendered appellation. <sup>103</sup> While femininity is used pejoratively here, by contrast, when Antiochus attempts to amputate

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<sup>101</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 359. All Latin translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

<sup>102</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., "mollio," *A Latin Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 358.



Fides' nipples, Adrian remarks, "Forsan coercebitur," ["Perhaps she will be tamed,"] and she responds, "Inviolatum pectus vulnerasti, sed me non laesisti. En, pro fonte sanguinis unda erumpit lactis." ["You injured my inviolable chest, but you did not harm me. See, in place of the font of blood bursts forth a wave of milk."] <sup>104</sup> Here Hrotsvit uses lactation, an image strongly associated with motherhood and femininity, to accompany a rebuke to the emperor's attempt to restrain or tame the virgin. Additionally, the word "coerceo" is pregnant with meaning, connoting not just "to tame" or "to restrain," but also "to enclose something on all sides or wholly," according to Lewis and Short. <sup>105</sup> This exchange, combined with the virgin's simultaneous bodily continence of blood but with respect of milk, invites analysis of Hrotsvit's portrayal of female bodies, and how that portrayal figures into her gendering of her female characters' heroism.

For further context on modes of female sanctity that Hrotsvit might have been influenced by, I compare accounts of heroic women from the Vulgate Bible, such as Judith and Susanna, among others, which were popular through the medieval period. This context will establish the Latin language used to describe heroic women and offer a basis of comparison for Hrotsvit's descriptions. Ultimately I plan on situating Hrotsvit's depiction of female heroism within the discourse about the changing gender of women's spirituality, to bring greater clarity to the diversity of female models of devotion.

In chapters 2 and 3, I address the plays *Dulcitus* and *Sapientia* and discuss the treatment of the virgin martyrs at the center of the stories, their inviolate bodies, and how their virginity is gendered. My discussion of *Sapientia* will include the role of Sapientia, the mother of the three martyrs, and explore how her motherhood is figured into the gendered portrayal of her

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 366.

<sup>105</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., "coerceo," *A Latin Dictionary*.

spirituality. While chapter 2 will examine the scenes in which the holy women engage in verbal combat with pagan persecutors, chapter 3 will focus on the spiritual struggles located in their bodily tortures and executions. In chapter 2, I discuss how stalwart resistance to flattering speech is a method by which the virgin martyrs perform their feminine chastity and overturn the paradigm of feminine fragility. Chapter 3, however, will focus on the feminized depictions of female bodies amid their tortures alongside affirmations of spiritual strength. My hope is that this study demonstrates that Hrotsvit saw no contradiction in terms between being feminine and strong or heroic. Furthermore, it will challenge the limitations of the current scholarly discourse on female sanctity and chastity in the Middle Ages, offering an alternative interpretation of women's sanctity.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PERFORMANCE OF VIRGINITY THROUGH SPEECH

“How she would desire that her speech had existed as a defence of her chastity!”<sup>1</sup> In his tract on virginity, St. Ambrose describes a tale about a pagan virgin, who when interrogated by a tyrant about the Pythagorean secret, bit off her own tongue to avoid revealing it and breaking the Pythagorean rites. Despite her preservation of her secret, she eventually succumbed to the king’s seduction. By contrast, a Christian virgin martyr “did not destroy her tongue through fear, but kept it for a trophy. For there was nothing in her which she feared to betray, since that which she acknowledged was holy, not sinful. And so the former merely concealed her secret, the latter bore witness to the Lord, and confessed Him in her body.”<sup>2</sup> Ambrose literally connects the virgin’s power for speech as a primary method of expressing her chastity and spirituality. The tenth-century nun and playwright Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, in turn, highlights her virgins’ strong speech in the interrogation scenes that initiate her dramas.

Hrotsvit begins both *Dulcitus* and *Sapientia* with scenes in which the pagan emperor interrogates the rebellious Christian virgins. These interrogation scenes play a crucial role in Hrotsvit’s portrayal of feminine heroism and chastity. Karen Winstead includes such episodes in her description of the generic virgin martyr story:

Many of the standard ingredients of virgin martyr legends are found in the accounts of most early Christian martyrs, male or female: the saint refuses to participate in pagan sacrifices, debates her antagonist, affirms the fundamental tenets of Christianity, destroys idols, performs miracles, and endures excruciating torments.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning Virginity*, trans. H. de Romestin and H. T. F. Duckworth, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896), accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34071.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 5.

Winstead notes, however, that a major difference between the passion narratives of female martyrs and male martyrs is “a preoccupation with gender and sexuality.”<sup>4</sup> Winstead mostly discusses later English sources in her monograph and focuses on the aspects of bodily torture in virgin martyrdoms.<sup>5</sup> What she does not observe in the English sources is crucial to understand in Hrotsvit’s dramas: the virgins’ responses to their interrogation, wherein they “debate their antagonists,” are an essential aspect of their performance of chastity. In *Dulcitius* and *Sapientia*, the pagan men expect to persuade the women to apostasy through flattery or seductive speech (“blandimenta,” as Hrotsvit is fond of using) due to their particular weakness as females. The women’s imperviousness to this seductive flattery through their verbal resistance, and the subversiveness of their argumentation, parallels their physical resistance as virgins to violations of their chastity and implicit challenge to the established political order through their defiantly continent sexuality.<sup>6</sup> Hence in the interrogation scenes in *Dulcitius* and *Sapientia*, the virgin martyrs perform their virginity through subversive speech, a brand of heroism only enabled by their position as women.

Through such speech and chastity, the women overturn the expected power dynamics of politics and gender. As Florence Newman observes of combative verbal exchanges between men and women in Hrotsvit’s drama: “Christian women resist and debate with their pagan male

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Winstead does discuss some verbal combat in relation to the Katherine Group, for example, a spirited exchange between St. Juliana and her father, who is having her put to tortures. She observes that “Juliana’s passion came about into a bitter contest of wills” and that through such struggles she becomes “a woman with goals of her own and the determination to implement them” (45). However, Winstead does not discuss any sort of connection between verbal resistance and chaste resistance to sex, or consider specifically interrogation scenes on their own for virgin martyrs—even the incident she cites her is juxtaposed closely with bodily torture.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Weston discusses at greater length the possibility of reading virginity itself as a challenge to the patriarchy and its subsequent connection to martyrdom: “virginity... tacitly appropriates the patriarchal control of female lives. This appropriation presents a potential political, even cultural threat, and that threat gives rise to the violence and martyrdom so central to their stories.” See Lisa M. C. Weston, “Virginity and Other Sexualities,” in *A Companion to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* (fl. 960), ed. Phyllis R. Brown and Stephen L. Wailes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 267-286 (270).

persecutors, driving the dramatic action until antagonists are verbally vanquished, spiritual virtues are validated, and blessed martyrdom is achieved.”<sup>7</sup> Hrotsvit’s technique comprises a multilayered reversal of power dynamics, wherein through their strong speech, the virgins reverse “traditional gender stereotypes and relations... even as traditional theological doctrines are satisfyingly reaffirmed.”<sup>8</sup> Newman briefly cites Sapientia’s mathematical lesson to Hadrian as demonstrating her intellectual superiority, and Fides, Spes, and Karitas as shaming their male persecutors verbally.<sup>9</sup> She observes that speech is used as a method of “establishing power relations.”<sup>10</sup> As I will demonstrate below, Hrotsvit’s virgins in *Dulcinius* consistently manipulate rhetoric to reverse the power dynamics, not just using stronger speech than the men, but reversing the interrogations so that they are in control rather than the officials who purportedly should be asking the questions. The eponymous Sapientia, as well, controls the course of her conversation with the emperor by controlling arithmetical knowledge, and furthermore, exposes the emperor’s utter disdain for wisdom itself.

The style of the virgins’ speech combines both militaristic and bridal language. Frequent juxtaposition of words with *martial* and *marital* connotations permeates the dialogue in the interrogation scenes, suggesting that Hrotsvit’s image of virginity, and of feminine heroism therein, cannot be simply defined as either “early/militant” or “late/bridal,” as the predominant scholarly narrative of virgin martyrs suggests. Through the language used to describe the women both by the emperors and by themselves, the heroines are portrayed as both soldiers and brides of Christ in Hrotsvit’s interrogation scenes.

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<sup>7</sup> Florence Newman, “Strong Voice(s) of Hrotsvit: Male-Female Dialogue,” in *A Companion to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (fl. 960)*, ed. Phyllis R. Brown and Stephen L. Wailes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 287-310 (303).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 297.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 297-298. Fides, Spes and Karitas’ verbal shaming coincides with their endurance of physical tortures, and as such, will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 298.

### Interrogation in *Dulcitius*

*Dulcitius* opens with the emperor Diocletian already having brought the accused Christian sisters Agape, Chionia, and Hirena<sup>11</sup> before him for questioning, in an attempt to persuade them to apostatize and worship the Roman gods in a show of loyalty to the empire. Such a formal interrogation is not only present in Hrotsvit's much later dramatic accounts of Roman martyrs, but is a common trope in martyrdom narratives. Even according to our earliest Roman sources of Christian persecution, interrogation and persuasion were the first steps in dealing with Christians—as Pliny wrote to Trajan, “qui ad me tamquam Christiani deferebantur, hunc sum secutus modum. Interrogavi ipsos an essent Christiani. Confitentes iterum ac tertio interrogavi supplicium minatus; perseverantes duci iussi.”<sup>12</sup> [“Those who, for instance, were denounced to me as Christian, I followed this method. I asked them whether they were Christians. Those who confess, a second or third time I interrogated them, threatened torture; those persevering I ordered to be carried off.”] Pliny's methods apparently continue in other early accounts, such as “The Passion of Sts. Perpetua and Felicity,” purportedly written by St. Perpetua herself before her execution in 203:

Alio die cum pranderemus, subito rapti sumus ut audiremur. et peruenimus ad forum. ... ascendimus in catastam. interrogati ceteri confessi sunt. uentum est et ad me. et apparuit pater ilico cum filio meo et extraxit me de gradu dicens: Supplica. miserere infanti. et Hilarianus procurator... Parce, inquit, canis patris tui, parce infantiae pueri. fac sacrum pro salute imperatorum. et ego respondi: Non facio. Hilarianus: Christiana es? inquit. et ego respondi: Christiana sum. et cum staret pater ad me deiciendam, iussus est ab Hilariano proiciet uirga percussus est. et doluit mihi casus patris mei quasi ego fuissem percussa; sic dolui pro senecta eius misera. tunc nos uniuersos pronuntiat et damnat ad bestias; et hilares descendimus ad carcerem.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Agape, Chionia, and Hirena (or Irene), are Greek names meaning Love, Purity, and Peace, respectively. I refer to them throughout this project as Agape, Chionia, and Hirena as Hrotsvit does to avoid any confusion. The literal translations of their names suggest an allegorical character to their passions.

<sup>12</sup> Pliny, *Epistularum Libri Decem* 10.96, accessed January 25, 2017, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/pliny.ep10.html>. All translations are my own, except where otherwise noted.

<sup>13</sup> H. Musurillo, ed., “Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis,” in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 106-130, accessed January 25, 2017, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/perp.html>.

[Another day as we were at meal we were suddenly snatched away to be tried; and we came to the forum. ... We went up to the tribunal. The others being asked, confessed. So they came to me. And my father appeared there also, with my son, and would draw me from the step, saying: Perform the Sacrifice; have mercy on the child. And Hilarian the procurator... said: Spare your father's grey hairs; spare the infancy of the boy. Make sacrifice for the Emperors' prosperity. And I answered: I am a Christian. And when my father stood by me yet to cast down my faith, he was bidden by Hilarian to be cast down and was smitten with a rod. And I sorrowed for my father's harm as though I had been smitten myself; so sorrowed I for his unhappy old age. Then Hilarian passed sentence upon us all and condemned us to the beasts; and cheerfully we went down to the dungeon.]<sup>14</sup>

In historical primary sources, it is clear that interrogation, in which people were not only asked whether they were Christian, but questioned on multiple occasions, including under threat of torture, was the norm. Moreover, as seen in Perpetua's account, Roman officials were not averse to using emotional appeals and manipulation to try to convince Christians to abandon the faith. While Hrotsvit's dramatic accounts draw on the typical, legal interrogations, she develops them past even Perpetua's emotional experience to protracted verbal sparring. In *Dulcitius*, this sparring takes the form of flattery and pressure to marry, a clear sexual threat, avoided at turns by the virgins, followed by accusations of impiety or insanity, deftly countered by their argumentation. These dramatic elaborations on interrogation subvert gendered expectations of feminine frailty, replacing them with striking exemplars of female resilience.

The play *Dulcitius* begins with Diocletian interrogating the three sisters who have been brought him. His first line of dialogue, and the first line in the play, brings to the audience's attention the imminent marriageability of the women: "Parentelae claritas ingenuitatis vestrumque serenitas pulchritudinis exigit, vos nuptiali lege primis in palatio copulari, quod nostri iussio annuerit fieri, si Christum negare nostrisque diis sacrificia velitis ferre." ["The renown of the free birth of your parents and the fairness of your beauty demands that you be

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<sup>14</sup> W. H. Shewring, trans., *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1931), accessed January 25, 2017, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/perpetua.asp>.

joined to the first men in the palace by the nuptial law, which my order will sanction, if you want to deny Christ and bring sacrifice to our gods.”<sup>15</sup> Here the emperor directly opposes the beauty and nobility of the sisters with their religious convictions. The verb “exigo” suggests “to demand some duty,”<sup>16</sup> which establishes a syllogism between the women’s nobility and beauty and their presumed duty to marry the men of his palace. This, in turn, he indicates is predicated upon their denial of Christ. By this logic, the virgins’ beauty and nobility is intrinsically opposed to their religious beliefs; however, as this speech comes from the emperor, one can surmise that Hrotsvit intends the opposite conclusion to be drawn by the audience. Moreover, the emperor in this address uses the future perfect for the verb “annuerit,” indicating his presumption that the women will answer his simple present conditional about wanting to deny Christ in the affirmative.

Additionally, as their potential for marriage is linked to their apostasy, in the reverse, their refusal of marriage and their chastity is linked to their adherence to the faith. Agape, answering the emperor, illuminates this point: “Esto securus curarum, nec te gravet nostrum praeparatio nuptiarum, quia nec ad negationem confitendi nominis, nec ad corruptionem integritatis ullis rebus compelli poterimus.” [“Be free of cares, and let not preparations for our weddings weigh upon you, because we will not be able to be compelled to deny the name that must be confessed, nor corrupt our integrity by anything.”]<sup>17</sup> Agape answers him in the future tense, rebuking his confidence with her self-assurance. While Diocletian emphasized their potential for marriage, Agape’s language emphasizes their chastity. Her use of the word “integritas” is particularly telling; according to Lewis and Short the word’s meanings include

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<sup>15</sup> H. Homeyer, ed. *Hrotsvithae Opera*, (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1970), 268. All translations of Hrotsvit are my own.

<sup>16</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds. *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s.v. “exigo.”

<sup>17</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 268.



“completeness, soundness; blamelessness, innocence, integrity; chastity of females.”<sup>18</sup> This is very gendered language, as it is particularly connected to female chastity. Such diction emphasizes not only their chastity, but also their femininity. Combined with the use of the phrase “ad corruptionem... compelli,” this changes the rhetoric to be specifically oriented toward the idea of rape, which contrasts with the licit idea of marriage mentioned by Diocletian. “Corruptio” in particular has a sexual connotation, as Lewis and Short define it as “a corrupting, spoiling, seducing.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in the Roman Digest certain titles discuss “ad impudicitiam compellere” in reference to rape, making it likely that this sort of language was connected to that act.<sup>20</sup> Hrotsvit thus presents an antithesis between Diocletian’s first line and Agape’s. While Diocletian’s dialogue links their nobility and grace with the potential for marriage and thereby worship of the Roman gods, Agape counters him with equal confidence, describing his marriage proposal as akin to rape and emphasizing her feminine “integritas.”

Diocletian counters Agape by asking, “Quid sibi vult ista, quae vos agitat, fatuitas?” [What does this silliness want, which impels you?]<sup>21</sup> Agape then questions Diocletian as to what signs of silliness he detects in her. He replies, “In hoc praecipue, quod, relicta vetustae observantia religionis, inutilem christianae novitatem sequimini superstitionis.” [“In this chiefly, that, having abandoned the observance of ancient religion, you follow the useless novelty of Christian superstition.”]<sup>22</sup> The word “agito” carries connotations of agency—Lewis and Short define the word as “to put a thing in motion, to drive or impel.”<sup>23</sup> As such, the emperor is ascribing the women’s actions to “fatuitas,” or “vanity,” “foolishness,” or “stupidity,” even

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<sup>18</sup> s.v. “integritas.”

<sup>19</sup> s.v. “corruptio.”

<sup>20</sup> s.v. “compello.”

<sup>21</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 268.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 268-269.

<sup>23</sup> s.v. “agito.”

“silliness.”<sup>24</sup> Dictionaries such as Souter and Blaise Patristic suggest the word can connote “languor” or “faintness.”<sup>25</sup> Considering that sense of the word, the emperor denies that the sisters are acting of their own accord, but rather are compelled to act a certain way by stupidity or weakness. By rebuking the emperor, Agape and her sisters are, in the reverse, negating these charges of stupidity and affirming their own control of their actions; moreover, Agape’s speech exhibits anything but faintness or stupidity. Responding to this charge by the emperor, the following exchange occurs:

AGAPES. Temere calumpniaris statum dei omnipotentis. Periculum—  
 DIOCLETIANUS. Cuius?  
 AGAPES. Tui reique publicae, quam gubernas.  
 DIOCLETIANUS. Ista insanit; amoveatur!

[AGAPE. Thoughtlessly you deprecate the character of the almighty God. Danger—  
 DIOCLETIAN. For whom?  
 AGAPE. For you and the state you govern.  
 DIOCLETIAN. This woman is insane; let her be removed!]<sup>26</sup>

Contrasting the “fatuitas” of Diocletian, Agape rebukes him by citing the “status dei omnipotentis.” Moreover, Agape’s language is legalistic. “Calumnior” is used legally to mean “to accuse falsely” or “misrepresent”; “statum,” as well, is used legally.<sup>27</sup> Though technically the women are on trial, it seems that Agape, rather than Diocletian, is controlling the interrogation, and legally accusing Diocletian of irreverence, though toward the Christian God. This ironic contrast to the reality of the situation, wherein Diocletian is supposed to be accusing the women

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<sup>24</sup> s.v. “fatuitas.”

<sup>25</sup> Albert Blaise, ed. *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), s.v. “fatuitas,” and Alexander Souter, ed., *A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D.* (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon, 1998), s.v. “fatuitas.”

<sup>26</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 269.

<sup>27</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “calumnior” and s.v. “statum.”

of irreverence to the Roman gods, reverses the power relationship in the dialogue, placing Agape more in the position of emperor than the emperor himself.

Chionia enters into the dialogue in response to the emperor, arguing that her sister is not crazy, but rather, justly censured Diocletian's stupidity ("stultitiam.")<sup>28</sup> Diocletian accuses her of insanity as well, replying: "Ista dementius bachatur; unde nostris conspectibus aequae subtrahatur, et tertia discutiatur." ["This woman rages more crazily; let her be dragged from our gaze as well, and let the third be examined."] <sup>29</sup> Using the word "bacchor," Diocletian connects Chionia's behavior to the classical Bacchantes who celebrated the feast of Bacchus. As discussed in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, Book 39, Chapter 13, the Bacchantes were a cult common in classical Rome, at first confined only to women and ruled by priestesses; eventually men were incorporated and every form of debauchery arose.<sup>30</sup> In particular, Livy seemed to be concerned with sexual norms, writing:

ex quo in promiscuo sacra sint et permixti viri feminis, et noctis licentia accesserit, nihil ibi facinoris, nihil flagitii praetermissum. plura virorum inter sese quam feminarum esse stupra. si qui minus patientes dedecoris sint et pigriores ad facinus, pro victimis immolari. nihil nefas ducere, hanc summam inter eos religionem esse. viros velut mente capta cum iactatione fanatica corporis vaticinari; matronas Baccharum habitu crinibus sparsis cum ardentibus facibus decurrere ad Tiberim demissasque in aquam faces, quia vivum sulphur cum calce insit, integra flamma efferre.<sup>31</sup>

[From the time that the rites were performed in common, men mingling with women and the freedom of darkness added, no form of crime, no sort of wrongdoing, was left untried. There were more lustful practices among men with one another than among women. If any of them were disinclined to endure abuse or reluctant to commit crime, they were sacrificed as victims. Men, as if insane, with fanatical tossings of their bodies, would utter prophecies. Matrons in the dress of Bacchantes, with dishevelled hair and carrying blazing torches, would run down to the Tiber, and plunging their torches in the water

<sup>28</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 269.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>30</sup> Livy, *The History of Rome, Book 39*, trans. Evan T. Sage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 252-255.

<sup>31</sup> Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, ed. W. Weissenborn (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1875), 24.

(because they contained live sulphur mixed with calcium) would bring them out still burning.]<sup>32</sup>

The Bacchantes were associated not only with women, who started the cult, but with a socially destructive order: Livy writes that when the matter was brought before the Roman Senate, the senators were terrified that the cult would produce some “danger” (“periculum”<sup>33</sup>) and issued an edict suppressing their gatherings.<sup>34</sup> Their religious practice itself was seen as destructive to society and impious, especially concerning sexual mores. This is a fascinating comparison to Hrotsvit’s women, who are indeed part of an “impious” cult that is subversive to Roman society. Moreover, their sexual choices are also disruptive to the Roman state, but in an opposite way to the emperor’s insinuation; while Livy emphasizes that the Bacchantes were lustful, licentious, and mingling illicitly with members of the opposite sex, Diocletian certainly sees some of the same behavior in the women: in the original story Hrotsvit drew from, the three sisters were part of a Christian group that involved both men and women.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, they refused marriage, clearly not in order to carry on orgies as the Bacchantes, but rather to swear chastity to Christ. Nonetheless, the denial of marriage, as made clear in the emperor’s opening line, was audaciously subversive and linked to their religious disobedience as well. Therefore, Hrotsvit’s allusion to the Bacchantes highlights the socially subversive nature of the virgins’ sexuality as well as their unique status as female religious figures.

The drama then proceeds to the interrogation of Hirena, the youngest sister. Hirena, by contrast, responds to Diocletian with almost militaristic language: “Tertiam rebellem tibi que penitus probabis renitentem.” [“You will test a third rebel withstanding you internally.”]<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Livy, *The History of Rome, Book 39*, trans. Evan T. Sage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 255.

<sup>33</sup> Weissenborn, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Sage, 257.

<sup>35</sup> Donald Attwater, *A Dictionary of Saints* (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1958), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 269.

“Renitor” is “to strive or struggle against, to withstand, to resist,” and is considered a rare word, having only twenty-six citations among classical sources in the Library of Latin Texts.<sup>37</sup> It is used mostly by Pliny in his *Natural History*, Celsus in *On Medicine*, and Apuleius in *Metamorphoses*. While Apuleius seems to use it in the same sense as Hrotsvit as a mental resistance, the use of it as a scientific term is apparently a quirk of the classical period; later authors such as Ambrose use it in a spiritual sense.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, “probo” has a military technical sense of examining to approve for military service, though not used in that sense here, it has that meaning as well.<sup>39</sup> “Rebellis” especially has definite military overtones—literally defined as “that makes war afresh, insurgent, rebellious,” the word is used frequently by Tacitus to refer to the barbarians, and in the Middle Ages, is used in legal sources. Hirena is depicted as a soldier through her speech, at least internally (“penitus”), creating an irony of her weak physical form and a “rebellis” spirit.

Diocletian and Hirena’s conversation then transitions into a question of dignity and honor:

DIOCLETIANUS. Hirena, cum sis minor aetate, fito maior dignitate.

HIRENA. Ostende, quaeso, quo pacto!

DIOCLETIANUS. Flecte cervicem diis et esto sororibus exemplum correctionis et causa liberationis.

HIRENA. Conquiniscant idolis, qui velint incurrere iram celsitonantis! Ego quidem caput regali unguento delibutum non dehonestabo pedibus simulachrorum submitiendo.

DIOCLETIANUS. Cultura deorum non adducit inhonestatem, sed praecipuum honorem.

HIRENA. Et quae inhonestas turpior, quae turpitudine maior, quam ut servus veneretur ut dominus?

DIOCLETIANUS. Non suadeo tibi venerari servos, sed dominos principumque deos.

HIRENA. Nonne is est cuiusvis servus, qui ab artifice pretio comparatur ut empticius?

[DIOCLETIAN. Hirena, although you are younger, be greater in dignity.

HIRENA. I ask you, show me in what way!

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<sup>37</sup> s.v. “renitor.”

<sup>38</sup> “renitor,” Similarity Search in the Brepols Cross Database Searchtool across the Library of Latin Texts.

<sup>39</sup> s.v. “probo.”

DIOCLETIAN. Bend your neck to the gods and be an example of correction and cause of liberation for your sisters.

