

**Putting on the Garment of Widowhood:
Medieval Widows, Monastic Memory, and Historical Writing**

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*The idea of the widow in communal memory and historical writing was a resonant and multi-faceted concept for monastic writers of the Middle Ages. This essay focuses on the function and meaning of widowhood in two examples of early medieval historical writing, by one male and one female author, to illustrate how monastic authors engaged significant and enduring aspects of widowhood during the Western European Middle Ages to construct institutional histories. Images of female memory and widowed piety (especially because the widow represented the Church who awaited her spouse, Christ) were useful in describing the experiences of women who held important associations for monastic institutions: the resonances of the Scriptural *vere vidua* transformed female founders' previous experiences with worldly marriage into a sacralized state of chastity and remembrance in widowhood, and facilitated such women's presence in the community's historical memory.*

Introduction: *Vidua et Memoria*

The idea of the widow in communal memory and historical writing was a resonant and multi-faceted concept for monastic writers of the Middle Ages. This essay focuses on the function and meaning of widowhood in two authors of early medieval historical writing—one male and one female—to illustrate how monastic authors engaged significant and enduring aspects of widowhood during the Western European Middle Ages. Images of female memory and widowed piety (especially because the widow represented the Church who awaited her spouse, Christ) were useful in describing the experiences of women who held important associations for monastic institutions: the resonances of the Scriptural *vere vidua* transformed female founders' previous experiences with worldly marriage into a sacralized state of chastity and remembrance in widowhood, and facilitated such women's presence in an institution's history.

Two examples of foundation narratives, the tenth-century hagiography of St. Rictrude by Hucbald of Saint-Amand (840-ca. 930/932) concerning the foundation of Marchiennes, and the *Primordia Coenobii Gandershemensis* of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (936-ca. 1000?)¹, illustrate the ways that the ideal of chaste widowhood rationalized women's participation in monastic life. Both Hucbald's *vita* and Hrotsvit's *Primordia* also engage what Patrick Geary has described as the "memory of women" in the tenth century: Geary argues that "elaborate mental categories" concerning women operated with special and iconic resonance in memory-keeping at the turn of the first millennium: "the place of women in the carefully selected, restructured, and present-minded discourse" became a concern for monastic writers as they recovered their institutions' history from the obscurity of the previous centuries, endeavors which often required authors to reconcile the historical roles women had played in the distant past with contemporary understandings of gender and gender roles.² Elisabeth van Houts has also noted the significance of female imagery in this process, although she resists Geary's gendered 'division of labor' in memory, suggesting instead a model of gender in historical writing in which memory functioned collaboratively between men and women; the changing political and economic conditions of the central Middle Ages encouraged texts that served institutional and familial needs.³ Similarly, Leah Shopkow has suggested that clerical authors' proximity to female family members, particularly mothers, rather than an abstracted idea of a folkloric female custodianship of memory, encouraged attention to women's roles in families and foundations in the content and construction of historical texts. All of these understandings of gendered memory, however, suggest a dynamic relationship between

1 Hrotsvit's death date is not known for certain, but Katharina Wilson places her death at the turn of the millennium; other scholars suggest an earlier date, ca. 973 or shortly thereafter, the same year that she completed the *Primordia*. Katharina Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of Her Works* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998) 2.

2 Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 51-52.

3 Elisabeth Van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900-1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 17.

the authors' and subjects' social experience and the conventions into which these experiences could be molded in historically reconstructing women's participation in male monastic institutions. In the case of matron-founders, the widow's spiritual capacities rationalized a woman's essential material and political contributions to an institution's foundation history.

In both Hucbald and Hrotsvit's texts, widows were integral to institutional memory. Hucbald's construction of Rictrude focused on how the saint's widowhood facilitated her patronage and religiosity at her convent, Marchiennes. He built her sanctity around her chaste widowhood and the notion that her matronly continence fostered the virginity of her daughters, thereby distinguishing her as a worthy devotional figure within the larger project of revival of her family's cult. Hucbald engaged Rictrude's experiences in widowhood as a theme that structured her *vita*. Her widowhood represented a pivotal position between married life and sexual renunciation, thus reframing her personal history as larger metaphor for her life that explained her transition from the concerns of secular society to the institutions of a professed religious. A professional hagiographer with access to an extensive library, Hucbald often engaged boilerplate definitions of the widowed state—extracted from Paul's letter to the Corinthians and the letters and treatises which Augustine and Jerome wrote to their widowed patrons—to demonstrate Rictrude's candidacy as a saint, typifying the Carolingian tendency to fortify scanty historical information with didactic texts to fashion a 'useable past' and an edifying example from fragments of historical documentation.

Hrotsvit accomplished a similar feat in her narrative of her own convent's origins, but in a different and much more original fashion than Hucbald. Hucbald's creation of Rictrude as a holy widow followed a pattern that engaged many of the most enduring *topoi* of widowhood throughout the Middle Ages. Unlike Hucbald and many of her contemporaries such as Odilo of Cluny (whose *vita* of the Empress Adelheid was also much concerned with her wid-

owhood), Hrotsvit invoked the patristic discourse on widowhood more subtly to characterize the female founders of her convent at Gandersheim. Drawing on liturgy and the image of the New Testament widow Anna's prophetic gifts in the Jerusalem temple, Hrotsvit constructed a highly original depiction of the convent's founder and patron, Oda, to illuminate the saintly origins of Gandersheim. Hrotsvit not only recounted the convent's history through a lineage of female patrons, but also interpreted it through a feminized view of *memoria*. Whereas Hucbald dutifully marshaled the didactic potential of the received tradition on holy widowhood to demonstrate Rictrude's sanctity, Hrotsvit creatively constructed a history of the convent through Oda's lineage that not only demonstrated their family's contributions to the institution, but also how Oda's experience as a widow characterized the spirituality of the institution itself, even as her worldly lineage affirmed the convent's connections to its royal patrons

Hucbald, Hrotsvit, and the "Profession" of Widowhood in the Early Middle Ages

Hucbald of Saint-Amand's life of St. Rictrude and Hrotsvit of Gandersheim's poem on the origins of Gandersheim drew on some well-established traditions concerning holy widowhood in Carolingian hagiographical writing. Writers of the Carolingian Renaissance, eager to recapture the histories of ancient saints as well as commemorate present ones, routinely drew on theological ideas about widowhood garnered from the writings of prominent theologians of Late Antiquity (in particular Jerome and Augustine), and integrated these into the conventional *topoi* of sacred biography in increasingly detailed formulas. Around the turn of the fifth century, the Church Fathers Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine had identified key concepts about female chastity that became the basic boilerplate for defining the status of the chaste widow in the medieval West. The most important of these was the *vere vidua* of Paul's description in 1 Timothy 5: 3-16. She who was "really a widow" was the wife of just one husband, lived chastely, and carried out numerous good

works. Other important medieval associations with this image of the *vere vidua* were the New Testament widow, Anna, who lived in the temple for many years fasting and praying, and thus was granted the gift of prophecy and the ability to recognize Jesus as the Savior. The Old Testament widow Judith, who defeated the Assyrian general Holofernes through her chastity and sobriety in widowhood.⁴ Authors also characterized chaste widowhood in relationship to other forms of female chastity such as virginity and married continence, using the metaphor of the thirty-, sixty-, and one hundred-fold fruit (earned respectively by married, widowed, and virginal women) to denote the progressive heavenly rewards that maintaining chastity in each state conferred.⁵

The themes that defined the state of consecrated widowhood for a Christian audience had emerged in the letters and treatises to and for the widowed patrons of the bishops and theologians of the early Church, texts that became staples of medieval monastic libraries and were the most often-read materials after the Bible itself in the monastic curriculum. Early Church synods had also addressed the practice of widows who undertook vows of chastity and described such women as a serving a chaste “profession” (*viduitatis servandae*

4 For a fuller discussion of the ideal of chaste widowhood in the Middle Ages, see also Katherine Clark, *Pious Widowhood in the Middle Ages* (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2002).

5 The trope originated in a treatise attributed to Cyprian (ca. 200-258), *De centesima, sexagesima*, in which the author referred to martyrs, celibates, and those living in marital continence. Fidel Rädle, “Einige Bemerkungen zur Bewertung der Witwenschaft in der patristischen und frühmittelalterlichen Theologie. Mit ausgewählten Texten,” in *Veuves et Veuvage dans le haut Moyen Age* (Paris: Picard, 1993) 21. Jerome most famously applied this formula in his polemic *Adversus Jovinianum* specifically to counter Jovinian’s assertion that one’s sexual status did not matter to one’s salvation. Ambrose did not explicitly engage the framework of specific merits for the three states, but followed a similar set of relationships among marriage, widowhood, and virginity, illustrated by the Biblical figures of Susannah, Anna, and Mary; see *Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, tr. Rev. E. DeRomestin and Rev. H. T. F. Duckworth, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1955) 391. Augustine engaged in this trope reluctantly, perhaps in response to Jerome’s intense engagement with it; he preferred to assess the authenticity of one’s devotion to each state rather than compare their merits, and refers to it in his treatise on virginity rather than on widowhood. Medieval authors, however, associated this formula with Augustine’s writings to widows; Augustine, *De virginitate*, PL 40 Ch. 46, 423.

professionem).⁶ Consecrated widows pursued a recognized way of life, established by patristic discourse and performed in full view of secular society, that was characterized by both sexual renunciation and service to the Christian *ecclesia*.

Medieval monastic writers, whether or not they had much actual pastoral contact with widows, thus had ample material to draw on when describing the widowed state in hagiography. Writers of the Carolingian Renaissance were eager to create new didactic materials as well as study patristic ones; they preserved patristic images of the 'real' widow in new *florilegia*, and also gradually incorporated this framework for female chastity into new *vitae* describing the lives of matron saints. Julia H.M. Smith suggests, for example, that Hucbald knew Aldhelm's treatise on female chastity, *De Virginitate*,⁷ a compendium of patristic writings that would have lent Hucbald the language of the tripartite hierarchy of chaste merits. Carolingian hagiographers, moreover, suffered from a paucity of original sources on and models for female saints. Hagiographies for men often served as only partial and imperfect examples for women's *vitae*, as they expressed different activities and spiritual gifts than those considered appropriate for women. Hagiographers thus attempted "to formulate an understanding of female sanctity...informed by the beliefs, ideology and cultural resources of the Carolingian church," particularly those drawn from antiquity.⁸

The patristic staging of women's lives into categories measured by their physical chastity, with attendant moral attributes and behaviors appropriate to each state, also provided useful frameworks for Carolingian authors as they attempted to reconstruct the lives of

6 Council of Orange, 441 (cited in Gratian, C. 35 C. 27 q. 1), in Joseph Friesen, *Geschichte des canonischen Eherechts bis zum Verfall der Glossarlitterature* (Tübingen: Verlag und Druck von Franz Fues, 1888) 683. See also Bernhard Jussen, *Der Name der Witwe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) 185 n. 104.

7 Julia H.M. Smith, "A Hagiographer at Work: Hucbald and the Library of Saint-Amand," *Révue Bénédictine* Vol. 106, 1996) 166-167.

