

THE PLAYS OF ROSWITHA

**THE PLAYS OF
ROSWITHA** TRANSLATED
BY CHRISTOPHER ST. JOHN
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY CARDINAL
GASQUET AND A CRITICAL PREFACE BY
THE TRANSLATOR



AYER COMPANY, PUBLISHERS, INC.
SALEM, NEW HAMPSHIRE 03079

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Reissued 1966

by Benjamin Blom, Inc., Bronx, N.Y. 10452

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L.C. Cat. Card No. 65-20048

Pbk ISBN 0-88143-106-0

Csb ISBN 0-405-08900-7

Reprint Edition, 1989

Ayer Company, Publishers, Inc.

50 Northwestern Dr.

Salem, New Hampshire 03079

Printed in U.S.A. by

NOBLE OFFSET PRINTERS, INC.

NEW YORK 3, N. Y.

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The works consulted include the following :

Hrotswithæ Opera : Edited by PAUL WINTERFELD.

Hrotswithæ Opera : Edited by H. L. SCHURZFLEISCH.

Hrotswithæ Opera : Edited by CONRAD CELTES (Nürnberg, 1501).

Patrologiæ Cursus Completus : J. P. MIGNÉ (vol. 137).

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Théâtre de Roswitha : CHARLES MAGNIN.

Origines du théâtre Moderne : CHARLES MAGNIN.

Antiquitates Gandersheimensis : LEUCKFELD.

Six Medieval Women : ALICE KEMP WELCH.

I am much indebted to Dame Laurentia McLachlan, O.S.B., Superioress of Stanbrook Abbey, and to the Reverend Paul Bonnet of Lyons University, for assistance in the work of translation.—CHRISTOPHER ST. JOHN.

NOTE.—These versions of Roswitha's plays may not be acted without permission of the translator.

THE PLAYS OF ROSWITHA



ROSWITHA PRESENTING HER PANEGYRIC OF OTHO THE GREAT TO OTHO II IN
THE PRESENCE OF THE ABBESS GERBERG.

From the woodcut by DÜRER.

INTRODUCTION

By HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL GASQUET

WHATEVER may be thought of the precise merits of these six short dramas, now translated into English for the first time,* it will be conceded that a collection of plays bearing the date of the 10th century, authenticated as the work of a woman, and a nun, is a remarkable phenomenon, interesting to students of monasticism and of the drama alike.

At one time, it is interesting to note, it was suggested that the author of these dramas was an Englishwoman. In fact, the English scholar, Laurence Humfrey, who first introduced them to notice in this country, endeavoured to prove that Roswitha was no other than St. Hilda of Northumbria. His theory cannot, of course, be maintained; but the very anxiety shown to identify this talented poetess and dramatist as a native of this country is evidence of the high estimation in which her compositions were held in the 16th century,

* Since this was written, an English translation of one of the plays, *Abraham*, has been issued by a private press.

the time when Laurence Humfrey, an exile from England for his religion, learnt to know them in Germany. It is now an established fact that the plays are the work of a Benedictine nun of Gandersheim, in Saxony, and their merits certainly justify her biographer's exclamation: "Rara avis in Saxonia visa est."

It used to be assumed that between the 6th and the 12th century all dramatic representations ceased, but each of these centuries when patiently searched has yielded some dramatic texts. The feudal period, reckoned the most barbarous, and Germania, set down then, as later in history, as the least civilized of countries, have produced the most considerable and least imperfect of these texts in the plays of Hrotsuitha, or Roswitha, a nun of the Order of St. Benedict, who spent her religious life in the Convent of Gandersheim.

There is a marked difference between her plays and such dramas as *The Mystery of the Wise and Foolish Virgins*, which is little more than an amplification of the sequence of the liturgy. We find here an author familiar not only with the Scriptures, the works of the Fathers of the Church, of the agiographers, and of the Christian philosophers, but with Plautus, Terence, Horace, Virgil, and Ovid—an author who, on her own confession, took the theatre of Terence as her model.

The Abbey of Gandersheim, where these plays were written, was founded about the year 850 by Ludolph, Duke of Saxony, at the request of his wife Oda, a

Frankish princess. Although these were what men call "the dark ages," the darkness was comparative. The Saxon court at this time was enlightened, and the Abbeys of Saxony, notably that of Corbei, were centres of learning and civilization. Gandersheim was one of the "free abbeys," that is to say its Abbess held it direct from the King. Her rights of overlordship extended for many miles; she had her own law courts, and sent her men-at-arms into the field. In fact, she enjoyed the usual privileges and undertook the usual responsibilities of a feudal baron, and as such had the right to a seat in the Imperial Diet. Coins are extant, struck by the Abbesses of Gandersheim, whose portraits they bear.