HIRENA. Those who want to incur the wrath of the heavenly God cower down to idols! I, however, will not dishonor the one anointed by oil by putting my head below the feet of idols.

DIOCLETIAN. The worship of the gods does not bring dishonor, but the principle honor.

HIRENA. And what dishonor is more filthy, what filth is greater, than that the slave be venerated as a lord?

DIOCLETIAN. I do not press you to venerate slaves, but the gods and lords of princes.

HIRENA. Is he not anyone's slave, who is bought from the maker for a price as a purchase?]<sup>40</sup>

Hirena and Diocletian seem to have a central agreement on what constitutes honor—namely, taking one's proper place in an order or hierarchy. Diocletian sees worshipping the Roman gods, including the emperor himself, as accepting that place; Hirena, however, rejects the gods as empty idols, thereby beneath her, and more importantly, beneath the Christian God. She turns Diocletian's logic on its head, changing the Roman political paradigm by placing the Christian God above Roman idols and therefore above Roman political authority. As such, Hirena, rather than Diocletian, becomes the interrogator and Diocletian becomes the interrogated, refusing to accept his proper place in a hierarchy organized around the true God. This reverses the power dynamics such that the Christian women, despite being physically disempowered, are depicted as having greater power and dignity than their pagan persecutors, due to their adherence to the true God.

Diocletian then dismisses her: "Huius praesumptio verbositatis tollenda est suppliciiis." ["The audacity of this multiplicity of words must be removed by tortures."]<sup>41</sup> Hirena, however, replies emphatically: "Hoc optamus, hoc amplectimur, ut pro Christi amore suppliciiis laceremur." ["This we desire, this we embrace, that for the love of Christ we may be wounded by

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<sup>40</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 269.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 270.

tortures.”<sup>42</sup> Hirena’s response is extremely emphatic due to the repetition of “hoc” plus the first person plural verbs. “Amplector” is especially interesting because of its connotations; though it is simply defined as “embrace,”<sup>43</sup> Hrotsvit uses it as a euphemism for sex when describing Dulcitius’s failed attempt to assault the women that resulted in his sexual assault on pots and pans.<sup>44</sup> This gives the women’s action of embracing their martyrdom a sexual overtone.

Moreover, “amor” is a word in an interesting position, as during the medieval period it seemed to be changing from the patristic connotations of carnal love, as opposed to “affectio, dilectio, caritas,” which described Christian love more often.<sup>45</sup> Though the word transitioned into typical religious usage in medieval Latin,<sup>46</sup> the sexual character of the term must have remained for Hrotsvit, as this is also a word Dulcitius uses in a sexual context.<sup>47</sup> “Opto” also primarily means “desire.”<sup>48</sup> Hrotsvit’s word choice additionally imbues the women with more agency; rather than being sent to their deaths against their will, they actively desire and embrace their tortures. Hirena combines both militaristic and bridal language seamlessly. This raises the question of whether Hrotsvit ever saw a distinction between these modes of spirituality, or saw spiritual militarism as perfectly compatible with spiritual marriage.

While the sexual and militaristic connotations are clear, there is additionally an underlying religious irony in Hirena and Diocletian’s exchange. “Supplicium,” clearly intended

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> s.v. “amplector.”

<sup>44</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 271.

<sup>45</sup> Albert Blaise, ed., *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens*, s.v. “amor.”

<sup>46</sup> Albert Blaise, ed., *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs du Moyen-Âge* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975), s.v. “amor.”

<sup>47</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 270. This may also be connected to her Terentian influences; Terence uses variations on “amor” or “amo” 160 times, searching across the Brepols Library of Latin Texts. Given the relatively small number of words written by Terence, this is a fairly high number of usages. Perseus’s word frequency tool can determine the maximum number of usages of a word in a text, and calculates the ratio per 10 thousand words. The highest of these ratios for Terence is 16.569 in *Andria*, and the lowest is 3.174 in *Phormio*. For contrast, the Latin Vulgate has a ratio of 0.354. For more details, refer to <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/wordfreq?lookup=amor&lang=la&sort=max10k>.

<sup>48</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “opto.”

by Diocletian to mean “torture,” has another meaning “in relig. lang, ‘humiliation, a public prayer or supplication, an act of worship... a sacrificing, offering.’”<sup>49</sup> Given the self-sacrificial nature of martyrdom in recalling Jesus’s own self-sacrifice, it seems Hrotsvit intended an ironic double meaning. While the women are at once being lacerated by tortures, they are also practicing the highest form of witness to God, the highest act of worship of a Christian, in being martyred for her faith. Moreover, the irony of the situation is that they were supposed to be offering sacrifice to the Roman gods; in refusing to do so, they then are offering the ultimate sacrifice to the Christian God. The frequency with which Hrotsvit uses this word—in this case, twice within two lines—suggests that she intends to highlight the connection between the tortures and the religious practice of martyrdom. Then, the women are at once, warriors, brides, and sacrifices, all of their own desire and choosing.

Diocletian challenges this portrayal with his final line in the interrogation: “Istae contumaces nostrisque decretis contraluctantes catenis inretiantur et ad examen Dulcitii praesidis sub carcerali squalore servantur.” [“Let these women, unyielding and wrestling against our decrees, be ensnared with chains and kept under imprisoned squalor for the scrutiny of the guard Dulcitus.”]<sup>50</sup> Hrotsvit exhibits her fondness for affixing prefixes to the beginning of verbs with the compound “contraluctor,” a word only she uses, and uses multiple times (three times in *Sapientia*).<sup>51</sup> “Luctor” means “to wrestle, to contend, to struggle.”<sup>52</sup> Though the word suggests extreme physical altercation, it is followed by “inretio,” which according to Blaise means “prendre dans un filet, (fig.) envelopper, embarrasser, enlacer, séduire,”<sup>53</sup> in addition to Lewis

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<sup>49</sup> s.v. “supplicium.”

<sup>50</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 270.

<sup>51</sup> Hrotsvit actually uses forms of this word on twelve separate occasions, and is the only author to have used this word, as seen in searching Hrotsvit’s works in the Library of Latin Texts for instances of “contraluct.” The uses in *Sapientia*, specifically, occur on pages 357, 367, and 371 of the Homeyer edition.

<sup>52</sup> s.v. “luctor.”

<sup>53</sup> Albert Blaise, ed., *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens*, s.v. “inretio.”



and Short's definitions of to "catch in a net, to ensnare, entangle," "to embarrass, hinder," and "to catch, entangle, ensnare."<sup>54</sup> The sexual overtones developed in the patristic period could have been retained for *Hrotsvit*; thus, the dialogue would foreshadow the threat faced by the women with *Dulcitius* guarding them. Moreover, it links their political and religious suppression signified by chains directly to the sexual threats they are facing from *Dulcitius*. Again, the language of physical violence implied by "contraluctor" combines with the language of sexuality, though in an illicit way indicating moral corruption and seduction, in one line. In this way, their physical, feminine chastity is directly linked to their moral fortitude.

### **Interrogation in *Sapientia***

*Sapientia* contains a significant interrogation scene as well. Unlike *Dulcitius*, it begins with the emperor and his right-hand man discussing the threat the women pose, and only introduces them after their initial conversation. Antiochus, Emperor Hadrian's official, warns the emperor that there is a disruptive force that has entered the empire, namely, a woman and her children: "Quaedam advena mulier hanc urbem Romam nuper intravit, comitata proprii faetus pusiolis tribus." ["A certain woman, having arrived, came recently to this city Rome, attended by three small children of her own offspring."]<sup>55</sup> Hadrian is skeptical, replying, "Numquid tantillarum adventus muliercularum aliquid rei publicae adducere poterit detrimentum?" ["Could the coming of such trivial little women bring something detrimental to the state?"]<sup>56</sup> This exchange typifies the approach of the pagan men to the Christian women in the play. The use of diminutives in Hadrian's rhetorical question is extreme: "tantus" means "of such a size," therefore, "tantillus" expresses something like "so little a thing."<sup>57</sup> Moreover, "mulier" also

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<sup>54</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "inretio."

<sup>55</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 358.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> s.v. "tantillus."

appears in diminutive form here as “muliercula.” This piling of up diminutives creates an extremely belittling effect. The emperor expects the women to be trivial, but Antiochus warns him with his reply to the question, “Permagnus” [“Something immense”].<sup>58</sup> They then discuss the nature of the threat that the women pose:

ADRIANUS. Quod?

ANTIOCHUS. Pacis defectum.

ADRIANUS. Quo pacto?

ANTIOCHUS. Et quod maius potest rumpere civilis concordiam pacis, quam dissonantia observationis?

ADRIANUS. Nihil gravius, nihil deterius; quod testatur orbis Romanus, qui undique secus christianae caedis sorde est infectus.

ANTIOCHUS. Haec igitur femina, cuius mentionem facio, hortatur nostrates, avitos ritus deserere et christianae religioni se dedere.

ADRIANUS. Num praevalet hortamentum?

ANTIOCHUS. Nimium; nam nostrae coniuges fastidiendo nos contempnunt adeo, ut dedignantur nobiscum comedere, quanto minus dormire.

ADRIANUS. Fateor, periculum.

[HADRIAN. What?

ANTIOCHUS. A lack of peace.

HADRIAN. How?

ANTIOCHUS. What can burst the concord of civil peace more than dissonance in religious observance?

HADRIAN. Nothing is more serious, nothing is more harmful; which the Roman world demonstrates, which is infected by the filth of Christian slaughter on all sides.

ANTIOCHUS. Therefore this woman, whom I mentioned, urges the people of our country to desert our ancestral rites, and dedicate themselves to the Christian religion.

HADRIAN. Are these incitements prevailing?

ANTIOCHUS. Excessively, for our wives spurn us so much with fasting that they reject eating with us, much less sleeping with us.

HADRIAN. I confess, this is a danger.]<sup>59</sup>

As in *Dulcitius*, the religious subversion of women is linked with sexual subversion. Unlike the women who deny marriage in the first play, the Christian women in *Sapientia* convince the married women of Rome to fast and embrace celibacy. “Conjux” almost always refers to wives

<sup>58</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 358.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

rather than husbands, suggesting the specifically gendered quality of this conversion.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, they mention multiple times her status as “mulier” and “femina.” As in *Dulcitius*, this specification of gender is juxtaposed with militaristic language. The emperor’s use of “praevaleo” is telling—Lewis and Short define the word as “to be very or more able, to have distinguished power or influence; to have greater power or worth; to be superior or distinguished, have the superiority, prevail.”<sup>61</sup> Classically, the word has martial connotations, used with great frequency by Frontinus in his military history text, *Strategems*, and in Suetonius’ *Life of Caesar*, though it also applies when discussing medicines by writers such as Pliny. At any rate, strength is not seen as contrary to Sapientia’s actions here but the opposite, despite the fact that they are done by and mainly are concerned with women.

Eventually, Hadrian has the women called in to be questioned and the interrogation begins in earnest, wherein the pagans urge them to abandon Christianity. Again, the emperor approaches the women in a condescending attitude, referring to them again as “mulierculae.”<sup>62</sup> He and Antiochus decide to try to flatter them into apostasy:

ADRIANUS. Quid, si illas primule aggrediar blanda alloquutione, si forte velint cedere?  
ANTIOCHUS. Melius est; nam fragilitas sexus feminei facilius potest blandimentis molliri.

[HADRIAN. What, if I should address them at first with seductive speech, if they should want to go away?  
ANTIOCHUS. This is better; for the weakness of the female sex can easily be softened by flattery.]<sup>63</sup>

Their aside illustrates tropes about women that Hrotsvit is clearly attempting to overturn.

Hadrian uses the word “aggredior” to describe how he will address the women—however, this

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<sup>60</sup> s.v. “conjux.”

<sup>61</sup> s.v. “praevaleo.”

<sup>62</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 359.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

word not only means “to address” but often “to attack.”<sup>64</sup> This militaristic language is combined, again, with sexual overtones, as he uses the word “blandus” to describe his speech. “Blandus” can be defined as “of a smooth tongue, flattering, fawning, caressing,” or, of things, particularly of speech or words, “flattering, pleasant, agreeable, enticing, alluring, charming, seductive.”<sup>65</sup> In particular, Ovid uses it in *Ars amatoria*: “Sit tibi credibilis sermo consuetaque verba, / Blanda tamen, praesens ut videare loqui.” [“Let the words be believable and customary to you, flattering also, ready at hand as you are seen speaking.”]<sup>66</sup> This comes from a passage where Ovid is insisting upon the importance of learning eloquence in order to seduce a woman.<sup>67</sup> Hence “blandus,” despite also having the general sense of flattery, has the idea of seduction.

Antiochus’s response illustrates this attitude more fully. His use of “mollio” is particularly telling: in addition to the standard definition of “soften,” Lewis and Short also offer “to render effeminate or unmanly” or “to unman.”<sup>68</sup> The very diction of Latin necessarily associates femininity with softness or weakness. The supposed weakness of feminine nature is apparently attached to a sort of sexual weakness, as “blandimentum,” etymologically related to “blandus,” has overtones of seduction and sexuality. In the Christian mind, this translates to “fragilitas sexus feminei,” where sexual weakness is indeed a moral weakness. Hrotsvit’s reason for insisting on chastity then becomes clear: if predilection toward sexual sin, if womanly “softness” is manifest through weakness of will in the face of seduction, “fragilitas feminae” is rebuked by women who willfully embrace celibacy. Hrotsvit’s women, in being willful and resistant in their speech and in the face of flattery, are therefore performing their commitment to

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<sup>64</sup> s.v. “aggredior.”

<sup>65</sup> s.v. “blandus.”

<sup>66</sup> Ovid, “*Ars amatoria*,” in *P. Ovidius Naso, vol. 1*, ed. R. Ehwald, 183-246 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1907), 195.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> s.v. “mollio.” This concept was also attached to humoral theory: as women were “moist” and “wet,” they were also “mollier,” or “malleable.” See Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 145-146.

chastity and virginity.<sup>69</sup> The verbal performance of chastity is evident thereafter in the subsequent interrogation:

ADRIANUS. Illustris matrona, blande et quiete ad culturam deorum te invito, quo nostra perfrui possis amicitia.

SAPIENTIA. Nec in cultura deorum tuis votis satisfacere, nec amicitiam tecum gestio inire.

ADRIANUS. Adhuc, mitigato furore, nulla in te moveor indignatione, sed pro tua tuique filiarum salute paterno sollicitor amore.

[HADRIAN. Noble matron, alluringly and calmly I invite you to the worship of the gods, by which you might enjoy fully our friendship.

SAPIENTIA. I neither long to make your offerings in the worship of the gods nor to enter friendship with you.

HADRIAN. As yet, with tamed passion, I am provoked by no disdain toward you, but for your welfare and that of your daughters I am stirred by paternal love.]<sup>70</sup>

As he planned, Hadrian attacks them with alluring speech, even repeating the adverbial form of “blandus” with “blande.” Hadrian uses particularly “soft” speech, including “quiete” suggesting calm, and use of the word “invito,” rather than a word of command, which means typically “to invite, treat, feast, entertain,” but has alternate meanings of “to invite, summon, challenge,” as well as “to incite, allure, attract.”<sup>71</sup> The latter is particularly useful here as it emphasizes, along with his use of the words “blande” and “quiete,” that Hadrian is being particularly alluring or enticing. Contrasting this “soft” speech, Sapiaentia does not show any softening, as Hadrian expected, but bluntly rejects his overtures—using a very expressive verb, “gestio,” which typically means “to use passionate gestures,” can also mean “to desire eagerly or passionately, to long for.”<sup>72</sup> Sapiaentia does not just reject Hadrian’s overtures, but dramatically repudiates them.

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<sup>69</sup> This raises the question that while Hrosvit’s women are clearly rebuking “feminine weakness,” are they also rebuking femininity itself? I answer this question strongly in the negative. The focus on their bodily femininity—locating their virtue in their specifically feminine chastity—does not represent, fundamentally, a shift to masculinity, despite the juxtaposition with militaristic language. Nor does it represent a third gender, as Lochrie or Salih argue, which becomes significantly clearer during the passion scenes, due to the emphasis on bodily femininity.

<sup>70</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 359-360.

<sup>71</sup> s.v. “invito.”

<sup>72</sup> s.v., “gestio.”

Hadrian's response, moreover, is even softer, increasing the claim of friendship ("amicitia") to that of paternal love ("paterno... amore"). The phrase "paternus amor" is not very common—it does not appear in antique texts, but it appears in patristic and medieval texts, often referring to God or an abbot.<sup>73</sup> This could suggest that the emperor is putting himself in the place of God, emphasizing his authority and power while feigning benevolence. This patronizing aspect does not phase the women, however:

SAPIENTIA. Nolite, meae filiae, serpentinis huius satanae lenociniis cor apponere, sed meatim fastidite.

FIDES. Fastidimus et animo contempnimus frivola.

[SAPIENTIA. My daughters, do not place your heart by the serpent-like pandering of this Satan, but disdain it like me.

FIDES. We disdain and contempt trivialities with our spirit.]<sup>74</sup>

"Lenocinium" is a telling word choice. Notably, the Anglo-Saxon author Aldhelm used it ten times in his Latin tract on the virtues of virginity.<sup>75</sup> To Aldhelm, "lenocinium" describes every possible assault on virginity via allurements, and resisting it is the height of virtue: "Ergo cum animadverteret, Christianos acerbiter poenarum libenter laturus, iam non tormentorum supplicio, sed blandimentorum lenocinio natum ad suos libitus flectere nititur." ["Thus when he noticed, Christians would gladly endure the bitterness of punishments, born soon not by the torture of torments, but by the pandering of seductive speeches, the pleased person endeavors to bend to them."] <sup>76</sup> Aldhelm seems much more concerned with the effect of female "lenocinina"

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<sup>73</sup> Such as Bernard of Clairvaux in *Sententiae* or Gregory the Great in *Moralia in Job*. See J. Leclercq and H.M. Rochais, ed., *Bernardi Opera*, vol. 6 (Rome : Editiones Cistercienses, 1972), 226. M. Adriaen, ed., *Moralia in Job* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), accessed May 9, 2017, [http://clt.brepols.net.libproxy.library.wmich.edu/LLTA/pages/TextSearch.aspx?key=QGREG1708\\_](http://clt.brepols.net.libproxy.library.wmich.edu/LLTA/pages/TextSearch.aspx?key=QGREG1708_).

<sup>74</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 360.

<sup>75</sup> Aldhelm, "De virginitate (Prosa)," in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi Tomus XV*, ed. Rudolph Ewald (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919). Aldhelm also composed a poetic version of "De virginitate," recounting legends of multiple virgin saints, including Sts. Agape, Chionia, and Hirena. His description does not mention them by name, but does name Dulcitius and describe his sexual assault on the pots and pans.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 277.

on chaste men, but does discuss the threat to chaste women, citing biblical examples such as

Judith:

IVDITH, filia Merari, post obitum Manasse sumpto viduitatis theristro et spreto sponsali peplo blanda procorum lenocinia contempnens, nondum resultantibus apostolicae salpices clangoribus: Dico innuptis et viduis: bonum est illis, si sic permanserint, quasi candens lilium pia castitate florens atque a publicis conspectibus delitescens in cenaculi solario pudica conversabatur...

[Judith, daughter of Merarius, after the death of Manassa, having taken up the garment of widowhood and discarded the garment of marriage, disdaining the seductive pandering of suitors, still without spots resulting from their clamors to the female apostle: I say to unmarried and single people: It is good for them, if they remained thus, as a shining lily glowing with pious, modest chastity and dwelt in a solitary cell, hiding away from public view...] <sup>77</sup>

Nonetheless, this passage is much more focused on Judith's effect on Holofernes, and the lessons men should draw from his mistake in trusting her due to her beauty and flirtation: "non nostris assertionibus sed scripturae astipulationibus ornatus feminarum rapina virorum vocatur!" ["It is not said by our assertion but the assertion of Scripture that the beauty of women is the robbery of men!"] <sup>78</sup> Were Hrotsvit using the same lexical understanding as Aldhelm, it is bizarre that the word "lenocinium" seems to be gendered for women seducing men and destroying their virility. Interpreting Hrotsvit's use of the word with this understanding would imply the emperor is seducing the women to destroy their strength.

However, there is also an example of legalistic use of the term, wherein a man uses "lenocinia" to lead a woman astray. The Digest of Justinian uses the word most frequently in Liber 48, Title 5: "Ad legem Iuliam de adulteriis coercendis" ["The Julian law about coerced adultery"]. Here "lenocinium" is used technically to discuss the action of a man who seduces another man's wife, and the question of whether the woman is excused. The code argues that it

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 316.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

does not excuse the wife's actions.<sup>79</sup> Regardless of the obvious misogyny of the legislation, "lenocinium" is linked to the male seduction, not the female capitulation. Either way, even the emperor's protestations of fatherly love are deemed by Hrotsvit's women as akin to pandering particularly aimed at sexual seduction. It seems his urging them to worship the Roman gods is directly linked to his assault on their chastity. To Hrotsvit, then, spiritual seduction of false gods is akin to adulterous seduction. Therefore, chastity is a bold choice of fidelity. On the one hand, by worshipping false gods the women would be "cheating" on God, while on the other, refusing to worship the Roman gods is a performance of marital faithfulness. Bridal imagery is especially evident in this exchange, even as Hrotsvit simultaneously draws upon the "unmanning" aspect of falling for seduction and the "manly" aspect of resisting it. Both of these verbal strategies are seamlessly blended in Hrotsvit's portrayal of the women.

Fides' response, in which the virgins reject the emperor's "frivola," stands in stark contrast to how the emperor underestimates the women.<sup>80</sup> As discussed above, the emperor and Antiochus consistently refer to the women with belittling, trivializing language saturated with diminutives. This contrast emphasizes the point Hrotsvit makes in subverting gendered expectations of femininity being linked to triviality and weakness. Moreover, it links the reversal of gender power dynamics with God's justice, using language similar to the Vulgate. Sapientia's exhortation, "Nolite... lenociniis cor apponere," ["Do not... place your heart by pandering"] mimics Psalm 61 in its diction and syntax: "divitiae si affluent nolite cor adponere." ["If riches

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<sup>79</sup> Theodor Mommsen, et al., ed., *Digesta Iustiani*, 48.5.2 § 5 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

<sup>80</sup> As indicated in Hadrian's question of "Quid murmando loqueris?" ["What are you saying with murmuring?"], however, this exchange between Fides and her mother is said in a low voice, so as not to flaunt her encouragement in front of the emperor. One might ask why, when their speech is typically directly defiant, Fides expresses this in a whisper. On one level, it emphasizes the allegorical aspect, in which Wisdom is more oriented towards speech than the theological virtues. Potentially, the delay of Fides' explicit verbal defiance is reserved later to be combined with her physical trials, while Sapientia, their mother, guides the interrogation scene. This heightens dramatic effect when the emperor, expecting each successively younger and smaller daughter to capitulate easier than their mother and the sister who preceded her, is perplexed by their increasing strength and resistance.



overflow do not place your heart by them.”<sup>81</sup> Sapientia’s allusion ties the virgins thematically with the Psalm, which proclaims:

nonne Deo subiecta erit anima mea ab ipso enim salutare meum / nam et ipse Deus meus  
et salutaris meus susceptor meus non movebor amplius / quousque inruitis in hominem  
interficitis universi vos tamquam parieti inclinato et maceriae depulsae / verumtamen  
pretium meum cogitaverunt repellere cucurri in siti ore suo benedicebant et corde suo  
maledicebant diapsalma / ... erumtamen vani filii hominum mendaces filii hominum in  
stateris ut decipiant ipsi de vanitate in id ipsum / nolite sperare in iniquitate et rapinas  
nolite concupiscere divitiae si affluent nolite cor adponere<sup>82</sup>

Shall not my soul be subject to God? for from him is my salvation. / For he is my God  
and my saviour: he is my protector, I shall be moved no more. How long do you rush in  
upon a man? you all kill, as if you were thrusting down a leaning wall, and a tottering  
fence. / But they have thought to cast away my price; I ran in thirst: they blessed with  
their mouth, but cursed with their heart. / ... But vain are the sons of men, the sons of  
men are liars in the balances: that by vanity they may together deceive. / Trust not in  
iniquity, and cover not robberies: if riches abound, set not your heart upon them.<sup>83</sup>

Alluding to the Psalm aligns Hadrian with the men who kill as frequently and casually as if they were knocking down old fences and who “bless with their mouth, but curse with their heart,” suggesting that Sapientia and her daughters clearly see through his deception to his ulterior motives. Additionally, it aligns the women with the speaker of the Psalm, who cannot “be moved” despite external pressures, placing themselves beside God rather than deceitful men in order to obtain salvation. The allusion affirms the women’s wisdom and resilience and reminds the audience of their anticipation of God’s justice.

In keeping with his fatuous biblical analogue, Hadrian continues in his flattery of Sapientia, praising her noble birth (“summis natalibus orta”) and the aptness of her name in her wise speech (“sapientia nominis fulget in ore”).<sup>84</sup> As in the analogous scene in *Dulcitius*, the beauty and nobility of the women are emphasized; despite not denying this, Sapientia refuses his

<sup>81</sup> Ps. 61:11 Vulgate. Translation is mine.