8 Julia H.M. Smith, "Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe," *Past And Present*, 146 (1995), 6, 14-18.

figures who had often lived in the distant past and for whom there were few extant sources after the chaos of the early medieval Dark Ages. Images of the widowed saint began to emerge in hagiography based on a number of ingredients: information that could be gleaned about the life of the saint, conventional expectations about the real experiences and duties of early medieval women in society, and the theoretical constructs provided by theologians of the Carolingian court such as Notker and Hincmar of Rheims.

In Merovingian *vitae*, widowhood functioned as a transitional moment that permitted a woman entry into a convent. Perhaps the best example of widowhood's function in the Merovingian hagiography is evident in the life of St. Radegund, whose position between marriage and the convent resembled contemporary examples of deaconesses and vowed widows. Radegund's escape from her husband through her consecration as a deaconess and her eventual widowhood functioned as both literal and spiritual thresholds that prepared her for claustral life. Radegund's *vitae* thus established an understanding of widowhood as a liminal time when a married saint began to separate herself from the world and progressed spiritually toward the convent. The continuation of Radegund's cult into the early seventh century made that characterization available to other hagiographers writing about widows.⁹

Images of widowhood in the Carolingian and Ottonian periods became more closely and explicitly connected to patristic discourse in the *vitae* of women saints. Many Carolingian hagiographers reconstructed the lives of women who lived in the distant past and turned to the language of widowhood described in patristic

⁹ Baudonivia's *vita*, written ca. 600, continued the promotion of Radegund's cult. Thereafter the extent of her veneration is poorly documented through the period of invasions until the early eleventh century, when a revival of her cult began. Her tomb, whose whereabouts had not been known to the twelfth-century monastics at Holy Cross, was "rediscovered," and her crypt renovated. Magdalena Carrasco associates a twelfth-century manuscript containing the two *vitae* and miniatures illuminating the *vita* of Fortunatus (the images that presumably accompanied Baudonivia's version have been removed from the manuscript and lost) with Holy Cross's post-invasion attempts to revive Radegund's cult. See Carrasco, "Sanctity and Pictorial Hagiography: Two Illustrated Lives of Saints from Romanesque France," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, eds. Renate Blumenthal-Kosinski and Tímea Szell (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 63-64.

sources and contemporary *florilegia* concerning widowed chastity to fill gaps in the narrative in the absence of verifiable biographical detail. Trends in Carolingian religiosity—the discouragement of extra-monastic consecration of widows, and new developments in female sanctity—encouraged a more prominent and thorough treatment of widowhood in Carolingian saints’ lives as modes of female pious expression outside the cloister’s walls diminished.¹⁰ Inherent in this development was not only a misogynistic pessimism about widows’ ability to maintain chastity outside the cloister, but also a royal and ecclesiastical awareness of widows’ vulnerable legal and social position. Both Hucbald’s *vita* and Hrotsvit’s plays and poems articulate the dangers of consecrated female chastity outside of the monastic environment.

Carolingian hagiographers thus addressed widows’ experiences such as marriage and motherhood, albeit filtered through the prescriptive and theological interpretations, in novel ways in the construction of female saints’ lives.¹¹ The anonymous life of St. Clothild (d. 544), for example, demonstrated the growing sophistication of widowhood’s hagiographical representation. The *vita* of this Merovingian saint was written in the late ninth or tenth century, ostensibly to preserve her memory among the clergy of Tours.¹² In

10 Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 105.

11 The theologizing of hagiographical texts occurred in the broader perspective of the Carolingian Renaissance, in which monks were encouraged to fill their *scriptoria* with copies of older works and also to generate new ones for educational purposes. The problem of reconciling Christian matrons’ marriage and motherhood with holy activities was not a new one in the Carolingian period, but it did receive novel attention. An increasing sophistication in the expression of widowed piety may have been less a sign of a particular interest in widows *per se* than of authors’ desire to display their knowledge of patristic texts and their proficiency in linking important passages from patristic scholarship to newer material in their own compositions.

12 St. Clothild’s cult was limited to this region, probably because she never established a convent that endured to foster her sanctified memory. McNamara suggests that the life can be dated to around the turn of the tenth century because of its substantial borrowings from a contemporaneous work, Hincmar of Reims’ *Life of Remigius*; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 38. The desire to “rebuild” the cult of the saint is evident in the author’s prefatory remarks that earthly edifices fall (and presumably need to be reconstructed), whereas the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem stand forever, *Vita Chrothildis*, MGH SRM 2 Ch. 1, 342; tr. McNamara, 40.

the opening lines of her *vita*, Clothild's hagiographer described the entrance to the heavenly Jerusalem as flanked by

A chorus of virgins, dearest and most pleasing to God, garnished with a fruit of a hundred-fold, gleams in God's presence in His heavenly palace like stars in the sky. The flock of virgins is followed by an assembly of holy widows and faithful wives who, though they cannot return fruit a hundred fold, harvest sixty and thirty fold and are numbered with all the saints justly rewarded with eternal felicity. The blessed and venerable Queen Chrothilda [Clothild] is of that collegium.¹³

Clothild's holy widowhood was thus an essential component of her sanctity; the language of theology that had existed for centuries in didactic treatises was now engaged explicitly to describe a certain type of female saint.

Pious widows therefore came to have a distinctive and nuanced representation within the ranks of nuns in the Carolingian period. The Carolingians, interested in preserving lineage history, also reversed the tendency in Merovingian to minimize the femininity and worldly experience of widowed saints, and, rather, incorporated these elements as part of the widowed saint's spiritual development and institutional importance. Both Carolingian and Ottonian rulers claimed authority as religious as well as political leaders, and employed monasteries and the episcopate in their administration as tools of state. Saints' lives promoted the cult of their saintly subjects

13 Chorus enim virgineus Deo gratus et carissimus centesimo fructu decoratus, sicut stelle in celo, ita ante Deum fulget in celesti palatio. Hoc agmen virgineum sequitur contio sanctarum viduarum et fidelium coniugarum, quae quamquam centesimum fructum non reportent, tamen sexagesimo fructo et tricesimo fructu gaudent et cum sanctis omnibus cumnumerantur et aeterna felicitate digne remuneretur. De quarum collegio extitit beata et venerabilis regina Chrothildis, *ibid*; tr. McNamara, 40-41. This is the earliest example I have found where the threefold harvest paradigm was explicitly stated in the *vita* of a widowed saint. The vision of the choirs of women bore remarkable resemblance to the text of a sequence composed by Notker the Stammerer (840-912) for a feast celebrating holy women. In Notker's lyric, the devil was confounded by the heavenly hosts at Christ's resurrection: And so now you see maidens vanquish you, hated one./and married women bearing sons who please God/And you groaned that widows remain perfectly loyal to their husbands./you who once persuaded a maiden to abjure the faith she owed to her Creator (Nunc ergo temet virgines vincere cernis, invade./Et maritatas parere filios deo placitos./Et viduarum maritis fidem nunc ingemis integram./Qui creatori fidem negare persuaseras virgini), Notker, *In natale sanctarum feminarum*, in *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, ed. and tr. Peter Godman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 320-321.

as part of the history of their religious houses, but also presented a favorable representation of a saint's dynastic ties. Hagiography in the eighth through the tenth centuries was thus extremely concerned with validating the authority and holiness of the dynastic line that provided patronage and protection to the convent or monastery, and this tendency persisted among Ottonian hagiographers as well. Hagiographers engaged questions of marriage and motherhood rather than dismissed them because they did not conform to an ideal of virginal sanctity; they allowed holy women's experiences during their widowhood to play a structural and symbolic role in the articulation of female sanctity. Indeed, the combination of the longevity of Ottonian widows and the imperial family's interest in commissioning historical texts in the tenth and eleventh centuries generated an unprecedented focus on female participation in the creation of family memory.¹⁴

Widowhood and Narrative in Hucbald's *Vita Rictrudis*

Just as the Carolingian version of Clothild's life reinterpreted her role as a widow and presented a new model of widowed sanctity, the life of St. Rictrude (614–688) by the monk Hucbald of Saint-Amand further developed the themes of widowhood in later Carolingian hagiography.¹⁵ A monk, priest, notary, professional hagiographer (he authored six *vitae* as commissions from neighboring monasteries), and teacher of august age at the time he was writing the *Vita Rictrudis*, Hucbald drew on a lifetime of literary study in the liberal arts of the Carolingian Renaissance to compose his narrative.¹⁶

Hucbald wrote Rictrude's life around 907, ostensibly for the clerics and nuns of Marchiennes, who had requested a *vita* to commemorate their sainted abbess, whose legend and even grave

14 Elizabeth Van Houts, *Memory and Gender* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 70.

15 Cf. Gregory of Tour's depiction of Clothild, which praised her chastity and virtue but made no reference to her widowed piety, *Historia Francorum* III.18.

16 Julia H. M. Smith, "The Hagiography of Hucbald of Saint-Amand" (*Studi Medievali* XXXVI 1994), 519.

site and relics had fallen into obscurity.¹⁷ Earlier written accounts of Rictrude's life had been lost, and Hucbald's *vita* was probably written with the intention of reviving the cults of the sainted founders—Rictrude's children as well as herself—and redressing accusations that the current nuns were lax in their duties.¹⁸ In constructing his *vita* of the ancient founders, Hucbald emphasized the holy heritage of the Marchiennes foundation, especially Rictrude's marriage and motherhood, the noble lineage of her husband, and her role as the matriarch of a family of saints.¹⁹

Hucbald's reconstruction of an older narrative afforded him the opportunity to insert theological reflections on Rictrude's widowhood, making it an integral part of her saintly life. Hucbald drew upon non-hagiographical sources to supplement often scanty biographical material about saints from a distant age, thereby generating texts that offered distinctly Carolingian perspectives on morality and pastoral care, creating what Julia H.M. Smith has termed a "biography without narrative...[which] suggests the limits of the adaptability of the hagiographical genre conceived from the fusion of classical and biblical literary traditions."²⁰ For lack or avoidance of a clear biographical narrative, Hucbald characterized Rictrude as an exceptional woman who, through her roles as a holy widow and spiritual mother, articulated the Carolingian Church's understanding of pious widowhood, and in particular its conventional viewpoint

17 McNamara, 195. Julia H. M. Smith notes that Hucbald's *vitae* generally indicated a monastic rather than lay audience; often concerning saints from the distant past, the lives were intended to be used to strengthen the saints' commemoration and provide liturgical materials for feast days and other ritual celebrations, "The Hagiography of Hucbald of Saint-Amand," 522. Karine Ugé suggests that the convent was a foundation for both men and women, *Creating the Monastic Past in Medieval Flanders* (York: York Medieval Press, 2005), 97.

18 Ineke van't Spijker, "Family Ties: Mothers and Virgins in the Ninth Century," in *Sanctity and Motherhood*, 176.

19 Her husband Adalbald was venerated as a saint after his death; in her widowhood, Rictrude's daughters went with her to the convent, where one became an abbess; her son also became an abbot, McNamara, 195; Hucbald of Saint-Amand, *Vita Rictrudis* AASS Vol. 16 (12 May), 1.1, 81.