During the 10th and 11th centuries these Abbesses were drawn chiefly from the royal house of Saxony, which had been raised to the dignity of the Imperial throne of Germania. Leuckfeld, in his voluminous history of Gandersheim, quotes a contemporary chronicler who praises the royal nuns for keeping all luxury and state out of the life of the community, and for observing the Rule of St. Benedict strictly. "They were forbidden," says the chronicler, "to eat away from the common table at the appointed times, except in case of sickness. They slept together, and came together to celebrate the canonical hours. And they set to work together whenever work had to be done." The Abbess who ruled the community in Roswitha's time was Gerberg, or Gerberga, a niece of the Emperor Otho I.

Gerberg was a good classical scholar, and Roswitha tells us, in one of the introductory prefaces with which, fortunately for posterity, her works are freely sprinkled, how much she owed to the tuition of this Abbess, "younger in years than I, but far older in learning."

It is from such sentences as this that we are able to gain a little information about Roswitha's life. Her mention of certain historical events and personages proves that she was born after the year 912 and before the year 940 (the known date of Gerberg's birth). She seems to have entered the religious life at Gandersheim when she was about twenty-three years old. She tells us nothing about her antecedents, but as Gandersheim was an exclusive house we may assume that she was of gentle birth. What education or experience of the world she had had before she became a nun is a matter of guesswork.

Roswitha wrote in Latin, the only language used in the 10th century in the West for literary composition. Conrad Celtes, the well-known humanist, discovered the manuscript, the writing of which cannot be earlier than the 9th, or later than the 10th century, in the library of the Benedictine monastery of St. Emmeran, Ratisbon, in the last days of the 15th century. In the year 1501 it was printed. This first edition has an interesting frontispiece representing the nun poet and dramatist presenting her works to the Emperor Otho II, in the presence of her Abbess Gerberg, who wears the crown

of a "Fürstäbtin." This and the other plates illustrating incidents in the plays have been attributed to both Dürer and Cranach, but they are not signed. Another edition, that of Schurzfleisch, in nearly all respects a reprint of the first, was issued in 1707, augmented with biographical and philological notes. The text given in the Latin Patrology (Migne, Tomus 137) is taken from the Schurzfleisch edition. More valuable to the student is Magnin's edition. The French commentator collated the Celtes and Schurzfleisch texts with the original manuscript, which in 1803 had been moved from St. Emmeran to the Munich library, and found one or two readings preferable to those of Celtes. Magnin also restored some stage directions omitted by Celtes, one of which, in the eighth scene of *Callimachus*, affords, as the English translator notes, valuable evidence that the play was acted, or at least intended for representation.

The original manuscript is divided into three parts. The first contains eight poems or metrical legends of the Saints in which reliable authorities are carefully followed, much skill being shown, however, in the arrangement of the material and in the handling of the "leonine hexameter." The second part consists of the six plays here given in English; the third, of a long unfinished poem called "Panegyric of the Othos." Celtes changed the order, which is to be regretted, as it is obviously chronological. Roswitha's preface to Part III

shows more confidence than the preface to the plays, and very much more than the diffident preface to the poems. One of these poems, "Passio Sancti Pelagii," once enjoyed a very high reputation, and is often quoted by Spanish and Portuguese agiographers. The Bollandists print it entire in the *Acta Sanctorum*. It has another interest in that Roswitha tells us that she obtained her facts from a witness of the saint's martyrdom.