<sup>82</sup> Ps. 61:2-5, 10-12 Vulgate.

<sup>83</sup> Ps. 61:2-5, 10-12 Douay-Rheims translation.

<sup>84</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 360.

flattery abruptly: “Frustra blandiris: non flectimur tuis suadelis.” [“You fawn in vain: we are not bent by your persuasions.”]<sup>85</sup> It seems Hrotsvit sees value in beauty and nobility, but not at the expense of spirituality. Perhaps she includes these details, as their beauty and nobility makes them more of a target for flattery, and thus their resistance to it is more sincere.

Sapientia’s rebuke abruptly shifts the tone of the subsequent interrogation. Hadrian immediately abandons his flowery speech for direct questioning:

ADRIANUS. Dic, cur advenires, vel quare nostrates adires.

SAPIENTIA. Nullius alius rei nisi agnoscendae veritatis causa, quo fidem, quam expugnatis, plenius ediscerem filiasque meas Christo consecrarem.

ADRIANUS. Expone vocabula singularum.

SAPIENTIA. Una vocatur Fides, altera Spes, tertia Karitas.

[HADRIAN. State why you came and why you approached our people.

SAPIENTIA. For no other reason except the cause of acknowledging the truth, by which I learned faith more fully, which you take by assault, and I consecrated my daughters to Christ.

HADRIAN. Put forth the names of the individuals.

SAPIENTIA. One is called Faith, the other Hope, the third Charity.]<sup>86</sup>

Hadrian’s questions are short, to the point, and include none of the flamboyant diction he previously used. This signifies Sapientia and her daughters’ unquestionable victory over his attempted exploitation of feminine weakness through flattery.

The subverting of this power dynamic is further accomplished through a similar technique used by Hirena in *Dulcitius*: a change in the rhetoric of the dialogue to change roles so that the women on trial take charge of interrogation and begin to question the emperor. However, here they do not preach to him explicitly as in *Dulcitius*, but instead, Sapientia aims to make a fool of him by publicly humiliating his intellect, answering his straightforward question about

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. Note that Sapientia uses “blandior,” a word connected etymologically to the key word “blandus.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. As implied by my translation, the Latin names Fides, Spes, and Karitas literally translate to Faith, Hope and Charity. Sapientia translates to Wisdom. I have retained Hrotsvit’s Latin names to avoid confusion; they were translated into English here to highlight the allegorical character of the narrative.

her daughters' ages with a series of mathematical puzzles Hadrian struggles to solve like a confused schoolboy.

This begins when Hadrian asks Sapientia the fairly direct question of how old her daughters are. Sapientia remarks: "Placetne vobis, o filiae, ut hunc stultum aritmetica fatigem disputatione?" ["Doesn't it please you, oh daughters, that I torment this fool with arithmetical reasoning?"], to which Fides answers, "Placet, mater, nosque auditum praebemus libenter." ["It pleases us, mother, and we freely offer our listening."] <sup>87</sup> The emperor does not object to being called a "stultus," and given the example of Sapientia speaking softly to the girls earlier, this may indicate a private exchange as well. Sapientia then seems to challenge Hadrian's mathematical reasoning for the sake of her daughters as an audience. Her reference to "fatigo," or "to weary" or "torment," <sup>88</sup> suggests that public humiliation of the emperor is absolutely one of her goals in instigating the mathematical disputation. This supports the idea that in her lecture, she is taking control of the interrogation and turning it around so she is in control of the exchange, due to her superior wisdom endowed by God.

Rather than directly giving the ages of the girls, Hrotsvit answers using properties describing the number of years each daughter has attained: Karitas's age is evenly even ("pariter par") and diminished ("imminutus"), Spes's is evenly odd ("pariter impar") and diminished, and Fides' is unevenly even ("impariter par") and augmented ("superfluous"). <sup>89</sup> Unsurprisingly, this baffles the emperor, who exclaims: "Tali responsione fecisti me, quae interrogabam, minime agnoscere." ["You make me, who was interrogating, understand the least with such a response."] <sup>90</sup> This emphasizes Sapientia's control of the exchange at this point, since the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> s.v. "fatigo."

<sup>89</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 361.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

emperor himself points out how it upsets his program of interrogation. Sapientia supplies him with a cheeky response of “Nec mirum, quia sub huius diffinitionis specie non unus cadit numerus, sed plures.” [“No wonder, because under the class of these definitions not one number but many fall.”]<sup>91</sup> Thus she continues the game, despite his clear accusation of her deliberate attempt to confuse him. The emperor asks her to explain clearly what she means, and she gives him the ages (eight, ten, and twelve) and begins a description of the mathematical properties that describe her daughters’ ages, drawing heavily upon the number theory of Boethius.

This mathematical digression is inspired by Boethius’s number theory, mostly clearly articulated in book one of his *De institutione arithmetica*. Boethius defines many of the mathematical terms that Hrotsvit uses to describe Sapientia’s children’s ages, such as “pariter par” and “pariter impar,” et cetera, and at times she nearly copies his definitions word for word. For example in “pariter par,” we see this from Hrotsvit:

ADRIANUS. Quis numuerus pariter par?

SAPIENTIA. Qui potest in duo aequalia dividi, eiusque pars in duo aequalia, partisue pars in duo aequalia, ac deinceps per ordinem, donec in insecabilem incurrat unitatem...

[HADRIAN. Which number is evenly even?

SAPIENTIA. That number which can be divided in two equals, and its parts in two equals and its parts of parts in two equals, and continuing by this rule, until it runs into indivisible unity...]<sup>92</sup>

Sapientia’s phrasing is very clearly similar to a passage from Boethius’s *De institutione arithmetica*, Book 1, Chapter 9: “Pariter par numerus est, qui potest in duo paria dividi, eiusque pars in alia duo paria partisue pars in alia duo paria, ut hoc totiens fiat, usquedum divisio partium ad indivisibilem naturaliter perveniat unitatem.” [“A number is evenly even, which can be divided in two equals, and its parts in another two equals and the parts of its parts in another

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 362.

two equals, so that this being done totally, while continuously the division of parts arrives naturally at indivisible unity.”<sup>93</sup>

Sapientia continues in this way to define the remaining terms used in her puzzle.

According to Sapientia (and Boethius), as mentioned above, evenly even is a number that one can divide into two equal parts, and then those parts into two equal parts, continuing successively until you reach one. In modern mathematical terms, this is equivalent to saying an evenly even number is a power of two, that is an evenly even number can be written as  $2^n$  where  $n$  is a natural number (that is,  $n$  could be 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.). Meanwhile, evenly odd numbers can be divided by the number two once, giving two equal parts, but those parts cannot be divided by two.<sup>94</sup> In modern mathematical terms, we would say a number  $m$  is evenly odd if  $m$  can be written as  $2n$  where  $n$  is greater than 1 and odd (that is, indivisible by two, such as 3, 5, 7, etc.). The last category of even numbers is unevenly even, where the number can be divided into two equal halves, and its halves can be divided into two equal halves, and so forth, but you cannot divide into equal halves until you reach one, as in evenly even numbers, because eventually you find an odd number not equal to one.<sup>95</sup> Today we would say a number  $m$  is unevenly even if  $m$  can be written as  $2^p m$ , where  $m$  is an odd number greater than one, and  $p$  is a natural number greater than 1.

She also defines diminished and augmented, as well as perfect numbers. These properties have to do with adding the factors (that is, the possible unique numbers that can be multiplied together to make the number), excluding the number itself but including one. Adding together the unique factors determines whether a number is diminished, augmented, or perfect. A number

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<sup>93</sup> Boethius, *De Institutione Arithmetica*, ed. Gottfried Friedlein (Lipsiae: B.G. Feubnerl, 1867), 17.

<sup>94</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 362.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

is diminished when the sum of its factors is less than the number, augmented when the sum is greater than the number, and perfect is when the sum is equal to the number.<sup>96</sup> The concept of perfect, augmented, and diminished numbers is also important to Boethius, who discusses multiple ways to construct perfect numbers.<sup>97</sup>

Though Sapientia notes that there are multiple numbers fitting her definitions, the emperor should have been able to figure it out with the information she gave and the appearances of the girls. The only possible age for Fides that is unevenly even and still reasonable given her childish appearance alluded to in the dialogue is 12, the only unevenly even number less than twenty, which is also clearly augmented (its factors, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 add to 16). As she's clearly the oldest, figuring out Spes should be simple: the only evenly uneven numbers under 12 are 6 and 10, and 6 is a perfect number (its factors, 1, 2, and 3 sum to 6), while 10 is diminished (its factors 1, 2, and 5 sum to 8), making it obvious that her age is 10. Finally, Karitas must be either 2, 4, or 8; again, choosing between the three numbers would be obvious based on appearance, as 2, 4, and 8 year old girls all look obviously different.

For the record, the issue of whether Karitas' age is diminished or not would actually not help solve the problem at all, given that all evenly uneven numbers are diminished; in fact the sum is equal to the number itself minus one. I supply a modern proof of this by induction. An evenly uneven number can be written as  $2^n$  where  $n$  is a natural number. The base case would be where  $n = 1$ , so the evenly uneven number is 2. The factors less than the number itself is only one, so the sum of those factors is only 1.  $2 - 1 = 1$ , so the sum of the factors is the number itself minus 1. Now for the inductive step. Assume this is true for  $n$ , now we must prove it is true for  $n + 1$ . The evenly uneven number is then  $2^{n+1}$ . All the factors of  $2^{n+1}$  that are less than the number

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 361-362.

<sup>97</sup> Boethius, *De Institutione Arithmetica*, 41-45.

itself are  $1, 2, 4, \dots, 2^n$ . Consider the sum of these factors,  $1 + 2 + 4 + \dots + 2^n$ . This is equal to  $2^n$  plus the sum of the factors of  $2^n$  that are less than  $2^n$ , which we will call  $m$ . But  $m$  is equal to  $2^n - 1$  by our assumption. Thus  $2^n + m = 2^n + 2^n - 1 = 2(2^n) - 1 = 2^{n+1} - 1$ . Therefore, the sum of the factors of  $2^{n+1}$  is  $2^{n+1} - 1$ , and it is thereby diminished. By induction, all evenly even numbers have a sum of their factors equal to that number minus one, so all evenly even numbers are diminished. Q.E.D.

Boethius mentions in his list of properties of evenly even numbers that the sum of their parts is as described above, observing that the first term being one prevents the sum of the parts from ever equaling the number itself, the intuition behind the modern, rigorous inductive proof provided above:

Hoc quoque multa condieratione multaque constantia divinitatis perfectum est, ut ordinatim dispositae minores summae in hoc numero et super se ipsas coacervatae sequenti minus uno semper aequentur. Si enim unum iungas his, qui sequuntur, duobus, fiunt III, id est, qui uno minus quaternario cadant, et si superioribus addas IIII, sunt VII, qui ab octonario sequente sola unitate vincuntur. Sed si eosdem VIII supradictis adunxeris, XV fient, qui par XVI numeri existeret quantitati, nisi minor unitas inpediret. Hoc autem prima etiam numeri progenies servat atque custodit. Namque unitas, quae prima est, duobus subsequentibus sola est unitate contractior; unde nihil mirum est, totum summae crementum proprio consentire principio.<sup>98</sup>

[This basic ordering of numbers has come about through careful consideration and through the great constancy of divinity, so that when disposed in an orderly fashion, the minor sums in this number series are always equal to the number directly above them minus one. So if you add one to the number which follows, that is, to two, they make 3, that is one less than four. And if to the preceding you add four, they add up to seven, which sum is overcome in the following eight by only a unity. But if you add that same 8 to those already accumulated, they make 15, which is in quantity equal to the number 16, except that a simple unity impedes it. The primary progression of numbers protects and maintains this order. Unity, which is first, is closed off from the following number two by unity alone. There is no reason to marvel at the fact that the total growth of the number series is in harmony with its principal nature to the highest degree.]<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Boethius, *De Institutione Arithmetica*, 20.

<sup>99</sup> Michael Masi, trans. *Boethian Number Theory: A Translation of the De Institutione Arithmetica* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1983), 81.

Further, one may question why Hrotsvit chose to include the extraneous information of the diminished nature of Karitas's age—was it for rhetorical parallelism, as an inside joke to the mathematically educated, or did she intend Sapientia to confuse the emperor further with extraneous information?

Her use of arithmetic in this section is vital; besides serving the above-stated purpose of exemplifying allegorical wisdom and stupefying the emperor, number theory held theological meaning to Boethius. Boethius sees arithmetic, as part of the quadrivium, the basic level of medieval education, as logically prior to the higher study of philosophy: “Quod haec qui spernit id est has semitas sapientiae ei denuntio non recte esse philosophandum, siquidem philosophia est amore sapientiae, quam in his spernendis ante contempserit.” [“Because of these things, he who rejects this that is the foot-path of wisdom, I denounce that there must be no philosophizing done by him rightly, since philosophy exists by the love of wisdom, which he will have disparaged by spurning these things.”]<sup>100</sup> Arithmetic even holds a special place among the quadrivium, as the first of the subjects to be taught: “Quae igitur ex hisce prima discenda est nisi ea, quae principium matrisque quodammodo ad ceteras obtinet portionem? Haec est autem arithmetica.” [“Therefore, which out of these is to be learned first, except she, who is the origin and in a certain way, holds the place of mother to the other subjects? This is arithmetic.”]<sup>101</sup> Thus, to Boethius, arithmetic, as the first subject taught in the quadrivium, is the ultimate prerequisite for the study of philosophy and the acquisition of wisdom; rejecting arithmetic constitutes a rejection of the mother of all learning.

Beyond arithmetic being the way to philosophy, to Boethius, it is the method of understanding God Himself. As he writes in the beginning to Book 1 of *De institutione*

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<sup>100</sup> Boethius, *De Institutione Arithmetica*, 20. My translation.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 10.



*arithmetica*, discussing the substance of a number: “Omnia quaecunque a primaeva rerum natura constructa sunt, numerorum videntur ratione formata. Hoc enim fuit principale in animo conditoris exemplar.” [“Everything that was constructed from the first age of nature seems to be formed by the measure of numbers. But this was at first an exemplar in the spirit of the Creator.”]<sup>102</sup> Therefore it seems Boethius asserts that mathematics comes from the mind of God. As David Albertson notes, this was a major development from his Greek sources, where for the Pythagoreans, there may have been a divine sequence of numbers, but for Boethius, the principles of arithmetic as precepts are the content of the mind of God, making Him “the supreme mathematician.”<sup>103</sup>

Hrotsvit reaffirms Boethius’s spiritualization of arithmetic as Sapiaentia explains, “In hoc laudanda est supereminens factoris sapientia et mira mundi artificis scientia, qui non solum in principio mundum creans ex nihilo, omnia in numero et mensura et pondere posuit, sed etiam in succedentium serie temporum et in aetatibus hominum miram dedit inveniri posse scientiam artium.” [“In this the towering wisdom of the Creator and the marvelous knowledge of the maker of the world is to be praised, who not only in the beginning, creating the world from nothing, fixed everything in number and measure and weight, but also in the succeeding series of time and in the age of men gave sight to be able to find knowledge of the art.”]<sup>104</sup> As Wilson observes, this passage is strongly Boethian in its perspective on mathematics being linked to Godliness: “God’s creation of the universe, thus, is depicted as an act of arithmetical ordering; man’s ability to understand mathematics, the practice of computing, ordering and mathematically

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>103</sup> David Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies: Nicholas of Cusa and the Legacy of Thierry of Chartres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 83.

<sup>104</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 363.

arranging, is his tool for unravelling the patterns of the Divine mysteries. This in turn, aids man in his effort to live in concordance with the harmony of the Divine plan.”<sup>105</sup>

Using this structure Sapientia is living in greater concordance with God’s plan than the emperor, who is simply made impatient by her puzzles. This constitutes a reversal in dynamic similar to, but distinct from, that between the emperor and the virgins in *Dulcitius*. Whereas Diocletian and Hirena debated proper piety about which gods to worship, here Sapientia and Hadrian discuss proper concord of the universe. Though Sapientia observes this order to Hadrian, he does not appreciate the beauty of the math laid out before him; instead he exclaims in annoyance at Sapientia’s lesson: “O quam scrupulosa et plexilis quaestio ex istarum aetate infantularum est orta!” [“How difficult and complex a question has been risen from the age of these children!”]<sup>106</sup> The allegorical message is clear: the emperor dismisses both the embodiment of wisdom, that is Sapientia, and the very foundations of wisdom, that is arithmetic. Moreover, unable to understand the larger meaning behind the arithmetic Sapientia discusses, he is also exposed as impatient with and dismissive of God due to his poor intellect. By contrast, Sapientia’s answer gives glory to God, not to herself, for her superior understanding of mathematics, as math originates in the mind of God, rather than in her ingenuity. This at once suggests a humbling of her own mind, but exalts God’s, which in turn allows Sapientia to be lifted up by His grace. After all, “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”<sup>107</sup> This highlights the absurdity of the scene of a posh emperor, supposedly wise and powerful, being made a fool of due to his resistance to

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<sup>105</sup> Katharina Wilson, “Mathematical Learning and Structural Composition in the Works of Hrotsvit,” in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Rara Avis in Saxonia?*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson, (Ann Arbor: Marc Publishing Co., 1987), 99-111 (102).

<sup>106</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 363.

<sup>107</sup> 1 Cor. 1:25 NABRE.

Christianity, which clearly has more power than his physical dominion due to the supernatural authority of God. Moreover, this demonstrates the agency of Sapientia in submitting herself to God and in turn gaining the power of eloquent speech. Indeed, her eloquent speech creates a climactic scene in the interrogation sequence wherein she not only humiliates the emperor in the legal proceeding, but on a cosmic scale, humiliates him in comparison to God. His continual use of belittling language to describe the Christian women is contrasted by the intellectual belittling he experiences in his verbal combat with them. Hrotsvit thus overturns temporal, physical, and masculine power in favor of the power of God, through the vessel of a human woman.

As in *Dulcitius*, the scene concludes with the women's condemnation. Ignoring Sapientia's last remark, Hadrian says, "Diu te sustinui ratiocinatem, quo te mihi efficerem obtemperantem." ["I have tolerated your reasoning for a long time, to cause you to comply."] <sup>108</sup> However, demanding they worship the Roman gods is yet met with resistance, leading to this exchange:

ADRIANUS. Si reniteris, tormentis afficeris.

SAPIENTIA. Corpus quidem suppliciis lacessere poteris, sed animum ad cedendum compellere non praevaleris.

[HADRIAN. If you resist, you will be subjected to torments.

SAPIENTIA. Certainly the body can be hurt by tortures, but you will not be able to compel the spirit to yield.] <sup>109</sup>

As Hirena does in *Dulcitius*, Sapientia uses the word "supplicium," emphasizing the sacrificial aspect of the tortures the women will face. This contrasts with the emperor's word choice of "tormentum," which according to Lewis and Short could only really be used to talk about "torture, anguish, pain," and the machines meant to accomplish that. <sup>110</sup> The use of "animus," as

<sup>108</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 363.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> s.v. "tormentum." It's also used to mean "a clothes-press" and "an engine for hurling missiles," but these are clearly irrelevant here.

well, is significant, as it stands in direct opposition to “corpus,” the body, and “anima,” the principle of physical life.<sup>111</sup> While it can also mean “will,” another common meaning is “heart, soul, spirit, feeling, inclination, affection, passion.”<sup>112</sup> Thus Sapiientia’s remark can be interpreted in a number of ways—on the one hand, as an emphasis of rational will overcoming bodily weakness, on the other, as an expression of adherence to faith as similar to “passion,” which could be used either in a courageous sense or in the sense of affection.<sup>113</sup>

This sense of emotional connection is heightened in the final portion of the scene, in which Sapiientia and her daughters discuss their upcoming passion when Hadrian and Antiochus leave them to go to dinner. Their entire discussion emphasizes both the daughters’ agency in choosing to receive their martyrdoms, as well as highlighting their status as young and female, whereas Sapiientia’s role as both physical and spiritual mother comes to the forefront in her encouragements:

SAPIENTIA. O dulces filiulae, o carae pusiulae, nolite super carceralis angustia custodiae contristari, nolite imminentium minis poenarum terri.  
 FIDES. Licet corpuscula paveant ad tormenta, mens tamen gliscit ad praemia.  
 SAPIENTIA. Vincite infantilis teneritudinem aetatulae maturi sensus fortitudine.  
 SPES. Tuum est, nos precibus adiuvere, ut possimus vincere.  
 SAPIENTIA. Hoc indesinenter exoro, hoc efflagito, ut perseveretis in fide, quam inter ipsa crepundia vestris sensibus non desistebam instillasse.  
 KARITAS. Quod sugentes ubera in cunabulis didicimus, nullatenus oblivisci quibimus.  
 SAPIENTIA. Ad hoc vos materno lacte affluenter alui, ad hoc delicate nutrivi, ut vos caelesti, non terreno, sponso traderem, quo vestri causa socrus aeterni regis dici meruissem.  
 FIDES. Pro ipsius amore sponsi promptae sumus mori.  
 SAPIENTIA. Delector ex vestra ratione magis quam nectareae dulcedinis gustamine.  
 SPES. Praemitte nos ante tribunal iudicis et experieris, quantum eius amor nobis attulit temeritatis.  
 SAPIENTIA. Hoc exopto, ut vestra virginitate coroner, ut vestro martirio glorificer.  
 SPES. Consertis palmulis incedamus et vultum tyranni confundamus.  
 SAPIENTIA. Expectate, donec instet hora vocationis nostrae.  
 FIDES. Taedet nos morarum; tamen est expectandum.

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<sup>111</sup> s.v. “animus.”

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

[SAPIENTIA. O sweet daughters, oh dear little girls, do not be made gloomy about the the difficulty of the confinement of this prison, do not be afraid of the menaces of imminent punishments.

FIDES. Though our little bodies are alarmed at torments, our spirit still swells up at the rewards.

SAPIENTIA. Conquer the tenderness of your young age with the fortitude of a mature frame of mind.

SPES. It is your duty to help us with your prayers, so that we can conquer.

SAPIENTIA. I exhort this incessantly, I request this, that you persevere in faith, which I never stopped instilling in your minds among your childhood rattles.

KARITAS. We will by no means be able to forget what you taught us, sucking your breasts in our cradles.

SAPIENTIA. To this end I nourished you with freely flowing maternal milk, to this end I fed you luxuriously, so that I might hand you over to a heavenly, not earthly, husband, to whom I might merit to be called mother-in-law of the eternal king because of you.

FIDES. For the love of this husband, we are prepared to die.

SAPIENTIA. I am delighted by your reason more than the taste of the sweetest nectar.

SPES. Send us before this tribunal of justice and you will test how much His love brings forth our boldness.

SAPIENTIA. This I desire greatly, that I be crowned by your virginity, that I be glorified by your martyrdom.

SPES. Let us advance, hands joined, and perplex the countenance of the tyrant.

SAPIENTIA. Wait, until we stand in the hour of our calling.

FIDES. We are weary of delays; still we must wait.]<sup>114</sup>

Sapientia's role as mother is foregrounded in the dialogue; as such, her main duties are reiterated. First, she does her duty as mother to martyrs by exhorting them not to be afraid ("nolite imminentium minis poenarum terreri"). Then, her daughters' recapitulation of their upbringing emphasizes her motherhood even more. Her prayers and instruction are juxtaposed with her physical nursing of her daughters ("Quod sugentes ubera in cunabulis didicimus..." and "macterno lacte affluenter alui"), linking spiritual nourishment with physical nourishment, and connecting her role as a spiritual mother with that of a physical mother. Her motherhood is further emphasized by her discussion of her daughters' dedication, additionally referring to

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<sup>114</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 364.

herself as the mother-in-law of Christ (“socrus aeterni regis”) given their marriage to Him as virgins.

The daughters themselves are undoubtedly depicted as brides of Christ, by explicit admission (“Pro ipsius amore sponsi promtae sumus mori”). Additionally, certain word choices seem to put their status as female saints at the forefront. Sapientia affectionately refers to them as “pusiola,” literally translating to “little girls,” emphasizing their youth as well as femininity. More strangely, Sapientia refers to her metaphorical nursing of them on the Word of God as “delicate nutriti.” “Delicatus” is a peculiar adjective with a multitude of meanings, most commonly “that gives pleasure, i.e. alluring, charming, delightful; luxurious, voluptuous,” or even “addicted to pleasure” or “spoiled with indulgence, delicate, dainty, effeminate.”<sup>115</sup> Her exposure of her children to Christianity, then, is oddly connected with sexual or pleasurable language, suggesting from the start their destiny as brides.