20 Smith, "Hagiographer at Work," 166-167; *ibid.*, "Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe," *Past And Present*, 146 (1995), 24.

that pious widowhood belonged within the confines of monastic life. Rictrude first chose a vow of chastity in the world, then turned quickly to the cloister as an escape from worldly trials and the locus for her holy career. Although Hucbald attributed to Rictrude powerful qualities, such as the spirit of prophecy, these powers were always exercised within the limits of Church authority, either contained within the convent of Marchiennes or under the supervision of her confessor, the saintly bishop Amand.²¹

Like Clothild, Rictrude enjoyed a harmonious marriage that was consonant with the Christian view of married chastity, but was presented as a mere prelude to her widowed chastity: her husband Adalbald joined himself to her “not for concupiscence but for love of progeny.”²² Their union was a reminder to all Christians that married people should, like Adalbald and Rictrude, faithfully render the conjugal debt and keep the marriage bed honorable and unsullied, as the Apostle taught.²³ Indeed, Hucbald’s discussions of all three states of female chastity—in marriage, in widowhood, and in virginity—served as mini-sermons on the subject for the community’s women, suggesting a heterogenous community of oblates and novices who were virgins, widows, and perhaps laywomen residing or being educated at the convent, illuminating for each stage of life how Rictrude’s example represented the correct expression of female chastity.²⁴

Hucbald depicted Rictrude and Adalbald’s relationship as both decorous and loving, an appropriate union of two noble lineages in a consensual and companionate marriage that founded a dy-

21 Amand was clearly a touchstone for Hucbald’s portrayal of Rictrude’s sanctity, not only as the patron of Hucbald’s own house but also as a well-known and venerated saint to whom he could attach the more vague history of Rictrude and her children; see Karine Ugé, *Creating the Monastic Past*, 98ff.

22 Causa vero uxoris ducendae non fuit incontinentiae, sed carae sobolis habendae, *Vita Rictrudis* Ch. 5, 564; tr. McNamara, 203.

23 Et ne multis immoremur secundum Apostolus erat illis honorabile connubium et thoris immaculatus, *Vita Rictrudis*, 1.9, 83, tr. McNamara, 203.

24 Smith, “A Hagiographer at Work,” 156.

nasty of saintly figures.²⁵ The couple produced four children: their three daughters, Clotsendis, Eusebia, and Adalsendis entered the convent of Marchiennes with their mother, and Clotsendis later became abbess; their son, Maurontus, whose cult would later become significant to the monastery of Marchiennes, became a priest.²⁶ When Rictrude's husband was killed by wicked relatives, she miraculously experienced foreknowledge of this event before the news reached her.²⁷ She mourned him together with the "tearful tears" of her household, but understood immediately, thanks to the wise counsel of her bishop, Amand, that she must remain a widow according to the teachings of the Apostle.²⁸

Hucbald thus structured *vita's* narrative around several important points in Rictrude's personal history: the dutiful establishment of a pious lineage through marriage, the crisis point in which she might be forced to remarry, Rictrude's voluntary affirmation of her widowhood, and, ultimately, her transition to convent life as a nun. The *vita's* discourse on widowhood—from Rictrude's deprivation of her spouse to her affirmation of chastity in his absence—thus was instrumental in moving the saint through a series of stages toward full participation in the convent life of Marchiennes: "widowed by Adalbald but a lover of God and beloved by God," Rictrude accepted chastity as both a consolation and a call to follow Christ.²⁹

25 Smith notes that Hucbald's positive representation of marriage appears at first extraordinary in the context of the more negative treatment of marriage in Carolingian hagiography, but is actually quite typical of Carolingian views of consensual marriage expressed in other genres, such as the *De Institutione Laicali* of Jonas of Orléans; Smith, "The Hagiography of Hucbald of Saint-Amand," 539.

26 *Vita Rictrudis.*, 1.10, 83; tr. McNamara 203. In the twelfth century, Maurontus' activities—as portrayed in a comprehensive history of the convent, the *Polyptique* (ca. 1116-1121) and a new *vita* dedicated to Maurontus—eclipsed Rictrude's role in Marchiennes' history, creating a "male tutelary saint" as the convent's key figure as part of an extended argument in the reform era that the community's nuns were lax in their practice, and that the convent should be re-established as a male house; see Ugé, *Creating the Monastic Past in Medieval Flanders*, 123-125, 131-133.

27 *Vita Rictrudis.*, 1.11, 83; tr. McNamara 204.

28 *Luctu lugentium*, *ibid I*, 1.11, 83; tr. McNamara 205; 1.12, 83; tr. 205.

29 *Adalbaldi relicta, sed dei dilectrix, et a Deo dilecta*, *ibid.*, II.13, 83.

Rictrude's widowed chastity, however, was affirmed. Although fully committed to a vow of continence, Rictrude nevertheless experienced a series of trials that tested her chastity. Both secular perils and the temptation of the devil led Rictrude to change the locus of her widowed sanctity from the secular world to the claustral one: initially expressing her chastity through a vow and the assumption of the widow's weeds (*vestibus viduitatis*), Rictrude solved the problems of worldly and demonic temptation by withdrawing into a convent.

The first challenge to Rictrude's widowed chastity while living in the world arose when the Merovingian king, Dagobert, motivated by lust, greed, and "the envy of the devil," attempted to betroth himself to Rictrude and "strove by stealth to thwart the healthful advice of the Prelate and the pious vows of the holy matron."³⁰ Rictrude, however, devised a plan to thwart the king:

She invited the king and his optimates, and with the salty seasoning of the banquet, they all enjoyed the sweetness of her talk...[and] He supposed that she sought to please him and his company. Following the salubrius advice of her renowned counsellor, the Prelate Amand, she invoked help from the terrible name of God and, to the stupefaction of the king and all the others, she covered her head with a veil blessed by that holy bishop which she drew from her bosom. The king was stirred to wrath and left the banquet, abandoning the unwelcome food. And she, pinning her thoughts truly on the Lord, committed herself and hers totally to His will that they might be nourished by Him and always comforted in the solace of His mercy.³¹

30 Sed ecce, et salubri Praesulis consulto, et pio sanctae Matronae voto invida diaboli nititur obviare subreptio; *ibid.*, 1.13, 84; tr. McNamara 205. Dagobert's political interests would have been well served by the marriage; Rictrude's husband Adalbald had been an important noble, the brother of Erchinoald, who became the mayor of the palace under Clovis II. Rictrude came from Gascony, a Gallo-Roman region not under the political control of the Frankish kings, and which experienced incursions from Visigothic rulers. Dagobert was probably interested in marrying Rictrude in 636 because an alliance with Rictrude would have been advantageous for controlling Gasgoine nobility and for combating Basque raiding in the countryside; McNamara, *Sainted Women*, 195-196.

31 Cum ita regem suspectum reddidisset, veluti ejus voluntati parere vellet; in praedio suo, hoc est in villa a Baireio, opiparum et regiae condignum magnificentemente instruit convivium. Invitat cum optimatibus regem, et inter prandendum sale conditorum omnes laetificat suavitatem sermonum. Postquam exempta fames et amor compressus edendi, Tum multo clara exhilarans convivio Baccho, Surgit, et non trepide sed constanter, non tepide sed ferventer,

Hucbald's narration of the scene between Dagobert and Rictrude resembled the tale of another widow, the Old Testament figure Judith, who defeated her enemy, Holofernes, in the luxurious and sensual setting of a shared meal.³² Rictrude's triumph, however, was a spiritual battle of wits rather than a literal slaughter. She humiliated the king publicly and undermined his plan to pressure her into marriage. Like Judith, the widow Rictrude was armed with chastity and sobriety. She seduced the 'enemy' into believing that his was an easy victory but did not actually compromise her virtue; her chastity served as the weapon that protected her and allowed her to liberate her people.³³ Whereas Judith bore a sword, Rictrude's weapon was

non segniter sed sagaciter, non muliebriter sed viriliter, quod conceperat mente, perficit opere. Primoque sciscitatur a rege, si concederat sibi in domo sua quod vellet agere, libera coram eo uti potestate. Ille autem annuit propere, reputans quod sumpto poculo, ut moris est pluribus in cogendo bibere; se vel convivias suos deberet aetificare. At illa, secundum salubre sui consiliatoris Amandi incliti Praesulis consilium ex suo sino prolatum, invocato terribilis Dei nomine et auxilio, capiti superponit, ipso rege et cunctis stupendibus, jam benedictum ab eodem pontifice velum. Illa vero jactans cogitatum suum in Domino, totam se suosque ejus commisit a rbitrio, ut ab eo enutrientur et solatiarentur misericordii semper solatio; *Vita Rictrudis*, 1.14, 84; tr. McNamara 206; cf. Vulgate, Judith 12.

32 Karine Ugé has suggested that Hucbald essentially lifted this scene from the seventh-century life of the virginal saint Gertrude of Nivelles, one of a circle of women, who, like Rictrude, were part of the monasticizing movement in northern Flanders that closely tied its institutions to Carolingian *Klosterpolitik*; see Ugé, *Creating the Monastic Past in Medieval Flanders*, 126 and McNamara, 197. It is likely that Hucbald had seen this *vita*; he seems to have delved liberally into a variety of manuscripts, both pedagogical (for example Isidore's *Etymologies*) and hagiographical for his sources. However, apart from the fact that in both *vitae* Dagobert attempts to take a bride in a social setting, the two incidents bear little narrative or linguistic resemblance to each other, and the essential issue of the veil in Rictrude's narrative is Hucbald's innovation, as it does not occur at all in Gertrude's life (Cf. McNamara's translation of the *Life of Gertrude*, 223, and the Latin *vita*, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH.SRM 2:447-474). Hucbald was familiar with the Carolingian history, *Gesta Dagoberti* (perhaps borrowed from the libraries of Saint-Bertin or Saint-Denis) and the *Vita Amandi* that also contained details about Dagobert's courtship, which may account for the king's prominent role in Rictrude's story (in addition to the fact that Dagobert was generally a favored villain in many Carolingian narratives); Smith, "Hagiographer at Work," 164 and "The Hagiography of Hucbald of Saint-Amand," 537.

33 Mark Griffith, *Judith* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997) 67. Griffith refers to a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem on the feats of Judith, which he considers "an amalgam of Christian saint's life and vernacular heroic form, exemplary in purpose," 81. While there is no textual evidence explicitly connecting Hucbald's *Vita* and the Anglo-Saxon text, both probably drew on Jerome's introduction to the Book of Judith in the Vulgate, which referred to Judith as an example of chastity for both sexes. A later text that exploited Judith's heroic example for both spiritual and political ends was Aelfric's prose adaptation of the Judith story, written ca. 1000. Aelfric wrote the text for a female monastic audience as a lesson in female chastity, but also sent a copy of it to a secular nobleman, Sigeward, as a model for the idealized Christian warrior, instructive not only for Judith's positive example but Holofernes' negative one (for a full discussion of this interpretation see Stacy

the veil of widowhood. The widow's veil and clothing represented a longstanding symbol of the widow's consecration to chastity in canon law and the Gelasian and Gallican Sacramentaries that constituted a visible sign of her vow of continence and the penalties incurred by suitors who violated it.³⁴ Christian exegetes treated the Judith story's violent aspects gingerly, and often emphasized Judith as a mere instrument of God's divine will to counterbalance the elements of the story that elevated Judith as an example of unchecked female power.³⁵ In Rictrude's defeat of Dagobert, the potential of female sexuality lured the enemy into danger, but (as medieval exegetes also noted with respect to Judith), the heroine's piety and deliberately sober clothing served as a reminder and protection of her chaste status.