Although Roswitha claims Terence as her master in the art of play-writing, it cannot be said that she imitates him closely. When *Paphnutius* was acted in London in 1914 the dramatic critic of *The Times* was justified from one point of view in asserting that Roswitha's style is "not in the least Terentian." For one thing she is quite indifferent to the "unities," and transports us from place to place with bewildering abruptness. Her relation to Terence, as she herself insists, is one of moral contrasts rather than of literary parallels. The "situation" in Terence's comedies almost invariably turns on the frailty of women; in Roswitha's plays as invariably on their heroic adherence to chastity. Although considerable variety is shown in the treatment of each story, the motive is always the same—to glorify uncompromising fidelity to the vow of virginity. This nun dramatist deals courageously, but, it must be added, delicately, when it is remembered that she lived in an age when even the best educated were neither fastidious nor restrained in manners or conversation, with the temptations which her characters

overcome. The preface to her plays shows that it was not without some qualms of conscience that she wrote of things "which should not even be named among us." But the purity of her intentions, which was obviously recognized by her religious superiors, should induce the most prudish reader to refrain from charges of impropriety. With all their shortcomings, Roswitha's works have a claim to an eminent place in medieval literature, and do honour to her sex, to the age in which she lived, and to the vocation which she followed.

THE PLAYS OF ROSWITHA*

By CHRISTOPHER ST. JOHN

THIS translation of the six plays of Roswitha (there are really seven, for the two parts of *Gallicanus* practically constitute two separate dramas) was begun in the year 1912 and completed in 1914. The lively interest provoked by the stage performance of one of the translations (that of the play *Paphnutius*) by the Pioneer Players in January 1914 led me to think that the publication of the whole theatre of Roswitha in English would be welcomed by all students of the drama. Unfortunately, the war delayed publication, and the manuscript was entirely destroyed by a fire at the publisher's premises in Dublin during the Irish insurrection of Easter 1916.

The work of collating the various Latin texts of Roswitha's plays and producing a translation which should preserve some of the naive simplicity of the original had been a difficult one, and to begin it all over again was a heart-breaking task. The consciousness that the interest in Roswitha provoked by the performance of *Paphnutius*

* I have adopted this form of the name in preference to "Hrotsuitha," "Hrotswitha," or "Hrosvitha," as being more easily pronounced and more pleasant to the eye. The name is said to be derived from the old Saxon word "Hrodsuind" (strong voice), a derivation accepted by Roswitha herself in her preface to her plays, when she writes "ego, clamor validus Gandeishermensis," and approved by Grimm.

had waned did not alleviate the heaviness of spirit in which the work of replacing the burned manuscript was undertaken.

Those readers who are unable or unwilling to compare the translations with the original should be warned that Roswitha's dialogue is characterized by a simplicity and conciseness hardly attainable in any tongue but Latin. The difficulty of finding equivalents for the terse phrases employed tempts the translator to "write them up." Although I have aimed at producing a readable translation for lovers of the drama in all its forms rather than an exact paraphrase for scholars, I have tried to resist this temptation at the risk of making the dialogue seem at times almost ludicrously bald. Except in a few cases where the use of "thou" seemed dramatically fit, "tu" has been rendered by "you." Roswitha's style is colloquial, and the constant employment of the singular pronoun would misrepresent its character. The Latin is not obsolete, and it would surely be a mistake to translate it into an obsolete vernacular. Although the author's syntax is decadent, and there is a tendency to make every sentence analytical, her use of words is classical, and her Latin in this respect superior to the scholastic Latin of the Middle Ages. The only principle observed in my translation has been the general one laid down by Edward Fitzgerald: "The live dog is to be preferred to the dead lion—in translation at any rate," and if this has involved a loss of dignity, I hope there may be some compensating

gain in ease and force.* In regard to the names of the characters in the plays, when there were well-known English equivalents such as "Hadrian" and "Constantine" I have not hesitated to use them, but when there were none I have given the Latin names. There is a good precedent for this inconsistency. We speak of "Rome" and "Venice," but we do not try to Anglicize Perugia or Assisi.

The plays are all founded on well-known legends, which Roswitha follows very closely as regards the facts. But she shows great originality in her use of the facts and in her development of characters often merely indicated in the legends. Three of the plays, *Gallicanus*, *Dulcitius*, and *Sapientia*, deal with the conflict between infant Christianity and Paganism, martyrdoms under the Emperors Hadrian, Diocletian, and Julian the Apostate being the chief incidents. *Gallicanus*, which comes first in the manuscript, shows considerable skill in dramatic construction. Incident follows rapidly on incident. The scene lies alternately in Rome and on the battlefield, yet the action is kept quite clear. The story is easily followed, although Roswitha, like all good dramatists, eschews narrative. Gallicanus, one of the Emperor Constantine's generals, claims the hand of the Emperor's daughter as a reward for undertaking a dangerous campaign against the

* Believing that the representation of the plays is possible, even desirable, I have also aimed at making the dialogue *speakable*.