While this is a very feminine depiction, they are at the same time discussing their upcoming martyrdom not just as a wedding but as a battle. To exemplify this, Sapientia uses a fascinating blend of gendered language to exhort them to embrace their martyrdom: “Vincite infantilis teneritudinem aetatulae maturi sensus fortitudine.” “Vinco” is an obviously militaristic term referring to martial conquest. Rather than conquering the emperor, paganism or some other obvious enemy, she commands them to conquer their “infantilis teneritudinem aetatulae,” or the “tenderness of their young age.” Impossible to capture in English is how each word is inflected with mention to their girlhood. “Teneritudo” can mean “softness,” “tenderness,” or “of the tenderest age,” while “aetatula” is the diminutive of “aetas,” or “age,” which in this form acquires the meaning “a youthful, tender, or effeminate age.”<sup>116</sup> Hrotsvit is the only writer in the

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<sup>115</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., “delicatus,” *A Latin Dictionary*.

<sup>116</sup> s.v., “teneritudo,” and s.v. “aetatula.”

Brepols Database of Latin Texts who combines even any two of the three words. In fact, each word is fairly rare in its own right. “Teneritudo” appears to be another favorite of Aldhelm in *De Virginitate*, as he uses it three times in his work to talk about people dedicated as children (specifically, men dedicated as virgins).<sup>117</sup> Notably, also, it is used in the Vulgate Bible in the Book of Esther:

die autem tertio deposuit vestimenta ornatus sui et circumdata est gloria sua cum que regio fulgeret habitu et invocasset omnium rectorem et salvatorem Deum adsumpsit duas famulas et super unam quidem innitebatur quasi prae deliciis et nimia teneritudine corpus suum ferre non sustinens altera autem famularum sequebatur dominam defluentia in humum indumenta sustentans ipsa autem roseo vultu colore perfusa et gratis ac nitentibus oculis tristem celabat animum et nimio timore contractum

[And on the third day she laid away the garments she wore, and put on her glorious apparel. And glittering in royal robes, after she had called upon God the ruler and Saviour of all, she took two maids with her, And upon one of them she leaned, as if for delicateness and overmuch tenderness she were not able to bear up her own body. And the other maid followed her lady, bearing up her train flowing on the ground. But she with a rosy colour in her face, and with gracious and bright eyes, hid a mind full of anguish, and exceeding great fear.]<sup>118</sup>

Hrotsvit could be referencing heroic biblical women such as Esther—consumed, here, by fear of her duty to advocate for her people to the king, and struggling with her own weakness, but nonetheless resolute. “Aetatula” is also quite rare, but used several times by Aldhelm. As before, he uses the word in reference to males, but as babies (Athanasius and then Samson).<sup>119</sup>

Using such language emphasizes above all the youth of the women, though it can also be used in the sense of “softness” or “effeminacy,” concepts shown to be related above in the discussion of the varieties of meanings of “mollio.” The effeminate sense is emphasized by Sipientia’s suggested replacement for their weak youth with “maturi sensus fortitudine.” According to Lewis and Short, “fortitudo” can mean “mentally, firmness, manliness shown in

<sup>117</sup> Aldhelm, “De Virginitate (Prosa),” 250, 262, 272.

<sup>118</sup> Est. 15:4-8, Douay-Rheims translation.

<sup>119</sup> Aldhelm, “De Virginitate (Prosa),” 272, 312.

enduring or undertaking hardship; fortitude, resolution, bravery, courage, intrepidity.”<sup>120</sup> The sense of “firmness” and “manliness” is a direct antithesis of “softness” and “effeminacy.” Moreover, the use of the word “maturus” is often used in military language—though basically meaning “ripe, mature,” it can mean in reference to age a sense of coming of age—in reference to a woman, “ripe for marriage” or with a man “fit for action.”<sup>121</sup> It seems the virgins are described as little soldiers conquering their own feminine softness and their youth. Militaristic language is also used by the girls themselves—Spes declares, “Consertis palmulis incedamus,” using the martial word “incedo,” which means “advance, encounter,” or “triumph over.”<sup>122</sup> Thus, in addition to being brides, they clearly see themselves as soldiers of Christ.

At the same time, the agency of the women is emphasized. As in *Dulcitius*, the girls are not dragged to tortures, but exhibit a specific desire for them. Sapientia, despite being subjected to watching her daughters be tortured and killed, uses the word “exopto” to express her desire for this fate. As in *Dulcitius*, where Hirena uses the word “opto,” this means “to desire,” but is made even more emphatic with the prefix “ex.” Moreover, the girls themselves clearly desire martyrdom. Fides mentions that “mens tamen gliscit ad praemia,” using the word “glisco,” which generally means “to swell up” or “to blaze up,” but also means “to long for.”<sup>123</sup> Moreover, Fides expresses impatience at having to wait for her tortures (“Taedet nos morarum”). These references, as in *Dulcitius*, in emphasizing their desire for their tortures, and thereby desire for their Bridegroom, reinforce their agency in becoming martyrs.

What do we make of this fused language? On the one hand, Fides’, Spes’s, and Karitas’s virginity and their status as brides of Christ are emphasized, along with their young age and

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<sup>120</sup> s.v. “fortitudo.”

<sup>121</sup> s.v. “maturus.”

<sup>122</sup> s.v. “incedo.”

<sup>123</sup> s.v. “glisco.”



small bodies (“corpuscula”). On the other, this is opposed to a sort of spiritual strength where they are exhorted by their mother to conquer their bodies and acquire manly spirits, even as their spirits are depicted as brides of Christ. Hrotsvit seamlessly weaves together both fortitude and femininity, all the while imbuing the women with agency in choosing their distinct role as female saints.

### **Conclusions**

Hrotsvit uses interrogation scenes in her virgin martyr plays to exhibit the chastity of her women through verbal resistance. While “feminine weakness” is supposed to capitulate to flattery or “blandimenta,” associated with sexual seduction, her women subvert that expectation by stalwart resistance of seductive speech in favor of fidelity to God. In their resistance, they take control of their interrogation, as in *Dulcitius* when Hirena puts Diocletian on trial for worshipping “slaves,” or in *Sapientia* when the eponymous wise woman humiliates Hadrian intellectually. Moreover, the women express their agency through freely and vocally embracing their self-sacrifice despite the emperor’s intent to use it as intimidation or punishment. In these scenes, their language blends both militaristic and bridal diction, suggesting that Hrotsvit sees no contradiction between their roles as brides and soldiers of Christ. Bodily femininity comes into play much more in the torture and death scenes, but the language of motherhood and marriage is nonetheless prevalent in the description of the women, even as they contrast the fragility of their bodies with the virility of their spirits. Overall, in the interrogation scenes, the female characters perform their subversive chastity and agency through their strong speech, which reaches its physical expression in later scenes depicting their martyrdoms, to be discussed in my next chapter.

## CHAPTER III

## EMBODIED AGENCY

While verbal sparring remains a significant aspect of Hrotsvit's dramas, as her virgin martyr narratives draw to a close, she focuses less on dialectic and more on the threat or application of physical tortures and martyrdom. However, the "torture" scenes in *Dulcitius* and *Sapientia* do not involve much physical pain. This sets Hrotsvit's plays apart from many other virgin martyr legends that focus much more extensively on explicit depictions of pain, which often leads scholars of virginity to interpret the literature as sadistic.<sup>1</sup> This analysis is clearly not applicable to Hrotsvit's invincible virgins. Florence Newman has interpreted Hrotsvit's curious portrayals in a feminist light, asserting that *Dulcitius* represents "physical resolve as an extension of the believer's inviolate will."<sup>2</sup> To Newman, the association of the feminine with the flesh is exploited by Hrotsvit to showcase feminine spiritual heroism performed in the locus of the body.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Brigitte Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991). Cazelles argues that "In contrast to the representation of male sanctity, which essentially entails self-assertiveness, female perfection appears to be grounded in bodily pain, silence, and passivity" (9). Cazelles sources, however, are mainly thirteenth century French romances based upon the tradition of the troubadours, wherein the women, though active in other traditions, are represented as "mute and passive" (44). Over the course of this study it has become all the more evident to me that generalized statements or narratives about "virgin martyrs" are questionable, and treatments of virginity and female spirituality need to take into account particularities of time and space to generate an accurate reading of the sources. Robert Mills' article, "Can the virgin speak?" in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Ruth Evans, Sarah Salih, and Anke Bernau, 187-213 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), magnanimously attempts to reconcile the various positions on the agency of virgin martyrs. Mills challenges the dichotomy between subject and object in feminist analysis of the position of virgins, preferring an intersectional approach; however, a much easier way to reconcile "camps" on this issue is to acknowledge the legitimate diversity of the portrayal of virgin martyrs by different authors.

<sup>2</sup> Florence Newman, "Violence and Virginity in Hrotsvit's Dramas," in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Context, Identities, Affinities, and Performances*, ed. Phyllis R. Brown, Linda A. McMillin, and Katharina M. Wilson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 59-76 (63).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

In this chapter I further develop this theory by examining Hrotsvit's language and images in the torture and martyrdom scenes of *Dulcitius* and *Sapientia*. I contend that one of the important pieces of evidence in reading these scenes is examining the often sexual nature of the tortures, and bringing Hrotsvit's implications about male sexuality into conversation with her stance on female chastity. There has been some resistance to such an approach among scholars; Ulricke Wiethaus, for example, writes: "Neither Hrotsvit's texts nor early Christian stories about martyrs include examples of sexual transgressions such as masturbation, bestiality, or incest, which appear frequently in later penitential literature."<sup>4</sup> Wiethaus then proceeds to argue that all female sexuality in the play ought to be considered a question of male rights over women, and adherence to virginity is merely Christ's right as a male over the virgin. This analysis, however, is predicated upon incorrect historical context, as penitentials as early as *Bigotianum*, a ninth-century continental document based upon earlier Irish examples,<sup>5</sup> assign penances for a wide variety of sexual sins, including masturbation and sodomy.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, he conspicuously ignores the play *Dulcitius*, which includes the memorable instance of the eponymous antagonist attempting to rape the Christian virgins under his watch, but, confounded in the dark kitchen imprisoning them, has sex with pots and pans instead. Such iconic incidents are highlighted by Hrotsvit herself in her Preface, as she claims that glory and triumph are greater "cum feminea fragilitas vinceret et virilis robur confusioni subiaceret." ["when feminine weakness conquers and masculine strength is under confusion."]<sup>7</sup> That is, it is also essential to understand how she portrays male sexuality and weakness in contrast to female sexuality and chastity. Kathryn

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<sup>4</sup> Ulricke Wiethaus, "Pulchrum Signum? Sexuality and the Politics of Religion in the Works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim Composed between 963 and 973," in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Context, Identities, Affinities, and Performances*, ed. Phyllis R. Brown, Linda A. McMillin, and Katharina M. Wilson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 125-143 (132).

<sup>5</sup> Zubin Mistry, *Abortion in the Early Middle Ages, c. 500-900* (York: York Medieval Press, 2015), 151.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Bieler, ed., *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 218.

<sup>7</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 234.

Gravdal writes of Hrotsvit's depiction of female vs. male sexuality in her study on the rape trope in medieval literature:

The paradox of Hrotsvitha's dogma is that she fiercely defends the patristic ideal of virginity, but does so to demonstrate the strength and purity of female nature, rather than any corruption that must be overcome. Hrotsvitha depicts male aggression and violence against women, then focuses on the alternatives of women as they respond to such objectification. In her opera, the troping of sexual assault becomes a way to represent female power, virtue, courage, and superiority.<sup>8</sup>

Though I believe Gravdal may overstate Hrotsvit's intentions in proving female "superiority," I will argue that female agency, as expressed through chastity, is clearly a specifically feminine virtue placed in contrast with the raging, out-of-control sexuality of male persecutors. As such, though it is essential to examine female sexuality in Hrotsvit's drama, it is also necessary to analyze male sexual deviance, a critically underexamined aspect of her work.

To interpret this, I will use both the explicit sexual violence and language of the men in *Dulcitius*. In *Sapientia* I will look into the layers of meaning in the torture scenes, using humoral theory to argue that the tortures, though not explicitly sexual, have overtones of male sexual desire and violence. The virgins' female-coded conquest over those tortures in turn represents Hrotsvit's continued overturning of the power dynamic between men and women, pagan and Christian, emperor and subject. In these moments of bodily invulnerability, the women are simultaneously specifically female and images of Christ Himself, which adds masculine elements to their depiction. Moreover, reframing our concept of sexual agency according to Hrotsvit's medieval Christian mores, and reinforcing this idea looking at the male *lack* of sexual agency, I hope to demonstrate that Hrotsvit's virgins are women performing spiritual heroism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 28.

<sup>9</sup> Though an allegorical reading is suggested by the names of Hrotsvit's virgin martyrs, this study will focus instead on the more literal reading of the women as actual people. I feel justified in this choice; as the medieval exegetes recognized the multiple layers of meaning in Scripture, I too embrace the possibility of multiple readings of texts.

### Male Sexual Passivity vs. Female Chaste Agency in *Dulcitius*

In *Dulcitius* the tortures attempted on the women are specifically sexual assaults. After their interrogation the virgins are locked away under the supervision of the guard, Dulcitius.<sup>10</sup> The threat he poses to them is explicitly sexual. His first reaction to seeing the women is to leer: “Papae! quam pulchrae, quam venustae, quam egregiae puellulae! ... Captus sum illarum specie.” [“Whoa! What beautiful, what charming, what excellent little girls! ... I am crazed by their beauty.”]<sup>11</sup> Dulcitius’s passion is emphasized both by his interjection and the anaphora of “quam” in addition to the plural feminine adjective. Moreover, he describes the girls as “puellulae,” the diminutive form of “puella.” This is not a very frequently used diminutive form. Four classical usages come from Catullus’s poetry, three from Catullus 61, a salacious epithalamium celebrating and encouraging the virgin bride’s first sexual foray: “tu fero iuveni in manus / floridam ipse puellulam / dedis a gremio suae / matris, o Hymenae Hymen, / o Hymen Hymenae.” [“You gave the blooming little girl from the lap of her mother into the hands of the wild young man, O god of weddings.”]<sup>12</sup> The other uses in the poem include: “mitte brachiolum teres / praetextate, puellulae: / iam cubile adeat viri” and “o bonae senibus viris / cognitae bene feminae, / conlocate puellulam” [“Toga-wearer, let go of the smooth little arm of the little girl: now she goes to the bed of her man” and “O good women, known well by old men, give the little girl in marriage.”]<sup>13</sup> Terence, as well, used the term in a sexual context in *Phormio*: “Continuo quandam nactus est puellulam Citharistriam: hanc amare coepit perdite.” [“Here, Phaedria right away meets a certain little girl Citharistria: He begins to love her excessively.”]<sup>14</sup> It seems

<sup>10</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 270.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. All translations are my own, except where otherwise indicated.

<sup>12</sup> E. T. Merrill, ed., *Catullus* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1893), 100-101.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Franz Otto Dziatzko, ed., *Ausgewählte Komoedien des P. Terentius Afer zur einfuehrung in die lectuere der altlateinischen lustspiele* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1874), 38.

“puellula” meant not just “little girl” but carried connotations of both virginity and the sexual desirability that accompanied it. Dulcitus’s words insinuate his fetishizing of the virgins and foreshadow his attempt to rape them. Moreover, his reference to being “captus” creates a contrast with the interrogation scene in which the emperor wrongfully accuses the women of being insane or crazed simply for believing in Christianity. Hrotsvit exposes the true state of insanity in Dulcitus, who is a slave to his passions in a way that causes him to act shamefully and bizarrely later.

Dulcitus clarifies this intention almost immediately, but is critiqued by the soldiers for his stupidity:

DULCITIUS: Exaestuo illas ad mei amorem trahere.

MILITES: Diffidimus te praevalere.

DULCITIUS: Quare?

MILITES: Quia stabiles fide.

DULCITIUS: Quid, si suadeam blandimentis?

MILITES: Contempnunt.

DULCITIUS: Quid, si terream suppliciis?

MILITES: Parvi pendunt.

[DULCITIUS: I burn to drag them to my love.

SOLDIERS: We doubt you’ll succeed.

DULCITIUS: Why?

SOLDIERS: Because they are unwavering in faith.

DULCITIUS: What if I persuade them with seductions?

SOLDIERS: They will spurn them.

DULCITIUS: What if I terrify them with tortures?

SOLDIERS: They will judge these small.]<sup>15</sup>

Dulcitus’s diction in his first line is telling. “Aestuo” according to Lewis and Short means “Of the passions, love, desire, envy, jealousy, etc., to burn with desire, to be in violent, passionate excitement, to be agitated or excited, to be inflamed.”<sup>16</sup> This associates his desire specifically with violence and connecting it to Dulcitus’s previous statement as to being in a crazed mental

<sup>15</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 270.

<sup>16</sup> s.v. “aestuo.”

state. “Trahere” too has connotations of violence and can mean “to drag away violently, carry off, plunder.” Akin to “rapere,” it can also mean “to attract, allure, influence.”<sup>17</sup> Were these hints too subtle, Dulcitius immediately clarifies in the rapid-fire dialogue that failing seduction via “blandamenta,” he would resort to threats of physical violence to coerce them. This violent threat is also connected specifically with his male desire: in humoral theory men were imagined to be “hotter” than women and ejaculation was seen as balancing out this hot humoral imbalance.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, it is very common for heat/fire metaphors to be used when discussing male desire specifically.<sup>19</sup> Ironically, as Jacqueline Murray observes, “By virtue of their hotter complexions, men were more susceptible to sexual desire than were women, despite conventional ideologically based statements to the contrary.”<sup>20</sup> Hrotsvit’s connection to violence implies a critique of male sexual desire, especially in comparison to feminine chastity.

Dulcitius then directs the soldiers: “Ponite illas in custodiam in interiorem officinae aedem, in cuius proaulio ministrorum servantur vasa... quo a me saepiuscule possint visitari.” [“Put them in confinement in the interior cell of the workshop, in whose hall the dishes of the servants are served... so that they may be visited by me a little more frequently.”]<sup>21</sup> “Aedes” is an interesting word, as it means a “hearth” or “cell” in classical Latin with additional meanings of a temple of the gods or a sanctuary,<sup>22</sup> but later developed usage in Christian Latin to mean a church or basilica.<sup>23</sup> Using this could foreshadow God protecting the virgins even in their confinement. Another odd thing about the language here is the adverb “saepiuscule,” which is

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<sup>17</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s.v. “traho.”

<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline Murray, “‘The law of sin that is in my members:’ The problem of male embodiment,” in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (London: Routledge, 2005), 9-22 (15).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 270-271.

<sup>22</sup> s.v. “aedes”

<sup>23</sup> Albert Blaise, ed., *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), s.v. “aedes.”

“saepius,” or “more frequently,” plus what is apparently an adverbial diminutive ending “cule.” It seems Hrotsvit is using an ironic understatement by combining the comparative adverb with the diminutive. Additionally, “visito” is the frequentative form of “viso,” which already suggests repeated action. Hrotsvit’s phrasing seems to suggest that Dulcitius is planning on seeing the virgins very many times, as many as he wants, in their confinement. The rhetoric at work dramatically heightens the threat he poses to the virgins.

Dulcitius finds the women singing hymns, and declares his intention: “Observate pro foribus cum lucernis, ego autem intrabo et vel optatis amplexibus me saturabo.” [“Stand guard before the doors with the lamps, now I will enter and satisfy myself with the desired embraces.”]<sup>24</sup> Dulcitius uses many of the same words that the virgins use to express their desire for martyrdom, such as “amplexus,” etymologically related to “amplector,” and “optatis,” the past participle of “opto.” This shared diction, in such close proximity to the virgins’ interrogation scene, establishes Dulcitius’s desire as the antithesis of the virgins’ desire, and his embrace as the antithesis of Christ’s heavenly embrace. As an explicitly sexual threat, it both highlights the virgins’ sexuality and identity as desirable females and aligns their salvation from that threat as concordant with their identities as brides of Christ.

As in many of Hrotsvit’s torture scenes, no actual torture is inflicted, despite the best efforts of the men in power. Instead, Hrotsvit offers the observations of the virgins as they watch Dulcitius humiliate himself in a failed attempt to rape them:

AGAPES. Quid strepat pro foribus?  
 HIRENA. Infelix Dulcitius ingreditur.  
 CHIONIA. Deus nos tueatur!  
 AGAPES. Amen.  
 CHIONIA. Quid sibi vult conllisio ollarum, caccaborum et sartaginum?  
 HIRENA. Lustrabo. Accedite, quaeso, per rimulas perspicite!  
 AGAPES. Quid est?

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<sup>24</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 271.



HIRENA. Ecce, iste stultus, mente alienatus, aestimat se nostris uti amplexibus.

AGAPE. Quid facit?

HIRENA. Nunc ollas molli fovet gremio, nunc sartagines et caccabos amplectitur, mitia libans oscula.

CHIONIA. Ridiculum.

[AGAPE. What is making a ruckus before the doors?

HIRENA. Calamitous Dulcitius is entering.

CHIONIA. May God protect us!

HIRENA. I will observe. Come here, I ask you, look through the small cracks!

AGAPE. What is it?

HIRENA. Look, that idiot, he's lost his mind, and thinks he indulges in our embraces.

AGAPE. What is he doing?

HIRENA. Now he's caressing pots in his tender lap, now he's embracing frying pans and pots, pouring forth mellow kisses.

CHIONIA. Ridiculous.]

In what is perhaps the most iconic episode in Hrotsvit's oeuvre, the virgins watch as the intended physical/sexual assault upon them is redirected upon pots and pans in the dark kitchen. While the preceding scene portrays Dulcitius and his soldiers musing on the virgins' beauty as the women themselves remain voiceless, this scene reverses the perspective. As Albrecht Classen notes, the virgins observe Dulcitius through the cracks in the wall, deriving enjoyment from laughing at his stupidity.<sup>25</sup> Though I disagree with Classen's reading of their enjoyment as "voyeuristic" or "erotic," Classen's observation does highlight the ironic contrast between Dulcitius's erotic gaze and the virgins' mocking gaze. Hrotsvit's choice to have the virgins watch and mock Dulcitius, out of the audience's view parallels Dulcitius's monologue about the virgins' beauty and his lust for them immediately before. This replaces a lustful male gaze with a continent, scornful female gaze, thus ironically reversing the power dynamic between the men and women.

The words used to describe Dulcitius in the dialogue also point to Hrotsvit's keen sense of irony. Combining "mente" and "alienare" literally means "to take away or deprive of

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<sup>25</sup> Classen, "Sex on the Stage (and in the Library) of an Early Medieval Convent: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim," 177.

reason, to make crazy, insane, to drive mad.”<sup>26</sup> The same sort of rhetoric is applied in Aldhelm’s account of the incident, found in his hagiographical poem *De Virginitate*:

Denique praedictas germana mente sorores  
 Diri tortores ducunt e carcere caeco,  
 Quas simul aspiciens formosis vultibus atrox  
 Praeses Dulcitius spurco succenditur igne  
 Luxuriae stimulis caeco et correptus amore.  
 Plurima tunc pallax spondebat dona puellis,  
 Si mallent animo nutum complere nefandum.  
 Sed famulas Christi protexit parma pudoris  
 Spicula luxuriae spernentes corde profana.

Sed nocturna quies cum fessos occupat artus,  
 Dulcia dum famulae cecinissent carmina Christo  
 Odis psalmorum pulsantes ostia caeli,  
 Audet atrox sanctam spuro flammatus amore  
 Audacter cellam stolidis irrumpere plantis;  
 Sed praestante Deo caecatur corde malignus,  
 Basia caccabis dum stultus tradidit atris:  
 Sic ollis niger, sic furva sartagine teter  
 Per totam noctem praeses diluditur amens  
 Defensante Deo sacrasque tuente puellas;  
 Egreditur tandem infelix gurgustia linquens.<sup>27</sup>

[And then the fearful tortures lead from blind confinement the condemned blood-sisters, whom savage Praesul Dulcitius at the same time as he saw their beautiful faces is spurred to defiled passion by the spurs of lust and corrupted by blind love. Many times that seducer promised gifts to the girls, if they should soften their will to fill their soul with heinousness. But the shield of modesty protected the handmaids of Christ, spurning the wicked arrow of lust with their hearts.

But in the nocturnal quiet, when strength conquers worn out people, while the handmaids sang sweet songs to Christ, the doors of heaven being battered by the haters of the psalms, the savage one hears the saint, inflamed by impure love, daringly the idiot bursting into the cell with his heels, but by the most excellent God the evil one was blinded at the heart, when the idiot delivered kisses to the black pots: As the jar was black, thus the loathsome, frantic praesul by the dark pot through all the night was deluded by God, defending and guarding the holy girls. He marched out at last, forsaking the hovel.]

<sup>26</sup> s.v. “alieno.”

<sup>27</sup> Aldhelm, “Carmina de virginitate,” in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctorum Antiquissimorum Tomus XV*, ed. Rudolph Ehwald (Berlin: Weidmannos, 1919), 444-445.