Rictrude's self-veiling as a declaration of her widowed profession was done in an unorthodox setting, but was consistent with canon law and liturgical practice. The veiling of a widow required clerical supervision; according to canon law, bishops performed the veiling of virgins, whereas the widow's consecration was overseen by a priest, and the widow placed the veil on her own head rather than receiving it from the celebrant.³⁶ In this case, Rictrude acted

S. Klein, "Aefric's Sources and His Gendered Audiences," in *Essays in Medieval Studies* 13, Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association, eds. Thomas Bestul and Thomas N. Hall, 1996, 111-119). Judith seems to be of particular topological interest to tenth and early eleventh-century insular authors; the same dynamic may be functioning here in Hucbald's use of the Judith story: Judith provided an ideal topical model for Rictrude's chaste widowhood, whereas Dagobert was unflatteringly likened to Holofernes, an immoderate warrior and ruler.

34 Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 103-105, 259 n. 45; see also the *Gelasian Sacramentary*, Ordo 55, ed. H. A. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1894) 271 and the *Sacramentarium Gallicanum*, PL 72, 570.

35 See Margarita Stocker, *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998) 4.

36 Smith suggests that Hucbald was familiar with Isidore's *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis* and the *Liber Ecclesialis* of Amalarius of Metz, both of which were extant in the Saint-Amand library, and might have lent insight into the ecclesiastical boundaries of this act; see Smith, "A Hagiographer at Work," 161. Although bishops were not supposed to veil widows, the frequent iteration of this point in canon law and liturgy suggests that in fact they often did preside over such ceremonies; in the later Middle Ages William Durandus commented that he had witnessed a bishop in Ostia blessing two widows; see *Guillelmi Duranti Rationale Divinorum Officiorum I-IV*, ed. A. Davril and T.M. Thibodeau. CCCM 140, II.45-46, 243.

with Bishop Amand's approval; he had counseled Rictrude's actions in advance and consecrated the veil. The dramatic setting of Rictrude's veiling, however, confirmed clerical superiority over the secular forces opposing her chastity and established a strong relationship between Rictrude and Amand, whose guidance and patronage as a well-known bishop saint (and namesake of Hucbald's own institution) supported the case for Rictrude's own sanctity.³⁷ In this example and others throughout the *vita*, Rictrude's widowed chastity, though lacking the perfection of virginity that normally marked a saint, was useful; it allowed Hucbald to distinguish Rictrude as a pious matron whose victory over King Dagobert proved the superiority of the monastic preference for chastity over the designs of worldly men.

Following the confrontation at the banquet, Rictrude distributed her remaining wealth and "put on the garments of widowhood" so that "what she had borne three-fold in the conjugal life" might be doubled, "for in widowhood her seed yielded fruit six-fold."³⁸ Rictrude's veil and dress marked her widow's mourning as a deeper sort of spiritual bereavement, "veiled with sorrow and penitent

37 As Karine Ugé has shown, one of Hucbald's strategies throughout the *Vita Rictrudis* was to prove the entire family's claims to sanctity through ties with already well-established saints; see *Creating the Monastic Past in Medieval Flanders*, 123 ff.

38 *Induitur viduitas vestibus, Vita Rictrudis*, 1.15, 84; tr. McNamara 207; *Ac primum facultatibus et possessionibus sibi relictis, ordinatione prudenti distributis, et spinosis hujus seculi curis a terra cordis sui penitus extirpatis; quae antea in conjugali vita ferebat trigesimum, postmodum, duplicato germine, fructum coepit in viduitate ferre sexagesimum; ibid.*, 1.15, 84; tr. 207. Hucbald had some knowledge of Anglo-Saxon literature and may have consulted a copy of Aldhelm's treatise *De Virginitate* in Saint-Amand's library (Smith, "Hagiographer at Work, 166-168). In addition to composing hagiographies, Hucbald also was a music theorist and wrote treatises on harmonics and psalmody; he might have become familiar with the "orders" of women through the lyrics of Notker on this subject. Hrabanus Maurus, who wrote a commentary on the book of Judith, was also interested in Judith's change of clothing and the contrast between the dress she adopted for her seduction of Holofernes and her clothing in private life as a widow; his terms contrasted the former "vestimentum laetitiae" with her latter "vestimentum viduitatis," *Expositio in librum Judith X, PL* 109, 584. Hucbald might have used patristic sources in the original, such as Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* and Augustine's *De Sancte Virginitate*, but Smith notes that Hucbald seems to have preferred to cite Carolingian *florilegia* and exegesis, rather than works of the Church fathers in the original; Smith, "Hagiographer at Work," 168, 170.

mourning.”³⁹ The dark garments were an outward expression of her interior transformation from pleasing a husband to pleasing Christ:

She changed the habit of her mind as she put a new habit on her body. She threw off the elaborate clothes which adorned her in marriage when she thought of worldly things, how she might please her husband. But one who has stripped away all the burdens of the world, though she appears as a widow divided from a husband, is not divided in mind but is always solicitous for the things of the Lord only, how she might please God. She put on garments of widowhood, which expressed her contempt of this world through her appearance.⁴⁰

Hucbald’s description of the process was suggestive of the liturgy for the consecration of widows in the later tenth-century compilation of the Romano-German Pontifical, in which the celebrant blessed the widow’s clothing and emphasized the change in the woman’s identity and her commitment to continence through the donning of the widow’s clothes:

Lord, open your eyes of majesty for the blessing of this garment of widowhood, so that she who pleased her husband and the world by the wearing of ornate garments might be worthy to gain your grace in sacred benediction...Lord God eternal, giver of celestial virtues, we humble petitioners pour out our prayers to you, that you might find this your servant worthy to consecrate, whom you have caused to be converted from her earlier way of life, putting off the old man and putting on the new, having been converted, just as Anna the prophetess abandoned [her old life] for a long time in fasting and prayer, clothed in the garments of widowhood to your glory in the temple, so too may this your daughter devote herself to you alone, God, in your church, with devoted mind.⁴¹

39 Ut principale animae id est mens, velanda signetur moeroris et poenitentiae luctu; *Vita Rictrudis*, II.15, 84; tr. McNamara, 207. Dyan Elliott suggested the useful term “spiritual bereavement” to interpret the widowed state.

40 Sicut mutaverit habitum mentis, sic mutat et corporis. Pomposas projicit vestes, quibus ornabatur nupta, cogitans aliquando ea quae sunt mundi, quomodo placeret viro: et una cum eis exiit omni seculi hujus impedimento, ut quamvis videretur vidua, id est, divisa a viro, jam non esset divisa animo; sed sollicita semper quae Domini sunt solummodo, quomodo placeret Deo. Induitur viduitas vestibus, quae ipsa sui specie monstrarent contemptum mundi istius, *Vita Rictrudis*, II.15, 84; tr. McNamara 207. Hucbald’s text underscores the liturgical language with a paraphrase Paul’s exhortation that the widow might concentrate on pleasing God rather than a husband, 1 Cor. 7:34.

41 Aperi quaesumus Domine oculos maiestatis tuae ad benedicendam hanc viduitatis vestem, ut quae in vestibus ordinatis [sic] viri sui usibus aut seculo placuit, in sacris vero benedictionis tuae gratiam consequi mereatur...Domine Deus uirtutum celestium eterne donator tibi supplices effundimus preces, ut hanc famulam tuam consecrare digneris, quam

Having abandoned the “elaborate clothes” of marriage for the “garments of widowhood,” Rictrude also adopted the monastic practices of strenuous vigils, constant prayers, fasting, and the wearing of a hair shirt. As a widow living in the world, Hucbald noted, she turned consciously from the worldly activities of Martha to the contemplative life and spiritual bereavement of Mary.⁴² Unfortunately, Rictrude’s temptations did not end with Dagobert. Despite Rictrude’s perfect conduct in widowhood, ultimately, she could not completely fulfill the duties of her state until she entered a convent. A literary contemporary of Hucbald’s, Haimo of Auxerre, wrote that “widows and continents earn the sixty-fold fruits, for they sustain the tribulation of having known the pleasures of the flesh.”⁴³ Haimo’s rather backhanded praise suggests that the source of the widow’s reward was also the source of her most pernicious challenge. In Rictrude’s case, demonic pressures plagued her as long as she remained in the world. Although she fulfilled all of the requirements of widowed piety, none of these measures was powerful enough to counteract the ill effects of the libidinous “demonic suggestions” that persistently troubled her.⁴⁴ (Hucbald declined to mention what, precisely, the demons suggested, perhaps wishing to discourage the imagination of his readers).

de pristina conuersatione ad nouitatem uite expolians veterem hominem, et induens novum conuerti fecisti, ut sicut Anna prophetissa multis temporibus vestibus uiduitatis induta in templo gloriae tuae ieiuniis et orationibus fideliter deseruiuit, sic et haec filia tua tibi soli Deo in ecclesia tua deuota mente deseruiat; Cyrille Vogel, ed. *Romano-German Pontifical* Vol. I, 25, 60-1.

42 *Vita Rictrudis* II.15, 84; tr. McNamara 207. For the benediction in the Germano-Roman Pontifical, see *PL* 138, *Benedictiones, consecrationes, et ordinationes variae* from *Vind. Theol.* 359, 1099.

43 Sexagesimum vero fructum viduae et continentiae proferunt, dum voluptatem carnis experite longiorem tribulationem sustinent, Haimo of Auxerre, *Homiliae de tempore*, Hom. 22.170, cited in Katrine Heene, *The Legacy of Paradise: Marriage Motherhood and Woman in Carolingian Edifying Literature* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997) 126. Hucbald had ties to the Auxerre school and may have been directly familiar with Haimo’s work. He received his education at the abbey of St. Germaine d’Auxerre and worked with Remigius of Auxerre to establish the Rheims school for liturgical song.

44 Et ut quondam expertas corporis voluptates, et molestas evinceret daemonum suggestiones, cum nimiis vigiliis et orationibus continuis, crebra ducens jejunia, esophorio amicitur cilicino; cuius assiduis punctionibus edomaret libidinis punctiones..., *Vita Rictrudis*, I.16, 84; tr. McNamara 207.

