

At the conclusion of Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim’s verse Passion of St. Gongolf the Martyr, the saint’s wicked wife, who had mocked reports of miracles at his tomb, suffered a punishment that made her “a source of uncontrolled laughter to all” (risus causa omnibus inmodica): for the rest of her life, she farted whenever she spoke. This indelicate subject matter is conveyed with a noteworthy decorum of language and style.

This paper argues that Hrotsvitha’s authorial decorum, though characteristic of her writings generally, has specific effects in Gongolf. Analysis of her vocabulary, metrical practice, and linguistic and rhetorical choices, especially her use of circumlocution and modesty formulas and her deployment of diminutives, shows that these serve simultaneously both to emphasize and to counter the indecorous potential of the legend. Comparison with the comic elements in Hrotsvitha’s play Agape, Chionia, and Hirena further clarifies certain features of her notions of the risible. In conclusion, I argue that the negative voicing of Gongolf’s wife, which contrasts with the positive speeches assigned to the saintly and heroic feminine characters prominent in Hrotsvitha’s other works, owes much to the author’s consciousness of gender and class.

Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (+203) to Marguerite Porete (+1310)* (Cambridge 1984, repr. 1991), ch. 3 “Hrotsvitha,” pp. 55-83.

Kate Olson, “What Hrotsvit Did to Virgil,” *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (Palgrave MacMillan 2007), pp. 115-35.