What Hrotsvit and her possible source Aldhelm<sup>28</sup> both emphasize is the quality of Dulcitius being fierce, wild, out of his mind—standing in contrast to the earlier accusations of madness against the women who are clearly sane. She also connects this, using the word “mollis,” as discussed above, to suggest Dulcitius’s weakness in committing such an act—a notable subversion of Dulcitius’s secular office, and a direct contrast to both Hrotsvit’s and Aldhelm’s use of the word above to suggest an “effeminate” weakness of will. The connotations of insanity and softness are connected to the “contra naturam” aspect to Dulcitius’s actions, one not explicitly mentioned in the text, but nonetheless obvious to the audience.<sup>29</sup>

A broad range of sexual acts were considered “contra naturam,” or “against nature,” by the medieval Church. Only intercourse within marriage, for the purpose of procreation, was sanctioned.<sup>30</sup> In his study of deviant sexual acts in the Middle Ages, Michel Raby asserts:

La lecture des pénitentials du Moyen Age, sorte de guides pratiques permettant au prêtre confesseur d’interroger le pénitent et de lui imposer une sanction tarifée pour chacune de ses offenses, souvent à caractère sexuel (Payer 7-8, 9), permet de retrouver, par simple déduction, le grand principe fondamental, mais ô combien utopique, de Saint Augustin. Les canons pénitentiels censoriaux, en effet, qui dérogent tous, en tout cas en matière de sexualité, à la règle augustinienne “*pro natura*” ne peuvent décrire et sanctionner que ce qui est à proprement parler “*contra naturam*.”

[Reading the penitentials of the Middle Ages, a type of practical guide permitting the confessor priest to interrogate the penitent and impose upon him an obligatory penance for each of his offenses, often of a sexual character, allows us to rediscover, through simple deduction, the great fundamental principle, but such a utopian principle, of St. Augustine. The penitential canons, censuring, in effect, those who broke them all, in any

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<sup>28</sup> No conclusive studies have linked Hrotsvit to Aldhelm, but Anna Katharina Rudolph has noted many of the similarities between their narratives in her article, “*Ego Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis* Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim: Her Sources, Motives, and Historical Context,” *Magistra* 20.2 (2014): 58-90. Moreover, I have noticed over the course of this study that they tend to use quite a bit of similar diction and both are concerned with virginity, raising the question as to whether Hrotsvit may have read his work.

<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Kathryn Gravdal in the aforementioned monograph observes that as Dulcitius is led to sin by pots and pans, it is not the virgins’ beauty that causes him to sin, but his own lust (35). As such, the women are absolved of any sort of blame for Dulcitius’ sin—pinning it entirely on his own weakness.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Raby, “Le péché ‘contre nature’ dans la littérature médiévale: Deux cas,” *Romance Quarterly* 44.4 (1997): 215-223 (215).

case in the matter of sexuality, by the Augustinian rule “pro natura,” cannot depict and sanction that which is properly called “contra naturam.”]<sup>31</sup>

Acts that were “contra naturam” included masturbation, and penances are outlined in the different penitentials he surveys. One early penitential, the *Bigotianum*, mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, prescribes 100 days of fasting for a first offense, and a year for repeated offenses.<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that this is still significantly less than sodomy, for instance, which is prescribed *ten* years of penance.<sup>33</sup> In another penitential of St. Columban, masturbation is given the same penance as bestiality.<sup>34</sup> As Raby later notes, though, sins such as masturbation could be seen as a “gateway sin” toward more serious offenses like sodomy, at least if we consult later, fourteenth-century medieval treatises on the subject.<sup>35</sup>

Much of the anxiety over masturbation, other than its connections with sodomy, came from concerns with “wasted seed” of any kind, including nocturnal emissions, a natural aspect of male physiology.<sup>36</sup> Jacqueline Murray examines male sexuality and desire in general by studying instances of nocturnal emissions and masturbation and frames the chaste male’s anxiety as aimed not just at his ability to control sexual desire, but at his will to control “movements of the flesh,” putting them “at war with their members.”<sup>37</sup> According to Murray, various medieval authors warned of the dangers of “wasted” semen: Caesarius of Heisterbach, writing in the thirteenth century against leniency toward nocturnal emissions, cautioned that “wasted seed” produced in nocturnal emissions or masturbation presented supernatural threats.<sup>38</sup> Caesarius claimed that demons constructed human bodies for themselves from “wasted seed” to deceive human

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 215. All translations of French are mine except where otherwise noted.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>33</sup> Ludwig Bieler, ed., *The Irish penitentials* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963), 218.

<sup>34</sup> Raby, “Le péché ‘contre nature,’” 216.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Murray, “The law of sin that is in my members,” 11, 13.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 13.

beings.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, “wasted seed” was not only polluting, but potentially supernaturally dangerous, enabling trickery by demonic forces. Murray also relates that men who had nocturnal emissions or masturbated often blamed demons for their lack of bodily control.<sup>40</sup> Murry recounts Gerald of Wales’ interpretation of a monk’s experience with either masturbation or a nocturnal emission; the incident was linked to a loss of chastity, but blamed on a demon, and treated by blessing his groin with holy salt and pressing the cross upon it.<sup>41</sup>

Placing Dulcitius’s actions within this context, the guard’s attempt at rape is thwarted, but he nonetheless commits a serious sin in having sex with pots and pans, in other words, masturbating with the assistance of kitchen equipment. When Onan spills his semen rather than completing procreative intercourse, God strikes him down.<sup>42</sup> With this biblical incident in mind, Hrotsvit’s inclusion of Dulcitius’s wasted seed may indicate Dulcitius’s impending judgment by God. Moreover, Dulcitius acts “contra naturam” and thereby is linked to more serious offenses such as sodomy or bestiality. Dulcitius’s insanity, moreover, is associated with a lack of control over his own body—though it would seem his status as a sexual predator would suggest that he occupies a position of power and control, his actions in the kitchen with the pots and pans indicate the opposite: that he is the plaything of his own body or even demons. This places him in direct contrast to the holy women, who, perfected in chastity, can neither be persuaded nor threatened into forsaking their virginity. Bodily chastity, linked with bodily control, becomes an aspect of agency for Hrotsvit, whereas Dulcitius’s lack of control and lust leaves him at the mercy of his “hot” physiology or subject to demonic control. Dulcitius’s overthrow recalls St.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>42</sup> Gen. 38:8-10.

Augustine's admonition that "the city of this world... is itself dominated by that very lust of domination."<sup>43</sup>

This demonic association with Dulcitius is furthered by the immediate aftermath of his risqué night in the kitchen. Emerging from the kitchen, the soldiers exclaim: "Quis hic egreditur? Daemoniacus. Vel magis ipse diabolus. Fugiamus!" ["Who approaches here? A demon. Or even the devil himself. Let's get outta here!"]<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Hrotsvit's description of his appearance accords with medieval European depictions of the demonic, strengthening this association: "Quid hoc vile ac detestabile monstrum, scissis et nigellis panniculis obsitum? Pugnīs tundamus, de gradu praecipitemus, nec ultra huc detur liber accessus." ["What is this vile and detestable monster, covered by torn and blackened rags? Let us beat him with our fists, anticipate him from this step, lest beyond here free access is given to him."] <sup>45</sup> The fact that Dulcitius is blackened by his encounter with the pots gives him a demonic appearance: many medieval references to demons, such as the fourth-century Greek *Life of St. Anthony* or the eleventh-century Old English *Life of St. Margaret*, conceive of them as literally the color black.<sup>46</sup> Even Agape observes the fittingness of his appearance to his soul: "Decet, ut talis appareat corpore, qualis a diabolo possidetur in mente." ["It is fitting that he appear in such a way in his body, just as he is possessed by the devil in his mind."] <sup>47</sup> Moreover, the use of the word "monstrum" is loaded—while it can mean literally a "monster," in religious language, it can refer to an evil omen.<sup>48</sup> In Christian language, this is taken further to mean "démons," or "choses contre nature," that is to

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<sup>43</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettensen, (London: Penguin, 2003), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 272.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> David Brakke, trans., "Life of St. Anthony of Egypt," in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head, (New York: Garland, 2001), 1-30 (10). Mary Clayton and Hugh Maggenis, *The Old English Lives of St. Margaret*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 123, 125. Even Hrotsvit's women

<sup>47</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 271.

<sup>48</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "monstrum."

say, “sodomie.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore it is obvious that Dulcitius’s subsequent monstrosity is both demonic and a direct result of his sexual transgressions. Acting “contra naturam,” Dulcitius becomes contrary to nature and God himself.

Dulcitius is determined to be avenged upon the sisters for this embarrassment. Encouraged by his wife to humiliate them as they supposedly humiliated him, Dulcitius resolves: “Mando, ut lascivae praesententur puellae et abstractis vestibibus publice denudentur, quo versa vice, quid nostra possint ludibria, experiantur.” [“I order that the wanton little girls be exposed and stripped publicly, their clothes having been taken away, they may experience that which our mockery was able to do by turning it back on them.”]<sup>50</sup> Dulcitius’s threat highlights the sexually transgressive nature of his own embarrassment, and his decision to repay the sisters in turn. Obviously, public stripping is a sexual shaming, but the particular words he uses attempt to consign not only physical but also spiritual embarrassment upon them: “lascivus,” which he uses to describe the women, is used negatively to mean “wanton” or “lewd.”<sup>51</sup> While the most basic meaning of “ludibrium” is “a mockery, derision, wantonness,” it can also be defined as “violence done to a woman,” specifically.<sup>52</sup> This highlights the gendering of their status as martyrs and marks the violence attempted upon them as specifically targeted at female bodies.

However, Dulcitius’s attempt to ascribe moral lewdness to the women through imposing physical stripping is a complete failure. The soldiers complain: “Frustra sudamus, in vanum laboramus: ecce, vestimenta virgineis corporibus inhaerent velut coria.” [“We sweat for nothing, we labor in vain: look, the clothes stick to the virginal bodies like skin.”]<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Dulcitius

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<sup>49</sup> Albert Blaise, ed., *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens*, s.v. “monstrum.”

<sup>50</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 273.

<sup>51</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “lascivus.”

<sup>52</sup> s.v. “lubridium.”

<sup>53</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 273.

immediately falls asleep during this process, and cannot be awakened by the soldiers, rendering him incapable of appreciating the torturous show he has devised: “*praeses stertit sedendo nec ullatenus excitari potest a somno.*” [“The sitting praesul snores, and cannot be awakened from sleep in any way.”]<sup>54</sup> Dulcitius’s soldiers cannot strip the women or cause them sexual embarrassment because the women have adhered to chastity and virginity through their willpower; as such, God’s intervention prevents, likewise, physical indecency that would contradict that chastity. Hrotsvit’s technique rebukes attempts by powerful men to violate or control the virgins’ bodies against their wills. Her use of divine intervention affirms their agency in adhering to virginity by defeating those who would violate it.

These incidents also bring forth a main theme of Hrotsvit’s virgin martyr plays: the power of speech. As the action of the play is communicated entirely in dialogue, verbal exchanges obviously play an important role in moving the plot forward. Specifically, all the action in the play, both on the part of the virgins and the emperors, proceeds from two types of speech acts: exercitives, in which the authorities order things to be done, and in which the virgins petition God,<sup>55</sup> and commissives, the threats leveled against the accused Christians and likewise, the counter-vows made by the virgins.<sup>56</sup> What is clear in this scene and many others, is that the speech acts of the virgins are always efficacious, while those of the emperor are not. When Dulcitius approached their cell to rape them, Chionia prayed, “*Deus nos tueatur!*” [“May God protect us!”], within the conventions of the world of the play, signifying a prayer, or an executive aimed at God. God’s response to their prayers, protecting them by befuddling Dulcitius, show that their speech acts actually produce results. Dulcitius’s words, on the other hand, are not

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 155-156.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 157-158. The main distinction between this is committing oneself to one’s own statement, in the case of commissives, and imposing consequences on others, in the case of exercitives (156).



actions: he orders the soldiers to strip the women, but as mentioned before, this is rendered literally impossible by God. This is also the case with commissives: Dulcitius's threat is proved completely ineffectual against the vow of virginity made by the women, thanks to divine intervention. Hrotsvit's belief in the ultimate power and authority coming from God guarantees that those speech acts appealing to Him are honored, while those against Him are impotent.

This reliance on speech acts in the plays prompts us to rethink our modern ideas of agency by adapting them to Hrotsvit's Augustinian philosophy of human freedom. To evaluate the agency of Hrotsvit's heroes, we must instead consider the Christian ideal of true freedom: though free will designates the ability to choose either right or wrong without impediment, true freedom is not found in injustice but rather in living with God's law, as St. Paul compares living in sin in the Letter to the Romans to being "in slavery to sin."<sup>57</sup> In the Christian life, however, "Freed from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness."<sup>58</sup> Hrotsvit's inspiration, Boethius, expands upon this, as Lady Philosophy says to the author: "Now, if thou wilt call to mind from what country thou art sprung, it is not ruled, as once was the Athenian polity, by the sovereignty of the multitude, but 'one is its Ruler, one its King,' who takes delight in the number of His citizens, not in their banishment; to submit to whose governance and to obey whose ordinances is perfect freedom."<sup>59</sup> In a later digression on free will, Lady Philosophy expounds:

"There is freedom," said she; "nor, indeed, can any creature be rational, unless he be endowed with free will. For that which hath the natural use of reason has the faculty of discriminative judgment, and of itself distinguishes what is to be shunned or desired. Now, everyone seeks what he judges desirable, and avoids what he thinks should be shunned. Wherefore, beings endowed with reason possess also the faculty of free choice

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<sup>57</sup> Rom. 6:6 (NABRE).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid 6:18.

<sup>59</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. R. James, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm>. The Latin (and Greek) reads as follows: "si enim cuius oriundo sis patriae reminiscare, non uti atheniensium quondam multitudinis imperio regitur, sed εἰς κοίρανός ἐστιν, εἰς βασιλεύς, qui frequentia ciuium non depulsione laetetur, cuius agi frenis atque obtemperare iustitiae libertas est." See Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*, ed. James O'Donnell, accessed May 1, 2017, [http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/boethius/jkok/list\\_t.htm](http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/boethius/jkok/list_t.htm).

and refusal. But I suppose this faculty not equal alike in all. The higher Divine essences possess a clear-sighted judgment, an uncorrupt will, and an effective power of accomplishing their wishes. Human souls must needs be comparatively free while they abide in the contemplation of the Divine mind, less free when they pass into bodily form, and still less, again, when they are enwrapped in earthly members. But when they are given over to vices, and fall from the possession of their proper reason, then indeed their condition is utter slavery. For when they let their gaze fall from the light of highest truth to the lower world where darkness reigns, soon ignorance blinds their vision; they are disturbed by baneful affections, by yielding and assenting to which they help to promote the slavery in which they are involved, and are in a manner led captive by reason of their very liberty.”<sup>60</sup>

Arguments that try to measure the agency of the women in virgin martyr plays in general, or Hrotsvit in particular, prematurely malign the virgins as passive, as they appear to lack control over the fates of their bodies since they are eventually executed. However, in Christian philosophy freedom is realized to its greatest extent when directed toward God; in the reverse, choosing against His will only enslave one to sin. This is especially clear in *Dulcitius* where the emperors and praesuls, who ought to have the most freedom due to their powerful positions, are literally constrained by divine intervention, to mirror the invisible containment found in their opposition to God. This contrasts the freedom that the virgins live in—though literally imprisoned like Boethius, they act in more authentic freedom through their adherence to God’s law and governance of their bodies through chastity. Considering the Christian frame of mind with which Hrotsvit was writing, we must analyze her women with reference to a Christian understanding of agency, rather than a modern, post-sexual revolution understanding. Employing

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. The Latin reads as follows: “est, inquit; neque enim fuerit ulla rationalis natura quin eidem libertas adsit arbitrii. nam quod ratione uti naturaliter potest id habet iudicium quo quidque discernat; per se igitur fugienda optandaue dinoscit. quod uero quis optandum esse iudicat petit, refugit uero quod aestimat esse fugiendum. quare quibus in ipsis inest ratio etiam uolendi nolendique libertas, sed hanc non in omnibus aequam esse constituo. nam supernis diuinisque substantiis et perspicax iudicium et incorrupta uoluntas et efficax optatorum praesto est potestas. humanas uero animas liberiores quidem esse necesse est cum se in mentis diuinae speculatione conseruant, minus uero cum dilabuntur ad corpora, minusque etiam cum terrenis artubus colligantur. extrema uero est seruitus cum uitiiis deditae rationis propriae possessione ceciderunt. nam ubi oculos a summae luce ueritatis ad inferiora et tenebrosa deiecerint, mox inscitiae nube caligant, perniciosi turbantur affectibus, quibus accedendo consentiendoque quam inuexere sibi adiuuant seruitutem et sunt quodam modo propria libertate captiuae.” Ed. James O’Donnell.

such a framework, it is clear that the virgin martyrs' agency is embodied in their will to resist sexual violence in which the women are made literally inviolable by the grace of God.

Their metaphorical and physical inviolability is also manifest in their martyrdoms. Sisinnius, appointed by Emperor Diocletian to take over for Dulcitius in his incapacitation, separates Hirena, the youngest, from her older sisters, Agape and Chionia, to try to persuade her. Agape and Chionia, however, are to be put to death. Sisinnius, like Diocletian, eschews their character in describing them: "O milites, ubi sunt lascivae, quae torqueri debent, puellae?" ["O soldiers, where are the wanton girls who must be tortured?"]<sup>61</sup> Before putting them to death, he asks them again to apostatize, but he is rebuked: "Non prohibebis, nec umquam sacrificabimus daemoniis." ["You will not hinder us, and we will never sacrifice to demons."] <sup>62</sup> With their final resistance confirmed, Sisinnius has them executed by burning:

SISINNIUS. Non tardetis, milites, non tardetis; capite blasphemias et in ignem proicite vivas!

MILITES. Instemus construendis rogis et tradamus illas bachantibus<sup>63</sup> flammis, quo finem demus conviciis.

AGAPES. Non tibi, domine, non tibi haec potentia insolita, ut ignis vim virtutis suae obliviscatur, tibi obtemperando. Sed taedet nos morarum; ideo rogamus solvi retinacula animarum, quo extinctis corporibus tecum plaudant in aethre nostri spiritus.

MILITES. O novum, o stupendum miraculum! Ecce, animae egressae sunt corpora, et nulla laesionis repperiuntur vestigia, sed nec capilli, nec vestimenta ab igne sunt ambusta, quo minus corpora.

[SISINNIUS. Do not delay, soldiers, do not delay; grab these blasphemers and throw them, living, into the fire!

SOLDIERS. Let us draw near to the built-up funeral pile and deliver them to the raging flames, where we may give end to their screams.

AGAPE. Let it not be for you, Lord, not for you this strange power, that the fire forgets the strength of his virtue, for you by submitting. But we are weary of delay; thus we ask

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<sup>61</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 273.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 274.

<sup>63</sup> The use of bacchantes is notable, especially given its first occurrence in the play. As noted in my previous chapter, this associates the women to a female cult; but also, as quoted from Livy, may refer to the Classical Bacchantes' torches, which, even doused in water, apparently continued to flame through some clever chemistry. As the women come out of the flames unharmed, Hrotsvit may have intended a reference, though they are preserved through the work of God rather than chemistry or occult.

to be released from the bonds of our spirits, so that our spirits applaud the extinct bodies with you in heaven.

SOLDIERS. O new, o stupendous miracle! Behold, their spirits have left their bodies, and no vestiges of injuries are discovered, but neither hairs, nor clothes were consumed by fire, much less their bodies.]<sup>64</sup>

Once again, the women's speeches are proved efficacious, whereas the men's fail: Agape's final prayer actually asks that God free them from their mortal forms. Her prayer alone, rather than Sisinnius' orders to execute them, guarantees their death. The efficacy of her prayer and impotency of the fire are clear through the outcome of the burning: the fire, clearly, could not have actually killed them (as the soldiers exclaim the fire didn't even hurt a hair on their heads), without their prayer that God allow them to be martyrs and abandon, very platonically, the bonds of their corporeality.

The fire imagery can be read as a metaphor for male sexuality, as discussed in Dulcitius's use of "exaestuo." Though exposed to fire, or male desire, the female bodies remain untouched; even their clothes remain intact. The virgins' commitment to chastity is preserved even in their deaths, symbolizing how their bodies were ultimately untouchable thanks to the uniting of their wills with that of God. At the same time, the divine associations with fire do suggest the nuptial nature of their martyrdoms. The Holy Spirit came in the form of fire in the Bible, such as when Elijah is carried to heaven in a "fiery chariot and fiery horses."<sup>65</sup> The virgins, likewise, are escorted to heaven by fire, though they are martyred by the will of God, rather than the will of men. Such imagery could also suggest the bridal or desiring quality of their relationship with God: though the emperor's fire is impotent, God's intervention leads to their conjugal-like union in heaven with him. Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed discusses Hrotsvit's legends rather than her dramas, with a special attention to the symbolic portrayal of desire, arguing that Hrotsvit's

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> 2 Kings 2:11-12 (NABRE).

legends encourage the “sublimation” of sexuality.<sup>66</sup> Cullhed notes that in Hrotsvit’s legends, while resistance to burning seems to be a trait of inviolably chaste saints, at the same time, “fire metaphors run through all representations of passion, both sexual and spiritual, thus uniting them in a shard configuration.”<sup>67</sup> Likewise, Hrotsvit’s fire symbolism in Agape and Chionia’s martyrdom enables multilayered readings of the virgins’ chastity.

Hirena, like her sisters, is preserved in virginity through divine intervention, thus affirming her agency and femininity; as she says to Sisinnius: “Quicquid irrogabis adversi, evadam iuvamine Christi.” [“Whatever adversities you will inflict, I will avoid with the help of Christ.”]<sup>68</sup> His threats, however, are not only purely destructive physically but also have explicitly sexual elements:

SISINNIUS. Faciam te ad lupanar duci corpusque tuum turpiter coinquinari.

HIRENA. Melius est, ut corpus quibuscumque iniuriis maculetur, quam anima idolis polluat.

SISINNIUS. Si socia eris meretricum, non poteris polluta inter contubernium computari virginum.

HIRENA. Voluptas parit poenam, necessitas autem coronam; nec dicitur reatus, nisi quod consentit animus.

[SISINNIUS. I will have you led to a brothel and your body defiled all over repulsively.

HIRENA. It is better that the body be defiled by whatever injuries, than the spirit be polluted by idols.

SISINNIUS. If you are a companion of prostitutes, polluted, you can not be counted among the company of virgins.

HIRENA. The will yields punishment, necessity, however, the crown; one is not said to be guilty unless the will consents.]<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, “Desire in Hrotsvith’s Hagiographical Legends,” in *Pangs of Love and Longing: Configurations of Desire in Premodern Literature*, ed. Anders Cullhed, Carin Franzén, and Andres Hallengren (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 204-215 (206).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 205. While Cullhed’s observations are astute, he does not consider the gendered nature of fire as a symbol of specifically male desire. Such gendered analysis would complicate and strengthen the argument of his paper, as all of the examples of fire symbolism he introduces are in reference to male erotic desire in the legends.

<sup>68</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 275.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

This exchange, in which Hirena is explicitly threatened with rape, reveals much about Hrotsvit's vision of chastity and how it plays into agency. Hirena's election to the choir of virgins is obviously by the grace of God but entirely dependent on the cooperation of her will and whether she willingly consents to sex. Far from a bodily feature in its own right, Hirena suggests that chastity is a purely spiritual virtue, and that experiencing rape as a result to her witness to the faith actually deserves the "crown." Virginity, then, may be a virtue; physical virginity is merely incidental.<sup>70</sup> By locating spiritual heroism in the will rather than in the body, the women are empowered even as they are physically weak. This enables and affirms agency even when physical force is in the dominion of the emperors.

However, as earlier, Hirena's will to preserve her virginity is rewarded by God, affirming her agency in the Christian concept of human freedom. Just as Sisinnius' persuasions are in vain, likewise his order to drag her to a brothel does not come to fruition.<sup>71</sup> The soldiers relate that on the way to the brothel on Sisinnius' orders: "supervenere duo ignoti iuvenes, asserentes se ad hoc ex te missos, ut Hirenam ad cacumen montis producerent." ["Two unknown young men overtook us, maintaining that they were sent here from you, to lead Hirena to the peak of the mountain."]<sup>72</sup> They describe these men thus: "Amictu splendidi, vultu admodum reverendi." ["With splendid dress, with faces to be revered to the greatest extent."]<sup>73</sup> "Splendidus" specifically can mean "bright, shining, glittering, brilliant."<sup>74</sup> One cannot help but notice the contrast between the bright and shining men, dressed beautifully, and Dulcitius after his unnatural sexual act, who is specifically described as dark and dressed in rags. Given Dulcitius's demonic associations, the

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<sup>70</sup> Florence Newman remarks that Hrotsvit's philosophy here is not novel, but Augustinian in nature in "Violence and Virginity in Hrotsvit's Dramas," 64.