Quidditas 41

Rictrude's (and Hucbald's) solution was to turn to the monastic life and enter the convent at Marchiennes.⁴⁵ Hucbald urgently exhorted his female audience to follow Rictrude's example:

Oh, hear these most truthful things, I pray! Let your ears receive them all--you who have ears to hear, to whom it has been given to rise to chastity, the privilege of angels, and thus to acquire the society of the most famous companion to sound out the sweet melody of the new song. Hurry! Hasten! Run! Remember Lot's wife and never seek to look back.⁴⁶

Hucbald represented Rictrude's initial widowhood as a pivotal position between her life in the world and life in the convent and an occasion to discuss the challenges vowesses faced in secular life. Rictrude suffered inner torments and anxieties concerning her chastity in the world. Hucbald, himself a product of the monastic ideal, described convent life as the most perfect expression Rictrude's sanctity. There, the spiritual trials of her widowhood had a salutary rather than destructive effect. He likened the convent to a "gymnasium" where

she would run, competing in the arena of this present life, struggling in contention against the Devil. She was anointed with the oil of celestial grace lest the wicked adversary get a hold to restrain her.⁴⁷

Implicit throughout Hucbald's text was the assumption that the institution of consecrated widowhood in the world would not make one sufficiently agile to elude the devil's grasp, and was indeed so prone to failure that even the most exemplary woman could

45 According to McNamara, Rictrude built a convent there on allodial lands of Adalbald's, McNamara, *Sainted Women*, 196.

46 Haec cum verissime ita sint, audite, obsecro, et auribus percipite omnes qui habetis audiendi aures, quibus adhuc fas est ad angelicae privilegia castitatis assurgere, et tam praeclari contubernii societatem aquirere, atque cum eis tam dulcem novi cantici melodiam personare. Properate, currite, festinate, ac memores uxoris Loth, retro respicere nolite, *Vita Rictrudis*, 1.18, 85; tr. McNamara, 208-209.

47 Gymnasium monasteriale; ubi stadium vitae praesentis, agonizando percurreret, et contra diabolum luctando decertaret, palaesticorum more sic nuda, ne in aliquo ab adversario maligno teneri posset, et oleo peruncta gratiae coelestis ingreditur, *ibid.*, 1.19, 85; tr. McNamara, 209.

not persevere successfully. Hucbald deliberately elicited this conclusion through Rictrude's initial intention to stay in the world, and her subsequent abandonment of that plan in favor of a convent, a spiritual *gymnasium* that was better suited to religious exercise.

Although the distinctions of worldly rank and sexual experience should have dissolved with the entrance to the convent, Hucbald transformed Rictrude's biography into hagiography by emphasizing her role as a chaste widow within the convent, not only distinguishing the widow as different from virginal entrants, but also as a mentor and guide to them. As Karin Ugé has noted, Hucbald emplotted the life of Rictrude within the foundation history of Marchiennes; her life before and after her entry into the convent, where she served as abbess, were thus major structural elements in recalling the foundation's history.⁴⁸ As a former wife, Rictrude was the mother of earthly children; as a chaste widow, Rictrude became the chaste mother of a spiritual dynasty. Upon entering Marchiennes, Rictrude espoused her three daughters to monastic life:

After a continent profession of widowhood to God, and after the assumption of the holy clothing of a nun's habit, she showed herself holy as a living sacrifice. She was not content to please God in herself alone, for she offered the first fruits of earth, that is her womb, sacred and excellent, to the holy undivided Trinity: that is, her three aforementioned daughters, white as doves, as most gracious offerings that with immaculate body and heart, preserving perpetual virginity they might follow the Lamb... therefore, Rictrude, the faithful woman of God who had devoted herself to him in holy continence, espoused her three daughters at one time, while they were still young, to Christ as husband... [and] taught her daughters to live by her example.⁴⁹

48 Karin Ugé, "The Legend of Rictrude: Formations and Transformations," *Anglo-Norman Studies: proceedings of the Battle Conference* (23, 2003) 286. It is not explicit in Hucbald's vita that Rictrude became abbess, but she is generally thought to have acted in this capacity (although some twelfth-century sources position her rather as a nun than as an abbess); see also Ugé, *Creating the Monastic Past in Medieval Flanders*, 134.

49 Post professam Deo viduitatis continentiam, et post sumptum sanctum sanctimonialis habitus indumentum; seipsam tantummodo exhibere oblationem vivam, sanctam, Deoque placentem non contenta; etiam terrae, hoc est ventris sui, sacras ac praecipuas sanctae et individuae Trinitati offert primitias, praefatas videlicet tres filias, candidas veluti columbas, gratissimas illi scilicet hostias; ut corde et corpora immacolatae, et perpetuam virginitatem servants, Agnum... Rictrudis igitur Dei fidelis femina, quae se totam illi in sacra devoverat

All three daughters took nuns' vows, and Rictrude's middle daughter, Eusebia, was venerated as a saint. Hucbald expressed a spiritual as well as physical dimension to Rictrude's motherhood, both toward her children and toward the nuns in her convent after she became abbess. The natural pairing of widows and virgins that paralleled the mother-daughter relationship was a commonplace in Jerome's well-known letters and treatises to women, and also echoed elsewhere in Carolingian theology.⁵⁰ Just as Jerome identified a spiritual as well as a physical nurturing by Paula of her virgin daughters, so too did Hucbald emphasize the mentoring role that bound Rictrude to her daughters and nuns. At Marchiennes, Rictrude gained the companionship not only of her children but also of the nuns who were the "fruits" of her chaste widowhood.

Thus from the ashes of spiritual bereavement arose both physical and spiritual children. Rictrude's own flesh and blood children were conceived in a chaste and honorable marriage bed. Her spiritual protégés—the monastic virgins whom the widowed protected and taught—were the fruits of her widowhood that preceded her heavenly reward. Hucbald praised Rictrude's entry into the monastic life, her spiritual leadership, and the establishment of a pious legacy through her children. In the *Vita Rictrudis*, the family's pious lineage adorned the history of the convent of Marchiennes, and the cloister in turn was the perfect setting for the jewel of Rictrude's widowed chastity.

“Look Who They Are Calling Saints:” The Profession of Widowhood as Holy Corrective

Of all the late Carolingian hagiographies that engaged the *topoi* of consecrated widowhood to demonstrate the transformation of a

continentia; tres quoque filias uni despondit viro Christo, in aetate adhuc tenera...suoque exemplo filias vivere edocet; *Vita Rictrudis*, II.18-19, 84-5. In this case I have used my own translation rather than McNamara's more elegant one, as McNamara's translation does not emphasize the pivotal nature of this description in the narrative; the Latin offers a series of constructions with the word "post" that suggests the offering of her daughters as a consequence of Rictrude's own conversion; cf. tr. McNamara, 208-210.

50 See Jerome's *Ad Eustochium (Epitaphium sanctae Paulae)*, Ep. 108, CSEL v. 1. 55, Ch. 20.

worldly matron into a monastic saint, Hucbald's identification with the discourse on widowhood was the most extensive, and this was no accident. Widowhood was an immensely useful construct for Hucbald not least because both the house of Marchiennes and Rictrude's family as its founders were in reality only mediocre candidates for cult status. Throughout its history, Marchiennes appears to have languished in the shadow of its richer and more powerful neighbor, Saint-Amand, and had failed to nurture Rictrude's cult.⁵¹ Hucbald's prologue expressed deep concerns about the dearth of available sources. Perhaps worse from a hagiographical standpoint was that Rictrude's family, despite the saintly pedigree that Hucbald ascribed to it, was riddled with conflict and violence. The mother and children's entry into the convent may in fact have been prompted by the infighting surrounding Adalbald's murder, and two of Rictrude's daughters, Adalsendis and Eusebia, died prematurely in the convent.⁵²

While the girls' deaths enhanced Rictrude's position of widowhood's "spiritual bereavement," these episodes also revealed Hucbald's narrative as a fabric that was easily unraveled by local memory, or even a reader's close scrutiny. Eusebia's demise was particularly problematic, as she died as the result of a severe beating, a correction for monastic disobedience which Rictrude herself ordered. The reason for the altercation was the daughter Eusebia's preference for residence in a neighboring convent, Hamage, where her great-grandmother Gertrude had appointed Eusebia abbess at the age of twelve. According to Hucbald, Rictrude feared Eusebia had too much freedom at Hamage and desired her daughter's companionship at Marchiennes. Eusebia may indeed have preferred Hamage, and the status and freedom of being its abbess, to living under her mother's authority in Marchiennes. She may also

51 Ugé, *Creating the Monastic Past in Medieval Flanders*, 98.

52 Although Hucbald characteristically 'spins' this event in support of claiming sanctity for Rictrude's entire lineage, Patrick Geary suggests that the entry of the entire family at once into the convent might have been politically motivated by the ascension of Ebroin (who was perhaps involved in Adalbald's murder) as Mayor of the Palace; Geary, *Aristocracy in Provence*, cited in McNamara, 209 n. 58.

have enjoyed a closer relationship with her great-grandmother than with her mother. In any event, Eusebia repeatedly stole away from Marchiennes to return to Hamage to complete its vigils and offices, resulting in Rictrude's order that her son, Maurontus, issue a beating as punishment for the girl's disobedience.⁵³ Hucbald hastened to explain that Rictrude only sought to avoid spoiling her child by sparing the rod. However, in writing the *vita*, Hucbald was forced to sanitize this most unpleasant episode in which the "holy mother" Rictrude ordered her daughter Eusebia to be beaten by her own brother. So over-zealous was Maurontus in his duties that he permanently damaged Eusebia's health, and the story had clearly persisted in local memory such that Hucbald had to confront it in the *vita*:

We are pleased to sharpen our pen a little in order to confound those who would slander the righteous with forked tongues and misplaced pride. Such folk would lay their tongues to heaven itself and still not fear to malign people who are free of earthly burdens and, as we believe, reigning with God in heaven. So in their cunning they have observed: 'Look who they are calling saints: a mother who attacked her innocent daughter for wanting to serve God; a daughter who deserted her own mother and fled her as an enemy; a son who, with his mother's consent, branded his sister like a fugitive taken away in secret, or like a condemned thief whipped her so viciously that she nearly died...What will be given—what assigned—to the accursed tongue? Only the sharp point of the arrow, that is, the lance of God Almighty's word from the quiver of the Holy Scripture.'⁵⁴

53 *Vita Rictrudis*, III.25-27. Gertrude had raised her great-granddaughter Eusebia at Hamage; when Rictrude ordered Eusebia back to Marchiennes, using the King's authority to overcome Eusebia's reluctance, Eusebia returned Marchiennes with Gertrude's relics. An anonymous *vita* of Eusebia composed about one hundred years after Rictrude's represented the beating episode as evidence of Eusebia's sanctity through suffering, and was clearly more sympathetic to her side of the story. This hagiographer extended Eusebia's lifetime into middle age and claimed that she ruled Hamage for twenty-three years as abbess; Ugé, *Monastic Past*, 102-103.

54 Libet paulisper exacuendo stylum protelare, quo illorum perfodiantur linguae, qui loquuntur adversus justos iniquitatem in superbia et in abusione; qui ponunt in coelum os suum, dum eis detrahare non verentur, quijam exempti de terrenis, cum Deo in coelestibus regnare creduntur. Aiunt enim strophas commentantes hujusmodi: En, quales isti dicuntur esse Sancti, Mater innoxiam insequitur filiam, Deo militare volentem: Filia sicut hostem, sic propriam execrator et refugit matrem: Filius matre consentanea, sororem refugam, asportato clam signo proditam, dirissimis velut furti ream afficit verberibus pene usque ad mortem...Quid dabitur, aut quid apponetur ad linguam dolosam, nisi sagittae potentis acutae, id est verborum Dei omnipotentis jacula, ex sanctarum prolata Scripturarum phareta?