<sup>71</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 275-276.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 276.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "splendidus."

men here are the angelic counterparts; contrasting immoral, unrestrained sexuality, in which a person is controlled by demons or their own flesh, the angels come to deliver Hirena in a moment when she may be subjected to such devilish sexuality. This reinforces Hirena's chastity, and as it is the antithesis to Dulcitius's sexuality, it appears brilliant, divine, and subject to the control of her will. Moreover, Hirena's protestations that she will evade tortures with the help of Christ are shown to be accurate, unlike Sisinnius's explicit orders and temporal power. The power of female speech, connected to the power of God, also allows the women to choose a purified, divine sexuality, rather than a demonic sort in which their bodies are merely driven by sexual desire.

What follows is an account of Hirena's martyrdom, the act that completes the play. Finding Hirena at the top of the mountain, Sisinnius orders her killed by an arrow to end his and his soldiers' embarrassments: "Quisquis es meorum, strenue extende arcum, iace sagittam, perfode hanc maleficam." ["Whoever is one of my men, resolutely stretch out your bow, launch an arrow, pierce this criminal."] <sup>75</sup> The mode of Hirena's execution is pregnant with symbolism, much like her sisters'. While "perfodio" can mean pierce, it also means "open up," and at any rate, the suggestion of sexual penetration is evident. <sup>76</sup> The violence of execution is once more connected with male sexual desire, which is ultimately thwarted for the preservation of Hirena's virginity. As Florence Newman asserts, the method of Hirena's execution (and the tortures attempted upon her) "conflate the sexual and the punitive." <sup>77</sup> However, to borrow a phrase from Newman, Hrotsvit proceeds to "deflate the 'sexing up'" of the maiden, <sup>78</sup> as Hirena mocks the men for their impotence: "Infelix, erubescere, Sisinni, erubescere, teque turpiter victum ingemisce,

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<sup>75</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 276.

<sup>76</sup> Leo F. Stelten, *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), s.v. "perfodio."

<sup>77</sup> Newman, "Violence and Virginity," 60.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

quia tenellae infantiam virgunculae absque armorum apparatu nequivisti superare.” [“Blush, unhappy Sisinni, blush, and lament your victory shamefully, because you could not conquer the youth of a tiny little virgin without the use of weapons.”]<sup>79</sup>

At the same time, this can also be read as indicating her impending spiritual marriage to Christ. Rejoicing at her impending death, Hirena exclaims: “Hinc mihi quam maxime gaudendum, tibi vero dolendum, quia pro tui severitate malignitatis in tartara dampnaberis; ego autem, martirii palmam virginitatisque receptura coronam, intrabo aethereum aeterni regis thalamum; cui est honor et gloria in saecula.” [“This must be celebrated to the greatest extent by me, but mourned by you, since because of the severity of your wickedness you will be damned to Hell; I, however, having received the palm of a martyr and the crown of virginity, will enter the ethereal wedding bed of the Eternal King; to whom there is honor and glory forever.”]<sup>80</sup> The act of being penetrated by the arrow will in fact effect her marriage to Christ as a consummation, confirmed by her use of “thalamum,” or “wedding bed.” Though he ignores the sexual innuendo inherent in penetration, Cullhed notes that in Hrotsvit’s legends, the playwright uses the classical symbol of the “arrow of passion” to evoke “both erotic and divine desire.”<sup>81</sup> Likewise, the arrow completes and confirms Hirena’s desires—threatened with the arrow, rather than cowering or being morose for having lost in a temporal sense to Sisinnius, she asserts that ultimately her martyrdom is a victory for her and an eternal loss for him. As such, Sisinnius is thwarted in his grasping for power, and Hirena, her agency affirmed, achieves her desire for martyrdom. At the

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<sup>79</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 277. Citing the arrow used to kill Hirena as well as the swords used to kill the sisters in *Sapientia* and the saints of Hrotsvit’s legends, Elizabeth Petroff asserts: “Virginity is heroic because temptations to surrender to passion are also on a heroic scale. For this reason, Hrotsvit’s virgin martyrs must be killed with heroic weapons, the instruments of personal combat” (236). See Elizabeth Petroff, “Eloquence and Heroic Virginity in Hrotsvit’s Verse Legends,” in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Rara Avis in Saxonia?*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Ann Arbor: Marc Publishing Co., 1987), 229-238.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Cullhed, “Desire in Hrotsvit’s Hagiographical Legends,” 204.



same time, the emphasis on her body and role as bride is highlighted in the end, emphasizing her femininity, a gendering consonant with her agency and strong speech—a fitting characterization by the “*Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis*.”

Through their bodily inviolability in the face of sexual threats and various tortures, Agape, Chionia, and Hirena are affirmed in their free choice to pursue virginity in pursuit of their Eternal Bridegroom. By contrast, the men in the drama, most notably Dulcitius and Sisinnius, are shown to be slaves to their passions and impotent. Rejecting God and acting only according to worldly desires of the flesh and power, their orders are always ineffective, while the prophecies and prayers of the women are accomplished through God. Being a slave to his body and indulging in his violent sexuality, Dulcitius is ruled by his unbridled lust and aligned with demonic forces, while angels protect Hirena from sexual assault. Ultimately, the sexuality of the virgins is fully realized in their martyrdoms: while the imagery of fire and arrows represents the futility of Dulcitius’s and Sisinnius’s desire, they can likewise be read as the means by which heavenly marriages between the virgins and Christ are consummated.

### **Thwarting Male Desire/Violence in *Sapientia***

In the martyrdom scenes of *Sapientia*, the eponymous mother steps out of the spotlight to encourage her daughters to undergo dramatic martyrdoms. In response to *Sapientia*’s verbal insolence, Antiochus and the emperor discuss:

ANTIOCHUS. Cur dignaris cum hac contumace verba miscere, quae te insolenti fatigat praesumptione?

ADRIANUS. Debeone illam dimittere inpunitam?

ANTIOCHUS. Hortare puellulas et, si renitantur, infantiae ne parcas, sed fac, ut illae necentur, quo rebellis mater funeribus natarum acrius torqueatur.

ADRIANUS. Faciam, quae hortaris.

ANTIOCHUS. Ita demum praevaleris.

[ANTIOCHUS. Why do you deign to take part in words with this obstinate woman, who wearies you with her insolent presumption?

HADRIAN. Surely I should not send her away unpunished?

ANTIOCHUS. Exhort the little girls and, if the young girls resist, do not spare but act so that they may be killed, by which the rebellious mother may be more sharply tortured by the funerals of her daughters.

HADRIAN. I will do what you urge.

ANTIOCHUS. Thus you will at last prevail.]<sup>82</sup>

Much of the same vocabulary that was present in the martyrdom scenes and scenes of impending torture of the virgins of *Dulcitius* reappears here, including the suggestive “puellula,” which both patronizes the girls and regards them as objects of sexual desire. Though the sexual threats are not as explicit in this play as its predecessor, the physical violence upon the girls does have sexual overtones, emphasized by Hrotsvit’s diction. This short exchange also reveals the special torture reserved for Sapientia: not physical, but nonetheless linked to her motherhood—watching her daughters’ executions. Sapientia’s “passion” is not as dramatic and not physical like her daughters’. Nonetheless, her femininity is emphasized, her suffering stems from her motherhood. What the pagans forget, however, is that she specifically raised her daughters to be brides of Christ and is delighted by their willingness to be martyred.<sup>83</sup> Though clearly Sapientia will suffer through this, suffering in a redemptive sense is to be praised and not denigrated: through her sorrows in watching her children suffer, she is united with Christ herself. Sapientia becomes the ideal Christian mother, an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the *Mater Dolorosa*, whose sorrows came from witnessing her Son’s passion. While Sapientia imitates the most iconic Christian heroine in her motherhood, her daughters imitate the same Blessed Virgin in their chastity.

Fides is the first sister the men threaten and torture. As in *Dulcitius*, before she is put to death, she has a final interrogation in which she is shown to be ever resistant:

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<sup>82</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 365.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 364.

ADRIANUS. Fides, intuerere venerabilem magnae Dianae imaginem et fer sacrae deae libamina, quo possis uti eius gratia.

FIDES. O stultum imperatoris praeceptum, omni contemptu dignum!

ADRIANUS. Quid murmuras subsannando? quem irrides fronte rugoso?

FIDES. Tui stultitiam irrideo, tui insipientiam subsanno.

ADRIANUS. Mei?

FIDES. Tui.

ANTIOCHUS. Imperatoris?

FIDES. Ipsius.

ANTIOCHUS. O nefas!

FIDES. Quid enim stultius, quid insipientius videri potest, quam quod hortatur nos, contempto creatore universitatis, venerationem inferre metallis?

ANTIOCHUS. Fides, insanis.

FIDES. Antiochue, mentiris.

ANTIOCHUS. Nonne haec summa insania et magna est dementia, ut rerum principem dixisti insipientem?

FIDES. Dixi et dico, dicamque, quamdiu vixero.

ANTIOCHUS. Breve tempus vivere, et cito debes consumi morte.

FIDES. Hoc opto, ut moriar in Christo.

[HADRIAN. Fides, contemplate the venerable image of the great Diana and bring libation to the holy goddess, by which you can receive our grace.

FIDES. O stupid precept of the emperor, worthy of all contempt!

HADRIAN. What do you murmur with mocking gestures? What do you laugh at with a wry face?

FIDES. I laugh at your idiocy, your insipidity with mocking gestures.

HADRIAN. Mine?

FIDES. Yours.

ANTIOCHUS. The emperor's?

FIDES. His.

ANTIOCHUS. Blasphemy!

FIDES. What can be more stupid, what more insipid, than what you exhort us, to bring veneration to metals, having disdained the creator of the universe?

ANTIOCHUS. Fides, you rave.

FIDES. Antiochus, you lie.

ANTIOCHUS. Is this not the highest insanity and great craziness that you called the prince of things insipid?

FIDES. I said it and I say it and I will say it, as long as I may live.

ANTIOCHUS. Your time to live is short, and quickly you should be devoured by death.

FIDES. This I choose, so that I may die in Christ.]<sup>84</sup>

The emperor orders Fides to worship Diana, an allusion pregnant with meaning. First, most obviously, Diana, or Artemis, was known for her commitment to virginity. This introduces the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 365-366.

irony of women dedicated to virginity for the sake of Christ being asked to worship an image of another virgin. Moreover, Diana was the patroness of the “margins,” and marginal figures, especially slaves and women.<sup>85</sup> This doubles the irony: the virgins are themselves marginalized figures, because of their deviant vocation, their status as a religious minority, their foreign provenance, and of course, their status as women. By alluding to the goddess known for her chastity, Hrotsvit highlights the chastity and marginality of her own virgins with perfect irony. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, when Actaeon is out hunting, he chances upon the naked Diana taking a bath. Offended by his gaze, she uses her bath water to transform him into a stag. He is then killed by his own hunting hounds to satisfy Diana’s wrath.<sup>86</sup> Likewise the male gaze directed at the stripped bodies of Hrotsvit’s virgins will be punished by both physical and spiritual death, despite the madiens’ apparent abjection.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, Fides demonstrates her fidelity by refusing to worship a goddess who is essentially an image of Fides herself, instead clinging to an invisible, greater deity.

As in the interrogation scenes, particularly as in the one in *Dulcitius*, charges of insanity are leveled at the women, perhaps critiquing the trope of the hysterical woman: in the pagan perspective, their adherence to a “superstition” until death could appear insane, but given Hrotsvit’s Christian point of view, the women are not only sane but more rational than the pagans. Moreover, Fides remains resilient in her speech, and likewise, turns the interrogation dynamic on its head using the same technique deployed by Hirena in *Dulcitius* of reminding them of the true God. The words used to describe her tone—“subsanno,” “irrideo,” and “fronte

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<sup>85</sup> Simon Price, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), s.v. “Diana.”

<sup>86</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. S. Kline, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph3.htm>.

<sup>87</sup> It is also worth noting that Diana defeats Actaeon with water. Fides, Spes, and Karitas each defeat fiery tortures with water symbolism, linked to their femininity, which is to be discussed at greater length below.

rugoso” (“mock,” “laugh,” and “with a wry face”)—all point to bemused scorn. “Subsanno” is a postclassical word, appearing multiple times in the Vulgate. One such significant instance comes from Proverbs in the midst of the female personification of Wisdom rebuking the wicked:

“despexistis omne consilium meum et increpationes meas neglexistis ego quoque in interitu vestro ridebo et subsannabo cum vobis quod timebatis advenerit”<sup>88</sup> [“Because you disdained all my counsel, and my reproof you ignored—I, in my turn, will laugh at your doom; will mock when terror overtakes you.”]<sup>89</sup> This echoes Sapiientia, the Lady Wisdom of Hrotsvit’s play, and her daughters rebuking the emperors and then mocking them, as Fides does here when they seal their fate through persecuting the Christians and worshipping the emperor and Roman gods. As Hrotsvit appears to be evoking biblical Lady Wisdom, mocking and derision may be female-coded in this instance. The female allegorical figure of Wisdom scolds those who ignore or scorn her, thus scolding or rebuking may be seen as conceptually linked to femininity.

Finally, threatened with death, Fides affirms her actual desire (“opto”) to die for Christ—affirming her agency in embracing martyrdom. Without further ado, the attempted tortures begin, as Hadrian orders, “Duodecim centuriones alternando scindant flagris eius membra... O fortissimi centuriones, accedite meique iniuriam vindicate.” [“Twelve centurions tear up her limbs with whips by turns.... O strongest centurions, attack and vindicate the affront to me.”]<sup>90</sup> The fact that he uses “fortissimus” to describe the centurions, the superlative form of “fortis,” emphasizes the masculine nature of the centurions: Lewis and Short define the adjective as “Mentally, strong, powerful, vigorous, firm, steadfast, stout, courageous, brave, manly, etc.” and many of the citations under “Of human beings” specifically refer to “fortis vir,” an undoubtedly

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<sup>88</sup> Proverbs 1:25-26 (Vulgate). Note the proverb also uses “rideo,” etymologically connected to “irrideo.”

<sup>89</sup> Proverbs 1:25-26 (NABRE)

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 366.

masculine usage.<sup>91</sup> This places them in stark contrast to the female martyr and highlights her opposition against a very masculinized strength. However, despite this extreme strength, Fides is apparently immune to their physical violence:

ANTIOCHUS. Vin adhuc, Fides, solita conviciorum obiectione imperatorem dehonestare?  
 FIDES. Cur solito minus?  
 ANTIOCHUS. Quia prohiberis verberibus.  
 FIDES. Verbera non compellunt me tacere, quia nullo afficior dolore.  
 ANTIOCHUS. O infelix pertinacia, o contumax audacia!  
 ADRIANUS. Corpus fatiscit per supplicia: et mens tumet superbia!  
 FIDES. Erras, Adriane, si reris me fatigari suppliciis; non ego quidem, sed infirmi tortores deficiunt et sudore ob lassitudinem fluunt.

[ANTIOCHUS. Do you want to dishonor the emperor with your usual shrieks?  
 FIDES. Why should I be accustomed to less?  
 ANTIOCHUS. Because you are hindered by scourges.  
 FIDES. Scourges do not compel me to be quiet, because they exert no pain.  
 ANTIOCHUS. Unhappy stubbornness, unyielding boldness!  
 HADRIAN. The body crumbles through tortures: and the mind swells with pride!  
 FIDES. You are wrong, Antiochus, if you suppose me tired by tortures; I certainly am not, but feeble tortures fail and flow with sweat due to faintness.]<sup>92</sup>

It is unclear what the effect of the tortures are on her physical body: Hadrian notes that it makes her body crumble (“*fatisco*”), but Fides says that she feels no pain and reminds him that she is not tired by tortures. Rather, she refers to them as feeble (“*infirmi*”) and affected by faintness (“*lassitudinem*”). Perhaps the scourges actually may be cutting her body, yet she somehow feels no exhaustion or pain—as Hadrian mentions, “*mens tumet superbia*,” which may suggest that her immunity to pain or exhaustion is located in her mind rather than her body. This parallelism recalls images and language from Jesus’ Agony in the Garden. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus rebukes Peter for falling asleep the night before the Passion when he should be praying: “*vigilate et orate ut non intretis in temptationem spiritus quidem promptus est caro autem infirma.*”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> s.v. “*fortis*.”

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Matthew 26:41 (Vulgate).

[“Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”]<sup>94</sup> The contrast between a weak corporeality and a strong mind or spirit is common in Christianity, and the emperor realizes that here but derides it as pride (“superbia”). This aligns his mentality with the body rather than the mind—and likewise, the martyr is aligned with mind rather than body. This challenges the old truism of Christian ideas of gender, that man is associated with mind and woman with flesh, because for Hrotsvit, female spiritual strength is associated with mind and male physical strength, naturally, with the body.<sup>95</sup>

Nonetheless, the femininity of her body is underlined even as Fides exhibits control of the mind over physical weakness. The next torture devised for her targets her breasts:

ADRIANUS. Fac, Antioche, ut gemellae pectoris particulae abscidantur, quo saltim rubore coerceatur.

ANTIOCHUS. O utinam possit ullo coerceri modo!

ADRIANUS. Forsan coercebitur.

FIDES. Inviolatum pectus vulnerasti, sed me non laesisti. En, pro fonte sanguinis unde erumpit lactis.

[HADRIAN. Antiochus, have the twins of her chest cut off, by which redness she will soon be controlled.

ANTIOCHUS. O if only by any way she could be controlled!

HADRIAN. Perhaps she will be controlled.

FIDES. You wounded my chaste chest, but you did not damage me. Look, in place of a fountain of blood from there erupts milk.]

The pagans attempt to mutilate a secondary sex characteristic that is particularly female, namely her breasts. Removing her breasts could be considered somehow trying to erase the femininity from her body and signify a masculinization or androgynization of Fides.<sup>96</sup> However, her breasts

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<sup>94</sup> Matthew 26:41 (NABRE).

<sup>95</sup> I use the terminology “mind” to echo “mens,” used by the emperor. “Soul” or “spirit,” referring to the animating principle of life, is usually “anima” in Latin, as feminine, whereas “soul” in the rational sense, is usually “animus.” These terms were gendered both grammatically and metaphorically, in a misogynist way: See Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 22. “Spiritus,” used by Jesus in the Vulgate, can mean simply “spirit” in later Latin, as well as specifically “mind” or “soul” according to Lewis and Short, s.v. “spiritus.”

<sup>96</sup> Such analysis of a similar incident in an Old Norse version of Fides’ passion is put forth by Kirsten Wolf in her article, “The Severed Breast: A Topos in the Legends of Female Virgin Martyr Saints,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*

are not just chaste (“inviolatus”), and incapable of being removed, but in response to attempted mutilation, they lactate. In their attempt to erase her femininity, Fides’ tortures backfire, since her femininity is heightened by her breasts performing their bodily function. Moreover, this is not only female bodily function, but also specifically a maternal one: Fides becomes here, in essence, the image of a virgin mother—her milk, then, can be read to represent the spiritual grace purchased by her suffering and martyrdom.

Fides’ “leaky” body brings to mind the scholarly discourse on the “flesh” and femininity. Scholars of medieval gender have observed the position of women often as “unbounded” or “leaky” bodies, requiring virginity as a bounding corrective.<sup>97</sup> Fides’ body here flows with milk from the mutilation of her breasts, though the professed goal of the emperor is that she may be contained/controlled (“coerceo”). Lewis and Short literally defines “coerceo” as to surround or contain, but also includes the definition: “Morally, to hold some fault, some passion, etc., or the erring or passionate person in check, to curb, restrain, tame, correct, etc.”<sup>98</sup> This agrees with Lochrie’s observation that flesh is more than physical body, but also a moral or emotional quality.<sup>99</sup> It seems that the emperor, however, conflates this containing, or coercion, with masculine control of her rebellious speech, sexuality, and religion. On the other hand, Fides’ bodily and verbal incontinence represent the inability of the men to impose restraint on the female virgin’s body and spirit. To Hrotsvit, virginity is not a “purging” or “closing of the body,” to borrow a phrase from Lisa Weston,<sup>100</sup> but rather, the unbounded nature of the female flesh is

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112 (1997): 96-112, 106. It’s worth noting that in Wolf’s source, blood rather than milk pours from Fides’ chest, making Hrotsvit’s version distinct.

<sup>97</sup> Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>98</sup> s.v. “coerceo.”

<sup>99</sup> Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh*, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Lisa M. C Weston, “Virginity and Other Sexualities,” in *A Companion to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (fl. 960)*, ed. Phyllis R. Brown and Stephen L. Wailes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 267-286 (270).



aligned with a passionate devotion to Christ expressed through virginity and opposed against pagan, masculine, physical control of Christian women.<sup>101</sup> The idea that virginity creates a third gender category is not truly applicable to Hrotsvit, as virginity appears to be, rather, a fuller expression of femininity, whether considered as “flesh,” or as simply female bodiliness. At the same time this is aligned with mental control rather than the weakness of the body, or bodily control of the person as in *Dulcitius*.

Realizing their failure at containing her so easily, the men proceed to greater tortures. As in *Dulcitius*, fire as a punishment makes a reappearance for Fides:

ADRIANUS. In craticulam substratis ignibus assanda ponatur, quo vi vaporis enecetur.

ANTIOCHUS. Digna est, ut miserabiliter pereat, quae tuae iussioni contraluctari non trepidat.

FIDES. Omne, quod paras ad dolorem, mihi vertitur in quietem; unde commode pauso in craticula ceu in tranquilla navicula.

[HADRIAN. Place her to be roasted in a gridiron with fire spread beneath it, where she will be killed by the strength of the vapor.

ANTIOCHUS. It is fitting that she who did not hesitate to wrestle with your order perish miserably.

FIDES. All, that you prepare for pain, turns into peace to me; hence I rest properly in the gridiron just as in a tranquil little boat.]<sup>102</sup>

As discussed in my analysis of *Dulcitius*, fire and burning is connected with the masculine and with specifically male sexuality. Much like the other women, Fides is subjected to violence at the hands of men, and given that the tortures are linked to her virginity, they can be read as connected to male sexual violence. Note that she is not burned and killed by the flames, but rather, she is to be roasted and killed by the ensuing vapors. Using “assare,” typically used to discuss roasting food, Fides is portrayed as a potential object of consumption. This imagery also

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<sup>101</sup> My commentary here applies to Hrotsvit’s female virgins specifically. As noted by Petroff, Hrotsvit also wrote a hagiographical poem about St. Pelagius, a male saint whose passion closely follows the model virgin martyrdom as he resists the homosexual advances of the Caliph of Cordoba (231). As such “models of virginité may be male or female” (230).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

calls to mind the martyr imaging Christ, whose body is sacrificed and consumed as food in the Eucharist. The depiction of a martyr's body being connected to the body of Christ has been explored at length by scholars such as Catherine Saucier, who focuses on twelfth-century sources, but observes that the metaphor was used as early as the first century by St. Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote: "I am God's wheat, and I am being ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, so that I may prove to be pure bread [of Christ]." <sup>103</sup> It's unclear how useful such a comparison would be here, however, as Fides appears immune to such attempts to cook her like food. Nonetheless, Hrotsvit may have intended to evoke a traditional comparison between the martyr and Christ, even as the martyr herself is a bride of Christ.

Even so, she is apparently immune to such violence; rather the tortures do not lead "to pain" ("ad dolorem") but turn "into peace" ("in quietem"). The concept of peace is repeated in "tranquilla" as well. Raging or burning is replaced by peace and water imagery—Fides refers to the gridiron as a "navicula," a little boat. In a sense, in her dialogue she signifies dousing of the fire, and consequently the dousing of male desire. The masculine "heat-coded" tortures are overcome, then, by feminine "water-coded" imagery: while male humours were thought to be choleric, female were seen as melancholic, or cool and wet, associated with water. <sup>104</sup> Though in some medieval texts, this coolness could be seen as associated with weakness to temptation of physical pleasure, <sup>105</sup> Hrotsvit's depiction makes it clear that this idea was by no means universal. While heat and male sexuality are associated with the flesh and sexual and moral weakness, Hrotsvit uses melancholic diction, corresponding to female sexuality, as a foil for male sexual

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<sup>103</sup> As quoted in Catherine Saucier, "Sacrament and sacrifice: conflating Corpus Christi and martyrdom in medieval Liège," *Speculum* 87.3 (2012): 682-723 (691).

<sup>104</sup> Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 144.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

passion and violence. For Hrotsvit, such cool and wet feminine dispositions are connected to peacefulness and spiritual strength rather than physical weakness.

Hrotsvit continues with heat-coded tortures when the emperor consigns Fides to a pan of boiling oil. Specifically, this is referred to as “sartago,” or frying pan, one of Dulcitus’ inanimate victims:

ADRIANUS. Sartago plena pice et cera ardenibus rogis superponatur, et in ferventem liquorem haec rebellis mittatur.

FIDES. Sponte insilio.

ADRIANUS. Consentio.

FIDES. Ubi sunt minae tuae? Ecce, illaesa inter ferventem liquorem ludens nato, et pro vi caumatis sentio matutini refrigerium roris.

ADRIANUS. Antioche, quid ad haec est agendum?

ANTIOCHUS. Ne evadat, providendum.

[HADRIAN. Let a frying pan full of wax and fat be placed above flaming funeral pyres, and into the hot liquid this rebel will be sent.

FIDES. I willingly leap in.

HADRIAN. I consent.

FIDES. Where are your menaces? Look, I swim, playing, unhurt among the burning liquid, and instead of the strength of heat I feel the chill of the morning dew.

HADRIAN. Antiochus, what is to be done to her?

ANTIOCHUS. Deciding is unavoidable.]<sup>106</sup>

As in the previous example, Fides is being treated as food—now being placed in a frying pan with hot oil, also conflated with her funeral pyre.<sup>107</sup> However, she is not consumed by heat, or by male desire, as previously mentioned. Rather, Fides mocks them, specifically playing and swimming in the oil and feeling a “chill” (“refrigerium”) from “dew” or “moisture” (“ros”).<sup>108</sup> As before, coolness and sanctity are united, antidotes to male desire and resistant to its violence. As such it is both feminine and strong, overturning the conflation of feminine and weak, and

<sup>106</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 367.

<sup>107</sup> Such a treatment could both recall the Eucharist, as mentioned above, and relate to feminine spirituality’s preoccupation with food imagery, as discussed in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>108</sup> s.v. “ros.”

turning the tables of female and male, weak and strong, fleshly and Godly. This also fuses with her characteristic resistant speech, as Fides not only offers exposition but also specifically mocks the pagans: “Ubi sunt minae tuae?” Fides is moreover affirmed in her agency through her speech: saying “sponte insilio” is deeply contrary to “haec rebellis mittatur”—while “mittatur” is passive, saying something shall be done to her, and treats her merely as an object of the action of being sent, “insilio” is active, and has a connotation of verve – she is not sent into the oil so much as she jumps into it. “Sponte” augments this: meaning “willingly,” it is often used in phrases underlining one’s use of her own autonomy or free will.<sup>109</sup> This scene is truly key because she is at once affirmed in agency, spiritual heroism, and femininity, and apparently invulnerable to sexually-coded male violence.

As with the previously discussed saints, Fides’ martyrdom does come, however, only at her own consent:

ADRIANUS. Capite truncetur.

ANTIOCHUS. Alioquin non vincetur.

FIDES. Nunc est gaudendum, nunc in domino exultadum.

SAPIENTIA. Christe, triumphator diaboli invictissime, da tolerantiam Fidei, mea filiae.

FIDES. O mater veneranda, dic vale ultimum tuae filiae, liba osculum tuae primogenitae, nec afficiare ullo maerore cordis, quia tendo ad bravium aeternitatis.

SAPIENTIA. O filia, filia, non confundor, non contristor, sed valedico tibi exultando et osculor os oculosque prae gaudio lacrimando, orans, ut sub ictu percussoris inviolatum serves misterium tui nominis.

FIDES. O uterniae sorores, libate mihi osculum pacis et parate vos ad tolerantiam futuri certaminis.

SPES. Adiuvate nos oratione assidua, ut mereamur sequi tua vestigia.

FIDES. Este obtemperantes monitis nostrae sanctae parentis, quae nos hortabatur praesentia fastidire, quo meruissemus aeterna percipere.

KARITAS. Maternis libenter obtemperamus monitis, quo perfrui mereamur aeternis bonis.

FIDES. Percussor, accede et iniunctum tibi officium me necando imple.

SAPIENTIA. Abscisum morientis filiae caput amplectendo impressisque labris crebrius deosculando, congratulor tibi, Christe, qui tantillulae victoriam praestitisti puellulae.

[HADRIAN. Let her be hewn at the head.

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<sup>109</sup> s.v. “sponte.”

ANTIOCHUS. She shall not be conquered in another way.

FIDES. Now this must be celebrated, now this must be exalted in the Lord.

SAPIENTIA. Christ, unconquerable defeater of the devil, give endurance to Fides, my daughter.

FIDES. O mother to be venerated, say goodbye for the last time to your daughter, give a kiss to your first born, do not be disposed to any sorrow of the heart, because I reach out to the reward of eternity.

SAPIENTIA. Daughter, daughter, I am not perplexed, I am not made sad, but I bid you farewell with exulting, and I kiss your mouth and eyes before joyful crying, praying, that below the strike of the executioner you preserve the inviolable mystery of your name.

FIDES. Younger sisters, give to me the kiss of peace and prepare yourselves for the endurance of future certainty.

SPES. Help us with continual prayer, that we may merit to follow in your footsteps.

FIDES. Be obedient to the warnings of our holy mother, who, present, encourages us to be unyielding, by which we may merit to seize eternity.

KARITAS. We obey freely the maternal warnings, by which we may merit to enjoy eternal goodness.

FIDES. Executioner, come and fill the necessary office, by killing me.

SAPIENTIA. The hewn-off head of my dying daughter with embracing and kissing with pressing my lips many times, I congratulate you, Christ, who was responsible for the victory of such a little girl.] <sup>110</sup>

Rather than mourning, or attempting escape, Fides celebrates her election to martyrdom by expressing exultation and joy. Moreover, she even chides her own mother not to mourn, but rather rejoice with her, expressing her own faith from which she takes her name. In being executed, she very sparingly uses the passive voice: rather than being sent to eternity, or something of the sort, she “reaches out” (“tendo”), an act that imbues her with more agency. Sapientia, too, in addressing her, uses very active language and contrasts it to the more passive responses that she rejects: she is neither made sad, with passive “contristor,” nor is she made perplexed with passive “confundor,” but instead, she actively bids goodbye with active “valedicto,” kisses her, with deponent “osculor,” and prays, with active participle “orans.” She also exhorts her daughter, using active “serves” to preserve the faith, an overt pun on her

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<sup>110</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 367-368.

daughter's name. So too is this true in her exchanges with her sisters, who command her to help them, using the active imperative "adiuva."

One may object that the sisters do not merit heaven themselves but, using the passive voice, they will merit it by their sisters' prayers. Likewise, Sapientia ascribes Fides' victory to Christ using the verb "praesto." However, such an interpretation of agency and passivity ignores the medieval Christian context of the plays. As I mentioned earlier in my analysis of *Dulcitius*, to discuss agency in such settings we need to reconfigure our definition according to medieval theology; the same is true here. Sapientia's ascribing Fides' success as a martyr to Christ is consistent with the Christian view of grace as entirely sufficient for salvation. As St. Augustine remarks:

When, however, the Pelagians say that the only grace which is not given according to our merits is that whereby his sins are forgiven to man, but that which is given in the end, that is, eternal life, is rendered to our preceding merits: they must not be allowed to go without an answer. If, indeed, they so understand our merits as to acknowledge them, too, to be the gifts of God, then their opinion would not deserve reprobation. But inasmuch as they so preach human merits as to declare that a man has them of his own self, then most rightly the apostle replies: "Who makes you to differ from another? And what have you, that you did not receive? Now, if you received it, why do you glory as if you had not received it?" To a man who holds such views, it is perfect truth to say: It is His own gifts that God crowns, not your merits,— if, at least, your merits are of your own self, not of Him. If, indeed, they are such, they are evil; and God does not crown them; but if they are good, they are God's gifts, because, as the Apostle James says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights." In accordance with which John also, the Lord's forerunner, declares: "A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven" — from heaven, of course, because from thence came also the Holy Ghost, when Jesus ascended up on high, led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men. If, then, your good merits are God's gifts, God does not crown your merits as your merits, but as His own gifts.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Augustine, "On Grace and Free Will," Chapter 15, trans. Peter Holmes, et al., in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 5*, ed. Phillip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1510.htm>. Latin: "Sed cum dicunt pelagiani hanc esse solam non secundum merita nostra gratiam, qua homini peccata dimittuntur, illam vero quae datur in fine, id est, aeternam vitam, meritis nostris praecedentibus reddi, respondendum est eis. Si enim merita nostra sic intellexerent, ut etiam ipsa dona Dei esse cognoscerent, non esset reprobanda ista sententia; quoniam vero merita humana sic praedicant, ut ea ex semetipso habere hominem dicant, prorsus rectissime respondet Apostolus: *Quis enim te discernit? Quid autem habes quod non accepisti? Si autem et accepisti, quid gloriaris quasi non acceperis?* Prorsus talia cogitanti verissime dicitur: Dona sua coronat Deus, non merita tua, si tibi a te ipso, non ab illo sunt merita tua. Haec enim si

Though all good is primarily because of God Himself rather than human merit, Augustine nonetheless affirms the importance of human will in electing to accept God's grace, asserting that though grace is a prerequisite for choosing good, free will is also necessary:

No man, therefore, when he sins, can in his heart blame God for it, but every man must impute the fault to himself. Nor does it detract at all from a man's own will when he performs any act in accordance with God. Indeed, a work is then to be pronounced a good one when a person does it willingly; then, too, may the reward of a good work be hoped for from Him concerning whom it is written, "He shall reward every man according to his works."<sup>112</sup>

In such a framework, every good act Fides or any Christian does is imputed to God's grace; at the same time, one may say that she used the agency of free will to choose to cooperate with that grace, and in the words of Augustine, have a "good work," since it was clearly and demonstrably done "willingly" ("volens").

The next sister to be martyred is Spes, to whom Hadrian condescends in his usual manner: "Spes, cede meis hortamentis paterno affectu tibi consulentis." ["Spes, give into my urgings, counseling you from paternal affection."]<sup>113</sup> As in the interrogation scene, Hadrian quite literally patronizes Spes, but again her chastity overcomes the falsity of his *blandimenta*. Similarly to her sisters, she is also called to worship Diana specifically, highlighting the irony of her position as a marginalized virgin: "Depone callum pectoris et conquinisce turificando

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talía sunt, mala sunt; quae non coronat Deus: si autem bona sunt, Dei dona sunt: quia, sicut dicit apostolus Iacobus: *Omne datum optimum, et omne donum perfectum desursum est, descendens a Patre luminum*. Unde dicit et Ioannes praecursor Domini: *Non potest homo accipere quidquam, nisi fuerit ei datum de caelo*: utique de caelo, unde etiam venit Spiritus Sanctus, quando Iesus *ascendit in altum, captivavit captivitatem, dedit dona hominibus*. Si ergo Dei dona sunt bona merita tua, non Deus coronat merita tua tamquam merita tua, sed tamquam dona sua." From Augustine, "De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio," in *Patrologia Latina* 44, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, accessed March 15, 2017, [http://www.augustinus.it/latino/grazia\\_libero\\_arbitrio/grazia\\_libero\\_arbitrio.htm](http://www.augustinus.it/latino/grazia_libero_arbitrio/grazia_libero_arbitrio.htm).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, Chapter 4. Latin: "Nemo ergo Deum causetur in corde suo, sed sibi imputet quisque, cum peccat. Neque cum aliquid secundum Deum operatur, alienet hoc a propria voluntate. Quando enim volens facit, tunc dicendum est opus bonum, tunc speranda est boni operis merces ab eo, de quo dictum est: *Qui reddet unicuique secundum opera sua*." Ed. Migne.

<sup>113</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 368.

magnae Dianae: et ego te propriae prolis vice excolo atque extollo omni dilectione.” [“Put aside the hardness of your heart and crouch down, burning incense to the great Diana: and I will adorn you as if you were my own daughter and extoll you with all affection.”]<sup>114</sup> Spes is tempted to worship a virgin, essentially an image of herself, and to be adorned (“excolo”) by the emperor. Resisting both this worldly glory and particular affection, Spes rebukes him: “Paternitatem tuam repudio, tua beneficia minime desidero; quapropter vacua spe deciperis, si me tibi cedere reris.” [“I refuse your fatherhood, I desire very little your kindness; thus you are misled by false hope, if you expect me to surrender to you.”]<sup>115</sup> Hrotsvit includes a pun with “vacua spe”: the women were assumed to be vain, trivial, or empty, often expressible as “vacua,” by the men as discussed in the previous chapter. Yet Spes, in reality, is not “vacua Spes”; rather his idea of her, particularly of her as weak, is a “vacua Spes” who misleads him. In reality, the actual Spes is steadfast.

Moreover, in her steadfastness, she confirms her agency in choosing martyrdom over the fatuous vanity expected of her as a woman. When Hadrian says “Loquere parcuis, ne irascar,” [“Speak very little, lest I get angry,”] Spes responds “Irascere; ne sollicitor.” [“Get angry, I don’t care.”]<sup>116</sup> Hrotsvit may be playing with ideas of male versus female physiology according to humoral theory: as noted in my reading of Fides, while women were “cool,” they were also “wet” and impressionable, in such a way that was thought to be fickle and faithless.<sup>117</sup> However, here Spes is clearly neither impressionable nor faithless, but the very opposite: at the same time, she is contrasted in her coolness, given her blasé attitude to Hadrian’s hotheaded threats.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 145.



Perhaps, for Hrotsvit, women are melancholic, but if they are impressionable, they are certainly not impressed by the impotent ire of pagan men ruled by emotion and physicality.

The men continue to use very choleric language in describing their feelings, connecting their anger and violence with language often used to describe male desire. Antiochus raves, “Miror, auguste, quod ab hac vili puellula tam diu calumniari pateris; ego quidem disrumpor prae furore, quia illam audio tam temere in te latrare.” [“I marvel, Augustus, that you endure to be disrespected by this vile little girl for so long; I am certainly being burst by fury, because I hear her rage against you with such temerity.”]<sup>118</sup> Antiochus uses “furor” which means both “fury” “raging desire,”<sup>119</sup> and in Christian language, “heretical error” or “demon.”<sup>120</sup> Antiochus suggests his anger has reached a climactic height, on the point of bursting, language that certainly resonates with sexual innuendo. This is especially pertinent as his rage is connected with demonic influence through the multiple meanings of “furor,” similar to how *Dulcitius*’s sexual transgression was depicted as demonic. However, much like male sexual desire is literally thwarted in *Dulcitius*, Hadrian’s and Antiochus’s angry desire for violent domination is impotent despite their attempts at torture. The first of these tortures appears to be some sort of whipping or beating:

ADRIANUS. O lictores, adite et hanc rebellem usque ad interniciem crudis nervis caedite.

ANTIOCHUS. Decet, ut severitatem sentiat tui furoris, quia lenitatem parvi pendit pietatis.

SPES. Hanc pietatem exopto! hanc lenitatem disidero!

[HADRIAN. Attendants, come here and cut down this rebel completely to bloody sinews for slaughter.

ANTIOCHUS. It is fitting that she feel the severity of your fury, because she considers a little piety light.

<sup>118</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 368.

<sup>119</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “furor.”

<sup>120</sup> Alexander Souter, ed., *A Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D.* (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon, 1998), s.v. “furor.”

SPES. I eagerly desire *this* piety! I want *this* lightness!]<sup>121</sup>

Hadrian calls for a total bloody destruction of the body to express the severity of his fury (“furor,” again), intending to reduce her to “crudis nervis.” “Nervus,” however, means not just “sinews” or “muscles,” but also “nerve, vigor, force, power, strength.”<sup>122</sup> Martial language has reappeared in the scene, depicting Spes as a little soldier. At the same time, Spes expresses her desire for this martyrdom using “exopto,” an emphatic form of “opto,” meaning to desire, and “desidero,” meaning “to long for.”<sup>123</sup> Playing with the double meaning of “pietas,” as both public duty in the Roman world, and duty to God in the Christian sense, she ironically inverts the idea that Antiochus expresses in his previous antithesis. Moreover, referring to the tortures as leniency “lenitas,” which can also mean “tenderness,” she appears to be alluding to her role as bride of Christ and her martyrdom essentially as her marriage. Additionally, it foreshadows the fact that the tortures will not, in fact, cause her any pain.

Nonetheless, as her mother prays over Fides’ body, Spes asks Sapientia to pray for her so that she may experience the same invulnerability as Fides. Either through the intercessory prayers of her mother and sister, or through her own status as a virgin, these prayers are clearly answered in the first trial she undergoes:

ADRIANUS. Si flagra parvipendis, acrioribus poenis coartaberis.

SPES. Infer, Infer, quicquid crudele, quicquid excogites loetale. Quanto plus saevis, tanto magis victus confunderis.

ADRIANUS. In aera suspendatur et ungulis larceretur, quoadusque evulsis visceribus et nudatis ossibus deficiat et membratim crepat.

[HADRIAN. If you consider whips small, you will accumulate harsher punishments.

SPES. Bring it on, bring it on, whatever bloody, whatever gruesome thing you think of. However much more severe it is, that much more you, defeated, will be confounded.

<sup>121</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 368.

<sup>122</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “nervus.”

<sup>123</sup> s.v. “opto,” s.v. “desidero.”

HADRIAN. Let her be suspended in the air and lacerated by talons, until, her guts having been plucked out and her bones having been exposed, she fails and rattles limb by limb.]<sup>124</sup>

The greater his effort, Spes notes, the more humiliating his inevitable defeat will be, highlighting Hrotsvit's program of overturning expected power dynamics. As to the nature of the torture itself, it seems Hrotsvit may be continuing with her "vacua spes" pun. Hadrian orders birds to pluck out her insides, thus "emptying" her; in the allegory, he attempts to empty hope or make it "vacua." Moreover, this image also evokes the myth of Prometheus, who was chained to a rock and whose intestines were picked at by birds as punishment for bringing humans fire from Olympus. Fire in this instance could represent hope of human development, perhaps, but the idea of Spes as the bringer of hope is also reinforced, as well as her status as martyr. Moreover, this aligns the emperor with the cruel and uncaring gods he wants them to worship. Unlike Prometheus, however, Spes is unaffected by the tortures:

SPES. Vulpina fraude loqueris et persipelli astutia, Antioche, adularis.

ANTIOCHUS. Quiesce, infelix; verbositas tua nunc est finienda.

SPES. Non, ut speras, evenerit, sed tibi tuoque principi nunc etiam confusio aderit.

ADRIANUS. Quid sentio novae dulcedinis? quid odoror stupendae suavitatis?

SPES. Decidentia frustra mei lacerati corporis dant flagrantiam paradisiaci aromatis, quo nolens cogaris fateri me non posse supliciis laedi.

[SPES. You speak with a crafty lie, Antiochus, and you fawn with cunning flattery.

ANTIOCHUS. Shut up, unhappy girl; your abundance of words now must be finished.

SPES. It will not come to pass as you hope, but now confusion comes to you and to your prince.

HADRIAN. What of this new sweetness do I sense? What do I smell of amazing smoothness?

SPES. The cut off bits of my vainly lacerated body give a glow of the aroma of paradise, so you think, though not willing to admit, that I am not able to be hurt by tortures.]<sup>125</sup>

Once again, the tortures were supposed to silence the virgin, but they fail in that purpose because of her immunity to pain. Spes is still torn physically by the tortures, however. Those bits of skin

<sup>124</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 369.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

that fall off, rather than creating a bloody slaughter as the emperor intended, create a beautiful smell; destruction and violence are replaced by sweetness and smoothness, making sensible the spiritual effects of Spes's martyrdom. Spes's choice of words is unusual: "flagrantiam paradisiaci aromatis." "Flagrantia" means not only "a glowing heat," but also "vehement desire."<sup>126</sup> As discussed earlier this appears to be male coded. However, given her immediate connection of it to Paradise, or Heaven, and the Christocentric nature of the miracles thus far, this glowing and sweet aroma of her broken flesh ought to be read as an identification of her flesh with Christ's flesh, broken in His passion and in the bread of the Eucharist, or even a representation of the passionate love between Christ and His martyrs. As Barbara Newman comments, traits associated with "womanly weakness" were often redeemed in female spirituality.<sup>127</sup> The female association with "flesh *in malo*" could be Christianized into "body *in bono*," thus identifying female bodiliness with the "bleeding, suffering, Eucharistic, redemptive body of Christ, for which many felt such irresistible desire."<sup>128</sup> This complicates the gendering of Spes, who is at once clearly feminine and identified with Christ's body, traditionally masculine.<sup>129</sup>

Realizing their failure, Hadrian appeals to Antiochus, who encourages him to try new tortures. Hadrian settles upon putting her in boiling oil, much as he does when he puts Fides in a frying pan:

ADRIANUS. Aeneum vas, plenum oleo et adipe, cera atque pice, ignibus superponatur, in quod ligata proiciatur.

ANTIOCHUS. Si in ius Vulcani tradetur, forsitan evadendi aditum non nanscicetur.

SPES. Haec virtus Christo non est insolita, ut ignem faciat mitescere, mutata natura.

<sup>126</sup> s.v. "flagrantia."

<sup>127</sup> Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 23. In particular, Newman cites "loquacity" being redeemed as "eloquence" for many female saints. This lens gives new meaning to the virgins' continued "verbositas" in the face of the men's tortures.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>129</sup> Hence Newman's term, "womanChrist"—rather than arguing for masculine virgins, she argues for a feminized depiction of Christ, especially in the later Middle Ages (3).

ADRIANUS. Quid audio, Antioche, velut sonitum inundantis aquae?

ANTIOCHUS. Heu, heu, domine!

ADRIANUS. Quid contigit nobis?

ANTIOCHUS. Ebuliens fervor, confracto vase, ministros combussit, et illa malefica illaesa comparuit.

[HADRIAN. Obtain a bronze pot, full of oil and wax and fat, let it be placed above flames, in which she, having been tied up, may be thrown.

ANTIOCHUS. If she is delivered into the law of Vulcan, perhaps she will not come across an opportunity for escaping.

SPES. Through Christ, this strength is not unaccustomed to making fire grow gentle, its nature having been changed.

HADRIAN. What do I hear, Antiochus, like the sound of a flowing in of water?

ANTIOCHUS. Oh no, oh no, my lord!

HADRIAN. What is happening to us?

ANTIOCHUS. The vase having been broken, the boiling fervor explodes the ministers, and that criminal appears unharmed.]<sup>130</sup>

As in the earlier episode, Spes is described with sensory language; instead of smell, here, she is signified by sound—specifically, the sound of rushing water. This could have several interpretations. First, continuing with the image of Spes as Christ-like, it could signify the water that flowed from Jesus’ side at the end of his passion: “One of the soldiers with a spear opened his side: and immediately there came out blood and water. And he that saw it hath given testimony: and his testimony is true. And he knoweth that he saith true: that you also may believe.”<sup>131</sup> The flowing water, then, is a witness of hope: natural symbolism for the character bearing the name “Spes.” Second, the imagery continues female melancholic symbolism versus male choleric symbolism. The water imagery is cool and wet, female-coded, while the fire of the pot is male-coded. This is especially underlined by the classical allusion to Vulcan, “an ancient Roman god of destructive, devouring fire.”<sup>132</sup> Despite his patronage, the Romans tended to pray to him to try to stop fire, and he was connected with Stata Mater, “the goddess who makes fires

<sup>130</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvitae Opera*, 369-370.

<sup>131</sup> Jn. 19:34-35 (DRA).

<sup>132</sup> Simon Price, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, s.v. “Volcanus.”

stand still.”<sup>133</sup> As such they would sacrifice fishes to him, which would normally be immune to fire, given that they live in water, with hope that he would spare things that are not water-based and not immune to him.<sup>134</sup> The irony of the situation is that Spes, in turn, is not devoured; instead, the fire “stands still” for her, while instead, the guards surrounding her are killed. This demonstrates the uselessness of their god, as the opposite results are achieved by their attempted sacrifice.

Another possible reading stems from the fact that Vulcan was later identified with Greek Hephaestus, who became iconic for his failed marriage to Aphrodite, the sensual goddess who cheated on him with Ares.<sup>135</sup> His inability to control the sexual choices of the woman over whom he held legal dominion finds a parallel in the emperor’s inability to control the virgins’ preference for Christ and heavenly marriage; moreover, the impotence associated with being cuckolded highlights the emperor’s impotence in trying to control or inflict any violence on the virgin. Such powerlessness is demonstrated in the results of the attempted torture: not only is the virgin unharmed (“illaesa”), but the men trying to put her through it are killed, exploding with the pot’s destruction. This goes along with Hrotsvit’s critique of male sexuality/violence in *Dulcitius*: instead of being able to harm others, they are themselves destroyed, and in fact explode (“combussit”) by the boiling fervor (“ebulliens fervor”), the symbol of unrestrained masculine desire. Ultimately, such fervor is self-defeating and limiting, rather than a tool for control and violence.

At this point, the emperor admits defeat, and has Spes beheaded after her sister. The ensuing exchange between the women is very similar to Fides’ final conversation. Spes exhorts

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Jennifer R. March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), s.v. “Hephestus.”

Karitas not to be frightened and instead keep the faith, and Karitas responds: “Taedet me vitae praesentis, taedet terrenae habitationis, quod saltem ad modicum temporis separor a vobis.” [“I am weary of the present life, I am weary of earthly living, but at least I am separated from you for just a little time.”]<sup>136</sup> Spes responds, “Depone taedium et tende ad praemium; non enim diu separabimur, sed socius in caelo coniungemur.” [“Put aside your weariness and reach to the prize; we will not be separated for even a little time, but we will be joined in friendship in heaven.”]<sup>137</sup> Karitas exclaims “Fiat, fiat!” [“Let it be, let it be!”].<sup>138</sup> Karitas expresses her intention to be martyred as well, and gladly, due to her weariness at life (perhaps ironically, given her young age of eight). However, her main concern seems to be the separation from her sisters and mother due to their deaths; perhaps evoking her name, Charity, this is a representation of her perfect Love for them. Moreover, the exchange confirms their agency: Karitas’ weariness of earthly life suggests an eagerness to accept martyrdom, rather than representing a passive surrender to the temporal power of the emperor. Much like Fides, Spes also uses the word “tende,” suggesting an active reaching out for her heavenly reward, confirming the virgins’ active desire for heaven through martyrdom. Karitas’ response, “fiat,” recalls Mary’s response to the Angel Gabriel’s request that she bear Jesus: as such, it is the ultimate expression of assent to God’s grace, which reflects the greatest sense of agency and freedom in the Christian worldview.