Hucbald's defense of Rictrude's family began with a *catena* of citations on the theme of "judge not, lest ye be judged," followed by a chapter in which Hucbald inoculated the reader against what must have been quite plausible skepticism about this family's sanctity among contemporaries. He reframed the violent events through the mother-daughter relationship established earlier in the *vita*. His warnings against gossip and judgment notwithstanding, Hucbald had few options in this instance but to characterize Rictrude's beating of her daughter—implausibly—as simply dutiful parenting.⁵⁵ On the whole, however, Hucbald's fashioning of Rictrude's image as a saintly widow who mentored her virginal daughters lent him ample material to reinterpret the foundation's history in local memory, and to explore the positive sides of Rictrude's sanctity within an otherwise quite problematic biography. In Hucbald's hands as a professional historian and historiographer, the dignity and sacrality of chaste widowhood distinguished Rictrude as a successful celibate, a mother of virgins, and a worthy candidate for commemoration by the house whose origins Hucbald closely associated with the her family.

Despite Hucbald's deftness with this difficult hagiographical mission, it is not clear that the *vita* circulated widely or in the long run fully accomplished the task of reviving her cult at Marchiennes. Within the next century, Hucbald's *vita* was rewritten as a verse life, probably by the monk John of Marchiennes, without significant change to the original content. Thereafter a series of revisionist texts, including lives of Eusebia, Maurontus (who seems to have been essentially a fabrication of Hucbald's and who emerges as an important male patron saint of the foundation in the twelfth century) and a comprehensive history, the *Polyptique*, articulated changing needs in the community's self-identification and sense of its own

Vita Rictrudis III.28, 87; tr. McNamara, 215-216.

55 See McNamara, 198-199 and Uggé's analysis of the evolution of Rictrude's legend as part of the creation of a "useable past" for Marchiennes in *Creating the Monastic Past*, 118 ff. On the struggles between Rictrude and Eusebia, see Uggé, 101-102 and 128ff; cf. also Ineke van't Spyker's analysis of Rictrude's motherhood in her essay, "Family Ties: Mothers and Virgins in the Ninth Century" in *Sanctity and Motherhood*, 165-191.

history. The later texts criticized the foundation's history as a female house; they cited lax caretaking on the part of the nuns, and were profoundly concerned with defending the convent's properties against secular interference. The later texts also privileged Maurontus as the leading figure in the convent's foundation history.⁵⁶ Karine Ugé has argued that contemporary pressures to reform the institution as a male house drove the need to rewrite its history under the patronage and protection of a "male tutelary saint," in part to stem criticism of the nuns and encourage the reform of the convent which had begun in 1024.⁵⁷

In Hucbald's day, however, Rictrude was clearly still the convent's key figure, and his construction of Rictrude's life as the framework for the convent's history showed that hagiographers had developed a coherent, inter-textual discourse on holy widowhood—gleaned largely from Carolingian Renaissance scholars' reflections on the topic—that proved useful for promoting the cults of matron saints. Widowed saints functioned as a matronly counterpart to the virgin saint in their own right as opposed to merely articulating widows as either *viragos* or incomplete virgins. Hucbald followed a typical Carolingian pattern of expanding on patristic traditions to fill in scanty historical information and fashion a useable past and edifying example from fragments of documentation; Scripture, patristic letters, and Carolingian treatises on widowhood thus offered rich

56 Ugé provides a fascinating analysis of the intricate fabrications that developed from the tenth to the twelfth centuries concerning whether Marchiennes was indeed founded on Rictrude's lands. She argues that both Marchiennes and Hamage were probably founded on lands donated by Adalbald's family. In Hucbald's *vita*, the connection is vague; in later histories of Marchiennes, monastic authors explicitly identified Rictrude (based on tradition or even just wishful thinking) as the convent's foundress, often contrary to fact and evidence, *Creating the Monastic Past*, 97,131.

57 *Ibid.*, 131. The tendency to rewrite Marchiennes' history that began around the turn of the millennium illustrates a pattern of the erasure of feminine origins in favor of a male figure as founder of the lineage that Patrick Geary observed in family histories in the central Middle Ages: "Thus reconstruction of family histories meant coming to terms, under differing needs and circumstances, with the relative importance of such marriages and of the women who put not only their dowries and their bodies but their personalities and kinsmen to work on behalf of their husbands and their children. Over time, the ideological imperative of illustrious male descent could best be fostered if memory of the women who made their rise possible was removed from center stage in favor of the audacious acts of men," Geary, *Women at the Beginning: Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2006) 43-44.

textual possibilities to illustrate piety in both secular life and in the convent. The hagiographical discourse could not erase an ecclesiastical preference for perfect, intact virginity over widowed celibacy, but Rictrude's widowhood created a pivotal position between married life and sexual renunciation, a state that allowed her to express what must have been a fairly common experience for many matrons: the transition from the business and structures of secular society to the institutions of professed religious. As examples of chaste asceticism, as advisors and protectors of virgins, and as dynastic mothers who raised pious children, holy widows facilitated the inclusion of married women and matrons in the medieval cult of saints.

**Hrotsvit's Historical Writing:
Widowhood and The *Primordia Coenobii Gandershemensis***

Just as Hucbald found Rictrude's widowhood essential to his recreation of Marchiennes' institutional memory, so too did Hrotsvit use the widowhood to characterize the sanctity of her convent's patron, Oda. Hrotsvit's use of the commonplaces of widowhood were more complex, however: not only did she use images of the *vere vidua* to characterize an individual figure, but she also engaged them more thematically to show how the true widow's spiritual bereavement created and inspired the piety of the women important to her foundation's history. Hrotsvit created a history of her monastic world in which women's contributions—initiating foundations, nurturing and sustaining the monastic community, and demonstrating spiritual gifts such as prophecy and visions—were not merely proof of a saintly lineage, but rather essential to Gandersheim's history, its embodiment of the monastic ideal, and its intercession on behalf of the secular rulers who supported the convent.

Hrotsvit is best known today as the author of eight verse legends and six plays; her surviving theatrical works represent the earliest recorded Germanic dramas. She was the only known female poet to produce works in those genres in the Central Middle Ages and a remarkable exemplar of the classicizing scholarship of the Ot-

tonian Renaissance. While the particulars of the circulation of her works remain disputed, her works were most likely well known and even performed within the literary milieu of the Ottonian court.⁵⁸

The historical Hrotsvit however, is elusive. Almost everything we know about her derives from information she provided herself in the highly topological prefaces to her dramas, verse legends, and histories. External evidence suggests a noble background, since her admission to Gandersheim as a canoness would have depended on high social rank, but outside of our general knowledge about the privileged status of the Gandersheim canonesses and the literary world of the Ottonians, we know little about Hrotsvit herself.

Both by her own account and by the consensus of contemporary scholars, Hrotsvit was more comfortable and had a greater fund of literary exemplars in her legends and dramas than her historical works, although similar themes (such as idealized characters, a moralizing tone, and a theatrical narrative quality) pervade her entire corpus of writings. Of all of Hrotsvit's texts, the *Gesta* and *Primordia* were the least reliant on specific extant models.⁵⁹ The *Primordia*

58 Peter Dronke argues that Hrotsvit's distinctive rhymed prose (leonine, or rhymed hexameter), offers "notable parallels" to that of Rather of Verona, a luminary of the Ottonian court, and further posits that she perhaps spent time there as well as being educated in the convent. He also suggests that Hrotsvit's imitation of Rather was quite deliberate, and that through the 960's Hrotsvit's connections with the Ottonian court were "far-reaching." Hrotsvit also had a strong connection with Bruno of Cologne; Theitmar of Merseberg comments in his *Chronicon* that Bruno had a great love of comedies and tragedies, both the reading of them and their performance "a personis variis;" Dronke argues that Hrotsvit might well have written her plays for Bruno and others at the court, including Rather of Verona and Luitprand of Cremona. Another indication that Hrotsvit was part of an inner circle of Ottonian literary lights arises in the preface to her plays, where she says that "there are others again who cling to the sacred page and who, though they spurn other works by pagan authors, still rather often tend to read the fictive creations of Terence; and while they take delight in the mellifluousness of the style, they become tainted by coming to know and impious subject-matter." Given Bruno of Cologne's known predilection for Terentian comedy, Dronke suspects that the hyperbolic claim that "some" read Terence even when spurning other pagan authors such as Virgil and Cicero might be aimed at Bruno as a teasing provocation by his protégé; Dronke *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 56-58, 69-70. (Cf. Hrotsvit's Latin: *Sunt etiam alii sacris inherentes paginis qui licet alia gentiliū spernant Terentii tamen fingmenta frequentius lectitant et dum dulcedine sermonis delectantur nefandarum notitia rerum maculantur;* W. Berschin, *Hrotsvit Opera Omnia* (Munich and Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2001) 132.

59 Wolfgang Kirsch, "Hrotsvit von Gandersheim als Epikerin," in *Mittelaltersches Jahrbuch: Lateinische Kultur im X. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann Verlag,

Coenobii Gandershemensis was her final and most mature work;⁶⁰ Hrotsvit's undertaking of historical writing at the most mature point in her career is significant. Her verse epics were highly original and constituted a hybrid genre that were influenced both by Hrotsvit's flair in her dramatic works and by the practical constraints of historical verisimilitude and plausibility. Hrotsvit's preface to the *Gesta Oddonis* resonated with a sensibility—one that perhaps exceeds the requirements of a typical modesty *topos*—the task of accurately portraying historical events vexed her, whether because of a paucity of sources, or because of embarrassing conflicts of interest in the storytelling. In the *Gesta*, Hrotsvit was forced to recall difficult moments between the family of her abbess and patron Gerberga, and Otto I that were all too well-known in the historical record.⁶¹

Like Hucbald of Saint-Amand, the Saxon canoness Hrotsvit wrote at the behest of patrons (in the case of the *Gesta Oddonis*, her abbess Gerberga), and was concerned with reconstructing the events of a distant past for which the evidence was often both scanty and problematic. Hrotsvit's historical and hagiographical task in these two cases, however, was not explicitly to spin a saint's life out of meager threads of sacred history, but rather to negotiate a past (and present) filled with conflict and competing factions within the Ottonian house. As scholars have noted, her epic on the deeds of Otto the Great (1991/1998) 224. Scholars admit however that Hrotsvit was not entirely without sources beyond oral reports and her own experiences with court politics in composing the *Gesta Oddonis*. Hrotsvit's narrative is similar in important respects to Widukind's *Sachsengeschichte*, and it is possible that the two authors both referred to some kind of annalistic history. There are some coincidental common narrative elements between Hrotsvit's text and Liudprand's *Antipodis* as well as with the chronicle of Regino of Prüm's continuator, but these seem more coincidental than deliberate in nature. For the *Primordia*, Hrotsvit seems completely reliant on oral testimony, apart from references to the *Vita Hathumodae* of Agius of Corvey; see Helena Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera* (München: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1970) 465-466. On the relationship of Hrotsvit's historical writing to her dramatic works, see Stephen Wailes, *Spirituality and Politics in the Works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 2006) 204-207.