Like her sister, Spes commands her mother not to mourn for her but to rejoice, and she intercedes for her, “Perennis trinitas restituet tibi in aevum plenum absque diminutione filiarum numerum.” [“May the eternal Trinity grant you rest in the full age from the loss of the number of your daughters.”]<sup>139</sup> Sapientia’s maternal sufferings in her children being martyred, as well as

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<sup>136</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 370.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

her role in producing such martyrs through giving birth to them and raising them, is confirmed as what will guarantee her own salvation. Like her sister, when Spes is finally killed, she explicitly expresses her willingness to take up the martyr's palm: "Libens excipio gladium. Tu, Christe, suscipe spiritum pro tui confessione nominis eiectionem de habitaculo corporis." ["I, willing, welcome the sword. You, Christ, receive my spirit, thrown out from this little robe of my body, on behalf of my confession of your name."]<sup>140</sup> Her agency is confirmed in her wording of "libens excipio." While "excipio" expresses receiving or welcoming,<sup>141</sup> "libens" is connected to the rhetoric of free will: in the above mentioned tract by Augustine, the saint uses the term "arbitrio libero" for "free will."<sup>142</sup> Her body is "habitacula," the diminutive form of "habita," feminine "habitus," which according to Blaise Patristic can mean a state of being, or more specifically, a piece of clothing or robe of a certain sort. Such a treatment recalls Platonic dualism, since the flesh appears just to be a robe of the spirit, holding it in or covering it up. Hrotsvit's version of the world, in diminutive form and switched into the feminine from the usual masculine noun, emphasizes Spes's status as a little girl. However, Spes remarks that she is being ejected from that status in order to go to Heaven, which raises the question of what her new status is. Though this imagery suggests a move to a sexless existence, the girls are repeatedly referred to as brides. Rather, Hrotsvit's metaphor evokes a transition from girlhood to bridehood, the robe of the body being like the nuptial robe ("habitus matronalis")<sup>143</sup> removed for spiritual consummation in heaven.

The final martyr, Karitas, is then called to worship Diana, but rebukes the emperor in the manner of her older sisters: "Quia mentiri nolo. Ego quidem et sorores meae, eisdem parentibus

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Albert Blaise, ed., *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens*, s.v. "excipio."

<sup>142</sup> Augustine, "De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio."

<sup>143</sup> Albert Blaise, ed., *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens*, s.v. "habitus."



genitae, eisdem sacramentis imbutae, sumus una eademque fidei constantia roboratae; quapropter scito nostrum velle, nostrum sentire, nostrum sapere unum idemque esse, nec me in ullo umquam illis dissidere.” [“Because I do not want to lie. Certainly I and my sisters, the same born to our parents, the same filled with the sacraments, we are one, and strengthened by constancy to the same faith; because of this I know that we want, we feel, we savor, and it is one in the same, nor do I disagree with them in anything ever.”]<sup>144</sup> “Roboro” is interesting because it comes from “robor,” which can mean both “vigor” and “strength,” deriving from its initial meaning of “wood,” but the verb took on a spiritualized meaning of “to validate” or “confirm,” in the patristic period.<sup>145</sup> “Imbuta” is the past participle of “imbuo,” which means “train,” or “inspire or impress early,” but initially comes from “saturate,” or “moisten, dip.”<sup>146</sup> This evokes their feminine ability to be impressed given their moist nature, but connects it to their retention of Christianity at even a young age. In the same speech, the women’s heroism is connected both to strength (“robor”) and to feminine humoral balance.

Despairing of their ability to kill her with small tortures, given her sisters’ track record, Hadrian and Antiochus decide to inflict a harsh punishment immediately: “iube, tribus continuis diebus ac noctibus fornacem succendi et illam inter bachantes<sup>147</sup> flammas proici.” [“Order that for three continuous days and nights the furnace be kindled and she be thrown among the raging flames.”]<sup>148</sup> The torture devised is the most intensely fiery in this instance, recalling language about male desire most strongly. Moreover, being thrown in the furnace for three days and nights alludes to multiple biblical stories: one, Jesus spent three days harrowing hell before His Easter

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<sup>144</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 371.

<sup>145</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “robur.” Albert Blaise, ed., *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens*, s.v. “roboro.”

<sup>146</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “imbuo.”

<sup>147</sup> This is Hrotsvit’s third use of this word over her virgin martyr plays, and her second use of the word in reference to fiery tortures (see footnote 63).

<sup>148</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 371.

resurrection, and two, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego of the Book of Daniel refused to worship an idol erected by Nebuchadnezzar and were thrown into the furnace only to be miraculously delivered by God, without any harm to their hair or clothes.<sup>149</sup>

The most straightforward declaration of the connection between male desire and violence, and likewise, the failure of fiery tortures being connected to impotence, is subsequently asserted by Karitas: “O iudicem inpotentem, qui diffidit se absque armis ignium octuennem infantem superare posse!” [“O impotent judge, who despairs of being able to conquer an eight-year-old infant with weapons of fire!”]<sup>150</sup> The impotence is emphasized as a reversal of power dynamics due to divine intervention. The conflict continues with Hrotsvit’s characteristic snappy dialogue:

KARITAS. Saevitiae quidem tuae satisfaciendo parebit, sed me minime nocebit, quia nec verbera mei corpusculum lacerare, nec flammae comam vel vestes poterunt obfuscare.

ADRIANUS. Experietur.

KARITAS. Experiatur.

[KARITAS. It will spare satisfying your bloodthirstiness, but it will hurt me very little, because neither tortures can hurt my little body, nor can flames blacken my hair or clothes.<sup>151</sup>

HADRIAN. She will see.

KARITAS. She *may* see.]<sup>152</sup>

Similarly to Chionia and Agape, her hair and clothes in particular are preserved from the flames—an inviolability of spirit made manifest in physical details and signs of chastity. The delightful exchange of “Experietur”/ “Experiatur,” wherein the verb is changed from future indicative to present subjunctive, undermines the confidence of Hadrian in his own power, a technique continued in the following scene.

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<sup>149</sup> Dan. 3:94.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Perhaps In contrast to Dulcitius, whose embrace of pots produced this exact effect.

<sup>152</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 371.

Surely enough, the men are again proved impotent, as Antiochus explains the results of the furnace: “Illa lasciva, quam mihi cruciandam tradidisti, puellula me praesente flagellabatur, sed ne tenuis quidem cutis summotenus disrumpebatur. Deinde proieci illam in fornacem igneum colorem prae nimio ardore exprimentem... Flamma erupit et quinque milia hominum combussit.” [“That wench, who you sent to me to be tortured, that little girl presented was beaten by me presently, but she was not burst in the skin or tendons up to the top. Then I threw her in the fiery furnace before excessively the color squeezed out arduously... The flame erupted and 15 thousand of the men exploded.”] This is similar to her sister Spes’s torture: rather than her being harmed, the men guarding are killed by the explosion, signifying defeated violent desire that is ultimately turned against the person indulging it. When Hadrian asks what happened to Karitas, Antiochus explains: “Ludens inter flammivomos vapores vagabat et illaesa laudes deo suo pangebatur. Illi etiam, qui diligenter inspexere, ferebant tres candidulos viros cum illa deambulasse.” [“Playing among the flaming vapors she strolled about and unharmed she pledged praises to her god. But they who diligently looked in, related that three shining bright men walked with her.”] Hrotsvit again alludes to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; the three faithful Jews found unharmed in the furnace, singing hymns, protected by an angel.<sup>153</sup> Karitas’s depiction is also similar to Hirena’s in *Dulcitius*, where she is escorted to a mountaintop, delivered by angels from the looming tortures who are likewise bright and shining. In this instance as well, Hrotsvit uses the word “viros” (as opposed to gender neutral “homines”), highlighting the masculinity of the angels. Thus the shining men serve as the antithesis of the weak, pathetic men, such as Antiochus and Hadrian, who are ruled by their desire for domination.

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<sup>153</sup> Dan. 3:91-92.

In perhaps a “feminine” way, similar to Hrotsvit’s blushes in her prologue, Hadrian blushes (“erubesco”) that he cannot inflict pain upon her (“nequeo illam laedere.”) Then they just decide to behead her cleanly like the sisters:

ANTIOCHUS. Detege duram, Karitas, cervicem et sustine percussoris ensem.

KARITAS. In hoc non renitor tui votis, sed libens pareo iussis.

SAPIENTIA. Nunc, nunc, filia, gratulandum, nunc in Christo est gaudendum; nec est, quae me mordeat, cura, quia secura sum de tua victoria.

KARITAS. Inprime mihi, mater, osculum et commenda iturum Christo spiritum.

SAPIENTIA. Qui te in meo utero vivificavit, ipse suscipiat animam, quam caelitus inspiravit.

KARITAS. Tibi, Christe, gloria, qui me ad te vocasti cum martyrii palma.

SAPIENTIA. Vale, proles dulcissima; et, cum Christo iungaris in caelo, memento matris, iam patrona effecta te parientis.

[ANTIOCHUS. Expose your tough neck, Karitas, and undergo the blade of the executioner.

KARITAS. In this I do not resist your vows, but freely submit to your commands.

SAPIENTIA. Now, now, daughter, it is to be celebrated, it is to be rejoiced in Christ, it is not concern, which bites me, because I am secure of your victory.

KARITAS. Press a kiss on me, mother, and again commend my spirit to Christ.

SAPIENTIA. He who gave you life in my womb, let him receive your spirit, which the Heavenly One breathes into.

KARITAS. Glory to you, Christ, who called me to you by the martyr’s palm.

SAPIENTIA. Farewell, sweetest daughter; and, when you are joined to Christ in heaven, remember your mother, now, my patronage having been completed by preparing you.]<sup>154</sup>

Karitas’ death is similar to her sisters. Once more, the virgin confirms that she freely wills her martyrdom (“libens pareo iussis”) and alludes to her heavenly marriage with Christ (“Christo iungaris in caelo”). Using “iungo” is particularly effective because on one hand it has marital connotations, hence Lewis and Short, “Of persons, to join, unite, bring together, associate, in love, marriage, relationship, etc.”<sup>155</sup> On the other hand, the word can also be a military technical term according to the same dictionary: “of troops, an army, etc., to join, unite.”<sup>156</sup> This is underlined by the use of the martyr’s palm image: “palma,” or palm, is specifically a symbol of

<sup>154</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 372-373.

<sup>155</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “iungo.”

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

“victory, honor, glory.”<sup>157</sup> This phrase could be read as both marriage to Christ, the Heavenly Bridegroom, and rejoining the heavenly host as a soldier of Christ. Karitas and her sisters are both soldiers and brides. In their scenes of heroism, the virgins are portrayed as feminine, as their imperviousness to torture recalls the “wet” language of female physiology. When their deaths do come, they are referred to as victories, and in explicit language, all the martyrs express their desire and willingness to accept it as a prize.

Sapientia’s spirituality is explored as well. Her role in preparing her children is emphasized in their mother’s death; the narrative proceeds to her and the matrons burying the martyrs’ bodies, with spices in a manner similar to Christ’s: “Corpuscula aromatibus condimus et exequias honorifice celebramus.” [“We inter the little bodies with spices and we celebrate the funeral honorably.”]<sup>158</sup> She then declares her intention to die there, but first, at the burial, she prays a final prayer for her daughters: “Flosculos uteri mei tibi, terra, servandos committo: quos tu materiali sinu foveo, donec in resurrectione maiori reviridescant gloria; et tu, Christe, animas, interim imple splendoribus, dans pacificam requiem ossibus.” [“The little flowers of my womb to you, earth, I commit them to be preserved: whom you keep warm in the fold of your matter, until they live again in greater resurrected glory; and you, Christ, fill their spirits meanwhile with splendors, giving peaceful rest to their bones.”]<sup>159</sup> Sapientia describes them as “little flowers,” and then likens them to being planted in the earth, using the common metaphor of the seed for resurrection.<sup>160</sup> The emphasis on their physical resurrection underlines the importance of body to their identity: this is recognized in her prayer to Christ, which asks him to

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<sup>157</sup> s.v. “palma”

<sup>158</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 373.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 3-4.

fill *their spirits* (“animas”) with splendors, but also commends their corpses to his physical care. The virgin martyrs are not merely their souls; though they refer to their physical life as chains, and Sapientia’s hope for bodily resurrection in her prayer makes it clear that their bodies are essential to their identities. Caroline Walker Bynum underlines this, observing that medieval Christians were fundamentally not dualistic, but rather they had “a concept of self in which physicality was integrally bound to sensation, emotion, reasoning, and therefore finally to whatever one means by salvation.... Indeed, person was not person without body.”<sup>161</sup> As such this body was specifically gendered female, their identities as saints were specifically female, though their performance of that could take on masculine traits through their imitation of Christ as martyrs. This denies any sort of binary of whether they are feminine or masculine—Hrotsvit sees no contradiction between them both being fundamentally women but also having masculine traits or performing masculine tasks while they also embrace and perform femininity.

### Conclusions

The depictions of bodily tortures and martyrdoms reveal Hrotsvit’s reversal of typical power dynamics in a more visceral way than the interrogation scenes. When pagan men attempt to enforce their worldly authority on virgins, often through sexual tortures or tortures using symbolism for male desire, like fire or penetration of some sort, they are proved impotent in the face of the virgins’ divinely assisted inviolability. The women’s verbal acts and prayers are confirmed by God, while the orders of emperors are overturned. Likewise, their “cool” and “wet” bodies are not seen as inferior in their spiritual pursuits, but Hrotsvit paints them as actual advantages, compared to the fiery failure of unrestrained male sexuality. Aligning with Augustine’s idea of the power of humility, “*virtus humilitatis*,” from *City of God*,<sup>162</sup> they find

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>162</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb (Turhout: Brepols, 1955).

themselves living freely by their cooperation with divine grace, while the men in the play are dominated by their own physicality in a way that actually limits their agency. On the other hand, the women are confirmed in their agency and live in true freedom according to Augustinian and Boethian philosophy, and as such, are certainly portrayed as women, though their femininity does not limit them from imitating Christ or being “soldier-like” even as they are Christ’s brides.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

There are two ways in which Hrotsvit's virgins confess Christianity: through their voices and through their bodies. Though these methods intermingle in the plays, especially given the dialogue-driven nature of the genre, the virgins exhibit verbal resistance mostly in the scenes of their formal interrogation by the Roman officials, while they exhibit bodily resistance in the ensuing tortures and martyrdoms that dominate the second halves of the plays. Both of these methods are performances of their chastity, and by extension, their agency: while men in the plays are dominated by lust (for domination), the women, freely choosing to embrace love for Christ, become inviolate in speech and body. Hrotsvit's women overturn the expected power dynamics of the situation by taking control of their interrogations and humiliate the pagan men in failing to impose tortures on them. Thereby, her heroines are confirmed in their agency and their femininity. Nonetheless, the language used to describe them is not only feminine and bridal, but reflective of a *miles Christi* or image of Christ himself. Hrotsvit's depiction thus challenges the reductive categories of "female/weak" and "male/strong" and expands the vision of what femininity can encompass.

Hrotsvit's virgin martyr plays allow us to complicate our discourse on medieval virginity and feminine spirituality more generally. Though scholarship that condemns virginity as misogynist and virgin martyr legends as sadistic has decreased in popularity in recent years, these readings are still incredibly popular in a variety of settings. When I mentioned that I work on virgin martyrs at a wine hour at Congress with a medievalist in another field, the historian felt the need to lecture me about how oppressive the concept of virginity is, of course, based on her



own experience growing up in an “ultraconservative, religious household” that stressed the importance of “purity.” In the much more formal, scholarly setting of her monograph, Madeline Caviness refers to virgin martyr legends as “sado-erotic,” and compares them to slasher films, as they both “reinforce fear of female sexuality in their audiences and provide erotic stimulation.”<sup>1</sup> Even Karen Winstead, who takes a generally positive approach to medieval virginity, nonetheless remarks, “The virgin martyr legend thus affords a safe distance from which to indulge in ‘innocent’ escapism as well as less innocent fantasies of ‘harmless’ violence against women.”<sup>2</sup> Though the sexual content may have fascinated medieval audiences, deconstructing virgin martyr legends as essentially a form of torture-pornography says much more about the obsessions and sexuality of 2001 than it does about that of 935.

Other scholars, especially in recent years, have taken a more positive approach to virginity, seeing it as something that can be reclaimed from the patriarchy by women who practice it. For example, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, while remarking the virgin martyr genre may seem “depressing,” notes that “What looks potentially dreary or appalling at the aerial-survey level of genre-history takes on life, multiplicity, and nuance at the level of particular texts in their context.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, she pays particular attention in her monograph to the fact that these texts were often written for and by women themselves.<sup>4</sup> More explicitly positive, Ruth Evans asserts that “virginity in the Middle Ages cannot be reduced to fetish or abject ‘Thing.’ Women of all estates and ages, lay and in orders, virgins or otherwise, appropriated its representations in bold and sometimes radical ways.”<sup>5</sup> Evans’s approach, rather than projecting specifically modern

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<sup>1</sup> Madeline Harrison Caviness, *Visualizing Woman in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) 84, 87.

<sup>2</sup> Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150-1300: Virginity and Its Authorizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Evans, “Virginites,” 23.

forms of sexism on the past or vaguely condemning the patriarchy, opens up the question of the multiple meanings of virginity to different people, especially to women who may view it as positive. Likewise, Hrotsvit's dramas expand the notion of what virgin martyrs can be. The fact that her women are impervious to stripping and sexual assault and cheerful and inviolable in the face of inefficacious tortures would make for really ineffective and boring pornography, were that Hrotsvit's aim. Rather, Hrotsvit's virgin martyrs signify a conquest of feminine chastity over male concupiscence, of Christ and his brides over the princes of the temporal world. Such a legend would undoubtedly be experienced as empowering by the women of Hrotsvit's community, as it vindicated "the praiseworthy chastity of holy virgins" "when feminine weakness conquers and masculine strength is under confusion."<sup>6</sup>

Another way the scholarship on medieval virginity has changed has been from seeing virginity as primarily a physical trait to be maintained to also considering virginity as spiritual virtue that requires practice and performance. Barbara Newman, for example, insists on the primacy of physical "virginitas intacta," even after citing multiple counterexamples to her claim.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, she argues that women's spirituality lacked any sort of change, but rather was about maintaining said physical virginity—or, in her metaphorical rendering, "Hers is a static perfection rather than a quest: the knight errant must seek the Grail through perilous adventures, whereas the damsel has only to remain in the castle where it abides."<sup>8</sup> By contrast, more recent scholarship has taken significantly more interest in the "spiritual dynamism" of virginity—Sarah Salih, for example, offers a cheeky response to Newman's theory: "The details of the strategy of chastity, however, remain unexamined. If the preferred strategy is that of exploitation of the

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<sup>6</sup> Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 233-234. My translation. Latin: "laudabilis sacrarum castimonia virginum," "cum feminea fragilitas vinceret et virilis robur confusioni subiaceret."

<sup>7</sup> Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 44-45.

body, then chastity, implicitly a denial of the body, is apparently uninteresting, and in Newman's word, 'static.'” Salih signifies a new wave of scholars increasingly interested in the performance of virginity and chastity, one that highlights much more the agency of the women involved than Newman's damsel-virgin. Hrotsvit's women, Sapientia, Fides, Spes, and Karitas, are foreign missionaries in Rome facing execution for their conversion of the wives of Rome, who dynamically reclaim chastity as married women. Such a narrative certainly does not evoke damsels in a tower, in distress. Moreover the performative aspect of Hrotsvit's virginity dispels notions of stasis. Virginity is not merely a physical attribute for her virgins, but it is expressed through their resilient speech in the face of flattery and even torture.

A final question in virginity scholarship I believe the consideration of Hrotsvit's plays can shed light on is the narrative of virginity in the Middle Ages. As described at greater length in my introduction, the traditional narrative recounts a transition of the “virago,” or masculine, militant virgin in the early Middle Ages toward a “bridal” model in the later Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> The progenitor of this model appears to be Barbara Newman, who suggests it in the title of her book, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, despite her protestations that she presents one strand of Christian spirituality rather than a “master narrative.”<sup>10</sup> Other scholars have moved away from Newman's suggestion, such as Sarah Salih, who carefully considers a variety of concepts of virginity popular in the Middle Ages. Salih questions “whether a chronological narrative is an appropriate framework in which to describe varieties of virginity,” given the coexistence and prevalence of both images of virgins from even the fifth century.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Evans, “Virginites,” 24.

<sup>10</sup> Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 17. It is worth noting that though there are masculine aspects to the “virago,” Newman insists that the virgin was still seen a woman (31).

<sup>11</sup> Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 15.

Salih even goes so far as to consider the possibility of virginity as a third gender, given the “challenge to stable gender identity” presented by these differently gendered forms of virginity.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, virginity as a gender identity could accommodate both the performative, spiritualized aspects of virginity and its focus on, or contradiction to, a bodily state.<sup>13</sup> While Salih’s theoretical boldness is to be lauded, I question whether this use of gender theory does not actually *limit* our understanding of what womanhood can mean. Does rejecting earthly marriage and childbearing in favor of celibacy mean one is no longer a woman? Does such a categorization reduce womanhood to physical motherhood? Is defining one’s gender on how well she embraces gender stereotypes not exactly what feminism was meant to overturn? Though recent gender theory can be useful in considering the performative, dynamic aspects of virginity, scholars often take it too far to limit or malign femininity—an awkward reversion to the misogynist ideology of gender of generations past.

I contend that given the medieval understanding of body and soul as not dualist but unified aspects of self,<sup>14</sup> gender is deeply connected to body in the Middle Ages, even as it may not necessarily be tied to gendered social roles. The performance of virginity in Hrotsvit is imagined in terms that evoke the imagery of the female body. At the same time, this does not prohibit women from behaving in ways or being depicted in ways typically associated to men, e.g. as *miles Christi*. This is particularly true for women who are martyrs and thereby *imitationes Christi*. Rather than “Virile Woman to WomanChrist,” I suggest “Christ’s Women and ChristWomen” as a better descriptor for Hrotsvit’s virgin martyrs: at once His brides, embodied as female with respect to their “wet” humeral balance and female bodily functions such as

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 38. Salih eventually concludes that though virginity “comes close” to being its own gender in idealized, literary narratives, for historical nuns virginity was more “conventionally feminine” (243).

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 11.

lactation, and at once an image of Christ Himself, their bodies broken in Eucharistic fashion as a sacrifice in exchange for an outpouring of divine grace. In other words, it may be time to embrace the performative aspects of gender, but it is not time yet to abandon the influence of biological sex on that performance.

In terms of the validity of a chronological narrative of virginity, Hrotsvit's status as a tenth-century author does not move either hypothesis to more or less probability. As she would have been in the "transition" period between the two models of virginity, it makes sense that even within the same line of dialogue Hrotsvit would evoke both a martial and marital imagery. At the same time, Hrotsvit could also serve as an excellent example of Salih's contention that there was a continuous coexistence between both the "virago" and "bridal" models of virginity. Either way, Hrotsvit's virgins demonstrate that the two models are certainly not diametrically opposed, and virginity can and did encompass both of these roles.

In this project I have tried to shed some light on issues of virgin martyrs, gender, and female agency through examination of Hrotsvit's virgin martyr dramas, *Sapientia* and *Dulcitus*. By bringing Hrotsvit scholarship into conversation with the larger field of medieval virginity, which is often focused on late medieval English sources, I have attempted to offer another example with which to assess our models of feminine spirituality. There is yet much more to be done on Hrotsvit's virgins and on her contributions to female spirituality more generally. In addition to the plays *Sapientia* and *Dulcitus*, Hrotsvit also composed a poem based on the legend of St. Agnes, another popular virgin martyr. Perhaps more fascinating, she composed a nearly contemporary legend of the rare male virgin martyr St. Pelagius, an adolescent man who resisted the homosexual advances of the Caliph of Cordoba, leading to his martyrdom. The latter, especially, could test my assessment of Hrotsvit's gendering of virginity, as it may offer a model

of distinctly masculine virginity. Moreover, Hrotsvit's other dramas could shed light on other forms of feminine sanctity and chastity, as they deal with chaste married women, virgins who are not martyred, and reformed prostitutes. To fully grasp Hrotsvit's contributions to women's devotional literature, further research paying attention to her subtle use of the Latin language must be done on her larger body of work. Nonetheless, I believe that my study of her virgin martyr dramas has offered a new perspective on her version of virginity.

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