60 Homeyer, 448; Wailes, 218.

61 In the introduction to the *Gesta* dedicated to her teacher, Gerberga, Hrotsvit describes historical writing as confusing and exhausting, like traveling without a guide "through a vast unknown ravine, where every path lies concealed, covered by thick snow," (Anne Lyon Haight, *Hroswitha of Gandersheim: Her Life, Times, and Works, and a Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: The Hroswitha Club, 1965) 29.

Great was characterized by the tactful negotiation of such conflicts. Writing the *Gesta Oddonis* between 965 and 968, Hrotsvit was confronted with the uncomfortable problem that Otto I's rule had twice (in 939 and 941) been challenged by her abbess Gerberga's father, Otto's brother, Henry of Bavaria (d. 955). Although the disputes between the two brothers had been more or less settled with the conquest of Italy and Henry's role in facilitating the union of Otto I with his second wife, Adelheid of Burgundy, Hrotsvit must have felt obliged to deal with it as a widely-known issue, and was cautious in her representation of this delicate matter.⁶²

In contrast to Hrotsvit's history of Otto I, her *Primordia Conobii Gandershemensis* (composed between 973 and 983)⁶³ permit-

⁶² Scholars concur that Hrotsvit's two historical works are closely related. R. Köpke suggests the *Primordia* was a kind of pre-history to the *Gesta* (*Otton. Studien* II, 41 n. 119 and "Die Älteste Dichterin," 99-100, cited in Homeyer, 391-392, 440). Homeyer notes a shared context in the vocabulary of the two works; see Homeyer, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 439. Stephen Wailes sees an even more profound connection between the two texts, positing the *Primordia* as essentially a *retractio* of the political deeds of Otto commemorated in the *Gesta*, in which Otto I had perpetrated violence against the papacy and set a bad example for Christian rulers' treatment of the papal see; Wailes, 228ff. On the delicate position of Hrotsvit's writing for the Ottonians as protectors on the one hand, and Gerberga as patron on the other, Jay T. Lees argues that by the time of the *Gesta*'s composition, the pre-941 conflicts between Otto I and Henry of Bavaria had been resolved, and that at least one function of Gerberga's commissioning of the work was to cultivate a strong patronage relationship with the newly-crowned emperor after 963; Lees, "Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and the Problem of Royal Succession in the East Frankish Kingdom," in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Contexts, Identities, Affinities, and Performances*, ed. Phyllis R. Brown et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2004) 20-23. However, it is possible that by the time of the *Primordia*'s composition, new tensions had broken out between Gerberga's male relatives and the imperial house. Were Hrotsvit still writing this text in 974, she would have been aware that Gerberga's brother Henry the Wrangler had renewed the challenge to the Ottonian succession in the next generation by revolting against Otto II in that same year after losing his position at the imperial court. The struggles between the Henrys and the Ottos in the next generation persisted into the regency of Otto III, when Henry the Wrangler, seeking the imperial throne, abducted the still-underage emperor, and bitter memories remained for several decades thereafter. For example, according to a now-lost *Denkschrift* from around 1008 by the chronicler Eberhard, it was claimed that because of her brother's conflict with Otto II, Gerberga thought of poisoning the emperor, but did not, moved by the persuasive advice of her community; see Suzanne F. Wemple, "Monastic Life of Women from the Merovingians to the Ottonians" in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Rara Avis in Saxonia?*, ed. Katharina Wilson (Ann Arbor: Medieval and Renaissance Collegium, 1987), 45; Götting, *Das Bistum Hildesheim*, 87-88.

⁶³ Thomas Head suggests that the text was written ca. 973-983, though many scholars take 973 as its date of composition; Thomas Head, "Hrotsvit's *Primordia* and the Historical Traditions of Monastic Communities," in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Rara Avis in Saxonia?* 143. Stephen Wailes, following the suggestion of Walter Berschin, who has completed the most recent edition of Hrotsvit's works, asserts it is impossible to date the text, except to note that it was almost certainly composed after Hrotsvit had completed the

ted an untroubled picture of the imperial family's sacred lineage and its beneficent role in the foundation's history. However, composing the convent's narrative required Hrotsvit to negotiate another set of 'family' problems, namely the challenges to the convent's autonomy by the oversight of not one but two episcopal sees, Hildesheim and Mainz, even though Gandersheim enjoyed intellectual and political relationships with both.⁶⁴ The *Primordia* was most probably compiled with Hrotsvit's dramas and legends together in one codex, dating from ca. 1000 at the Regensburg monastery of St. Emmeram. The history was detached from the rest of the book, possibly with sections of the *Gesta Oddonis*, in the eleventh or twelfth century, and remained at Gandersheim (possibly as documentation to underscore the convent's privileges that had subsequently deteriorated under influence from local episcopal and noble interference) while the rest of the codex was sent to St. Emmeram.⁶⁵ Although the Gandersheim canonesses of Hrotsvit's time had close intellectual and personal ties to the bishops of both Hildesheim and Mainz, around the turn of the eleventh century, the tension over Hildesheim's ju-

Gesta Oddonis and was her last work (or next to last, as some scholars believe that she might have composed lives of the patron saints of Gandersheim, whose relics were given to its founders by Pope Sergius with the founding of the monastery), 218.

64 James H. Forse, "Religious Drama and Ecclesiastical Reform in the Tenth Century," *Early Theater: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama* 5.(2002), 60ff.

65 Head, "Hrotsvit's *Primordia*," 143. The St. Emmeram codex—with a latter-day binding and still minus the *Primordia*—is now held in the manuscript collection of the Bavarian State Library, Clm 14485. An explanation of the fate of the codex was suggested by Hans Götting: the codex might have been designated as a gift to the St. Emmeram monastery through a testamentary bequest of Gerberga, Hrotsvit's abbess. The Gandersheim nuns might have detached the history of their own convent from the manuscript, along with another *carmen* to the convent's patrons, attributed to Hrotsvit but now lost. Götting also suggests that the reason for separating the *Primordia* had to do with supporting Gandersheim's claims in a legal dispute. The *Primordia* was detached from this codex and survives only in copies dating from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. As Götting demonstrates, in 1525, a Benedictine monk, Heinrich Bodo of the monastery of Clus rediscovered the *Primordia*, and thereafter the text was used as a source by historians of Gandersheim and exists in copies dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; Götting, 61–62. Leah Shopkow has noted that such an arrangement indicates Gerberga considered herself to be Hrotsvit's personal patron, and that the work was considered to belong to Gerberga herself rather than the convent; alternatively, the *Primordia* is Hrotsvit's only work that does not have a preface, which rather indicates the opposite, the work might have "belonged" to the community for liturgical and historical purposes; Götting, "Die Überlieferungsschicksal von Hrotsvits *Primordia*," in *Festschrift für Hermann Hempel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 3 vols, 1972) 94–98.

risdiction—which might well have already been an issue at the time Hrotsvit was writing the *Primordia*—erupted in the so-called “Gandersheimer Streit,” a lengthy conflict in which Hildesheim claimed authority over Gandersheim, and was not definitively settled until 1028. In the *Primordia*, Hrotsvit effaced such tensions concerning Gandersheim’s ancient privileges and its status as an autonomous convent by emphasizing the convent’s papal protection and its rise through the able stewardship of Oda, its founder and patron.

While the audience for the *Primordia* is not certain, it potentially fulfilled a variety of functions. On a political level, it invoked the convent’s autonomy as a critical part of its ancient origins, and the celebration of these origins implicitly exhorted external patrons to continue to support the convent, suggesting an extra-claustral readership as well as the convent’s own use of the text. As a royal monastery, Gandersheim claimed independence from episcopal jurisdiction, submitting only to papal authority, and Hrotsvit’s description of these privileges was essential to the convent’s history from its inception. The *Primordia* might even have been commissioned during a heightening of these tensions to demonstrate the independence of the community.⁶⁶ No foundation documents survive for the convent, and though they may have been extant in Hrotsvit’s time, the poem functioned as the convent’s foundation document and a reminder of the sisters’ accumulated immunities, privileges, and holdings, which had been well established in the early days of the foundation and had recently been renewed (in 972) by the Imperial imprimatur of Otto I.⁶⁷ Within the convent the use of such a history for liturgical and commemorative purposes would be manifold, not only as an artifact of the convent’s privileges, but also as edifying reading in the convent’s refectory and as part of the celebration of

66 The catalyst for the controversy was the decision of Sophia, abbess of Gandersheim and daughter of Otto II and Theophanu, to request Willingis of Mainz rather than Bernward of Hildesheim—though both were in fact present at the ceremony—to officially consecrate her as abbess, and encouraged him to claim Gandersheim for his see based on Fulda’s rights over the monastery of Brunhausen; see Forse, “Religious Drama,” 62, Katharina Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers*, 45 n. 37, and Hans Götting, *Das Bistum Hildesheim* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1973-1984), 87ff.

67 Homeyer, 443-444 n. 20.

the feast days of the founders.⁶⁸ Hrotsvit clearly connected the present-day nuns with their illustrious founders, and provided a hagiography of its founding family and notable miracle stories that would have had significant liturgical applications, and would have been essential to the formation and preservation of the convent's institutional memory.⁶⁹

Hrotsvit, like Hucbald, found widowhood useful in articulating the history of her convent. Like Rictrude's role in the foundation of Marchiennes, Oda's piety facilitated the convent's origins as well as all of its privileges (both directly through her petition for papal protection, and indirectly through her daughter Liudgard's marriage to Louis the German and hence Queen Liudgard's confirmation and protection of the convent's rights). Indeed, Hrotsvit developed Oda's sacred lineage even more prominently, and in more complex ways, than Hucbald did in Rictrude's *vita*. In comparison to Hucbald's strategy of "biography without narrative"⁷⁰ in Rictrude's life, Oda's biography formed the warp and woof of Hrotsvit's tale, explaining both the history and the quality of Gandersheim's spiritual life. Hrotsvit documented the convent's external establishment through the lineage of its founders, Liudolf and Oda, and its privileged independence from both local episcopal and secular authority and obedience to the apostolic see alone. Through carefully chosen moments in the house's sacred history, Hrotsvit recounted the convent's origins through allusions to the Nativity and described its historical and spiritual character as a *templum* that recalled the Jerusalem Temple and the presentation of Jesus to Simeon and Anna in the Gospel of Luke (2:36-38). The term *templum* in the *Primordia* thus signified not only a monastic church *per se*, but also the nature of the Gandersheim foundation as similar to the spiritual powers of the widow, Anna, who spent her widowhood in the temple devoted to fasting and prayer, and thereby received the gift of prophecy.

68 Head, "Rara Avis," 144, 148.

69 Homeyer suggests that Hrotsvit's verse legends, written in hexameter form, were meant to be read aloud, and the same could be true of the verse history, all but four lines of which were composed in leonine, or rhymed, hexameter, *Hrotsvita Operae*, 36, 499.

70 See above, n. 20.

Rather than merely recording the lineage of the convent's patrons, Hrotsvit interpreted from the miracles surrounding the foundation narrative a spiritual lineage that Oda and her daughters created and bequeathed to the sisters of Gandersheim. Within this framework, Oda's chastity, first in marriage, and then in widowhood, functioned throughout the text as an instrument of both virtue and prophecy. Oda's widowhood facilitated her residence in the convent, enhancing the piety she had already demonstrated her marriage with a new capacity to immerse herself fully in convent life. Through Oda's example, and her production of a sacred line of abbess-daughters, the Liudolfing women imparted a devotional model to the community that characterized the prayers and *memoria* of the Gandersheim sisters through parallels with the Biblical widow Anna's long vigils in the temple, connecting the ancient founders with the devotional life of the contemporary convent.

Hrotsvit's narrative choices in the *Primordia* were both original and striking. Although Hrotsvit probably shared, or even surpassed, Hucbald's knowledge of classical and patristic writings on chaste widowhood from letters, treatises, and Carolingian *florilegia*, Hrotsvit did not merely reiterate the standard tropes she would have known from these texts, but instead crafted an origins narrative that took the notion of the widow's devotion as the very fabric of the convent's devotional life and underpinned the structure of her narrative of its history.⁷¹

71 For example, an acquaintance with Jerome's letters (if not the writings of Augustine or even a general acquaintance with Carolingian *florilegia* on female chastity) would likely have made Hrotsvit aware of the tripartite hierarchy of chastity's merits that the Church Doctors so avidly explained to widows. Moreover, if Stephen Wailes' assertion that Hrotsvit knew Hrabanus Maurus's (776-856) commentaries on Paul to the degree that they provided "guidance to Hrotsvit's understanding of flesh and spirit in individuals and in human communities" is correct, then Hrotsvit would have known Hrabanus' writings on widowhood and his notion that there was an "ancient order" of women who elected to live in widowed chastity; Wailes, 27ff. Hrabanus Maurus commented on the prayer and chastity ascribed to the "order of widows" in the ancient church in his *Ennarations on the letters of Paul*, and incorporated the paradigm of the sixty-fold fruit for widows in both his commentary on Matthew as well as in his treatise on numbers in *De universo*; Rabanus Maur, *Ennarationes in epistolas b. Pauli*, PL 112, 23.5, 616; *Commentarium in Mattheum*, PL 107 V.13, 495; *De universo*, PL 111, XVIII.3, 493. Reconstructing Hrotsvit's classical literary influences and resources in the Gandersheim library, scholars believe that Hrotsvit knew works by Horace, Ovid, Statius, Lucan, Boethius, Terence, and Virgil; moreover, the Byzantine empress Theophanu, wife of Otto II, spent time in Gandersheim and may have introduced Greek language and texts into the convent. Hrotsvit was also familiar with a variety of texts including Prudentius, Fortunatus, Jerome, Alcuin, Bede, Notker, and Ekkehard, as well as the Vulgate, liturgical texts, and hagiographical legends, Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 31. On the influence of Byz-

Oda's Sacred Lineage

Like many monastic histories and hagiographies of the Carolingian period, Hrotsvit's historical writing functioned in part a project to recapture fragments of history from an earlier time and refashion them for present purposes. It also served the purpose of cultivating the favor and patronage of the Imperial house. In the *Gesta Oddonis*, Hrotsvit articulated the dearth of sources that many scholars admit as more than a mere modesty topos. In the *Primordia*, however, Hrotsvit showed no such hesitation in writing about her own convent.⁷² Her narrative drew on communal memory as well as texts such as the late ninth-century prose and verse *Life* of Hathumoda, the convent's first abbess, by Agius of Corvey. Julia H. M. Smith notes that Hathumoda's *vita* demonstrates a typical problem in late Carolingian hagiography: it was difficult for authors to reconcile women's spirituality, which was oriented toward interiority, visions, and kinship, with the predominantly male hagiographical conventions in which saintly deeds were accomplished through secular activities, influence, and authority.⁷³ In the *Primordia*, however, Hrotsvit reinvented Hathumoda and her kin in an Ottonian mold that celebrated holy matrons for their responsible exercise of power and virtue as the spiritual equals of the convent's cloistered virgins. Hrotsvit not only rationalized female founders' roles in the establishment of the

antine culture, see: *ibid*, *Florilegium*, 8. Peter Dronke suggests that among these classical and medieval authors Hrotsvit was in particular familiar with the letters of Jerome and his treatise *Contra Vigilantius*, Ovid's *Fasti*, and possibly Priscian's grammar, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 296 n. 45 and n. 47, 297 n.57 and n. 60.

⁷² See especially Stephen Wailes' argument suggesting that Hrotsvit was uncomfortable with the political events of the *Gesta Oddonis* and saw the *Primordia* effectively as a corrective to the concerns she had to overcome in writing the former; Stephen L. Wailes, *Spirituality and Politics in the Works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 2006) 206ff.

⁷³ Smith, "Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe," 36. Hrotsvit had already engaged this characterization of feminine holiness and virtue in her depiction of Otto I's two queens, Edith and Adelheid (the latter of whom enjoyed a cult fostered by the monks of Cluny), in the *Gesta Oddonis*. For Hrotsvit's treatment of Edith and Adelheid, see Wilson, *Florilegium*, 101-107, *Medieval Women Writers*, 35; Homeyer sees parallels between Oda and Henry the Fowler's wife Mathilda, 445.

convent, but also structured her account of its history around three generations of holy women, each characterized by chastity, visionary power, and deft stewardship of the Gandersheim foundation.

Hrotsvit's narrative began with the decision of Duke Liudolf of Saxony (d. 866) and his wife Oda to found a convent for women. Throughout the work, Hrotsvit presented Liudolf as a revered founder and patron, but always in partnership with Oda, the convent's spiritual advisor and mother. The foundation fulfilled a prophecy told to Oda's mother, Aeda, by John the Baptist, who had appeared to Aeda as she lay prostrate before his altar. John had informed her that her "descendant" would "establish a cloister for holy virgins and a triumphant peace for his realm," and also that her progeny would one day ascend to imperial rule, thus immediately combining the fate of Gandersheim Convent with the Liudolfing/Ottonian lineage.⁷⁴

Hrotsvit positioned Oda as the driving force behind the foundation; by urging her husband "frequently in loving and persuasive speech" (*exhortabatur blandis nimium suadalis*) to realize Aeda's prophetic vision, Oda and Liudolf established a house for women at Brunshausen in 852, and began work on the new convent buildings for the Gandersheim foundation.⁷⁵ They made a pilgrimage to Rome on behalf of the convent, where they met with Pope Sergius, who blessed their project with the relics of Popes Anastasius and Innocent. Hrotsvit suggested that Sergius confirmed Liudolf's request

74 "Nuntio, virginibus sacris tua clara propago institute claustrum, pacem regnique triumphum," *Primordia*, ed. Berschin, 309; translation Thomas Head, ed., "Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, The Establishment of the Monastery at Gandersheim," in *Medieval Hagiography* (London: Routledge, 2001), 244.

75 *Primordia*, ed. Berschin, 309; tr. Head, 244. Homeyer suggests that the papal meeting probably consisted of permission to build the foundation and a papal blessing, not the full immunity--comparable to those desired by Cluny's founders and consistent with those sought by other tenth-century reforming foundations--that Hrotsvit suggested in the poem. Agius in the *Life of Hathumoda* states they received permission "cum apostolica auctoritate et episcopali benedictione" as opposed to Hrotsvit's formulation: "hoc est apostolici iuris." The patronage of the two pope-saints, Anastasius and Innocent, seems important to Hrotsvit for their apostolic connections rather than for any specific attributes of their cult; for Hrotsvit, papal authority and the vision of John the Baptist seem to confirm the holiness of the convent rather than local saints or episcopal authority, *Hrotsvithae Opera*, 452.

that the convent be freed from any authority by earthly lords and rather governed by “the authority of the apostolic ruler alone,” a significant request that Hrotsvit strongly emphasized, perhaps because Gandersheim’s autonomy had become a contentious subject with the Hildesheim bishops, (significantly, Hrotsvit makes no mention of Hildesheim’s episcopal authority over the convent’s governance).⁷⁶

As was the case in many Carolingian foundation narratives, Gandersheim was the happy product not only of temporal patronage but divine blessing, and a succession of nature miracles propelled the foundation story forward. The appearance of miraculous lights in the sky in the Gandersheim forest at All Saints prompted Liudolf, “with the approval of his beloved wife,” to move the Brunshausen convent to that site in 865, and to build a church and monastery on the spot that the lights had designated (the building of which took twenty years to complete).⁷⁷ Liudolf died prematurely, leaving his sons and wife Oda to complete the building of the convent, but the miracle, which was repeated two more times, including on the day of the consecration of the new monastery on November 1, 881 (the anniversary of the miraculous lights), confirmed for Hrotsvit that “the construction of our monastery was begun under God’s patronage.”⁷⁸

While Hrotsvit described Liudolf’s death with all the appropriate honor due to her convent’s founder, and noted that his “revered remains” were buried in the “ancient church,”⁷⁹ she nevertheless followed the medieval convention of interpreting the husband’s demise as serving the greater purpose of allowing the surviving spouse to live as a holy widow who fostered the interests of the convent:

76 *Rectoris apostolici solum*, *Primordia*, ed. Berschin, 312; tr. Head, 245.

77 *Consensusque suae dilectae coniugis Odae*, *Primordia*, 315.; tr. Head, 246.

78 *Coenobi sub honore dei construction nostro*, *ibid.*

79 *Cuius in antique corpus venerabile templo/Tunc gremio terrae commendatum fuit apte*. Hrotsvit added that his bones were later transferred to the new church; *Primordia*, 317.

Perhaps God took [Liudolf] from this world when he had scarcely attained the warmth of middle age, in order that thereafter the heart of the eminent lady Oda would be intent upon God and, with no further thought of earthly love whatsoever, might be able to devote [herself] more fully to the things of God.”⁸⁰

Meanwhile, the couple’s daughter, Hathumoda, had been chosen as the foundation’s first abbess. Trained since the age of twelve at the convent of Herford, Hathumoda was the recipient of the next nature miracle that guided the foundation. In the process of building the convent, the builders lacked sufficient quarries of stone. One day when Hathumoda was deeply absorbed in fasting and prayer (*nocte dieque*, borrowing the Scriptural passage describing the prophetess Anna in the temple), a miracle occurred through which the abbess discovered a quarry that would permit the continued work on the convent.⁸¹ A bird led Hathumoda to the monastery’s construction site, where a dove directed her to a new stone quarry. The monastery was completed, as the “heavenly support that she was seeking was at hand, quick to take pity on her requests.”⁸²

The three miracles—Aeda’s vision of John the Baptist, the lights at All Saints that encouraged Oda and Liudolf to select the monastic site, and the birds that helped find the stone to complete the project—were typical miracles for monastic foundation legends. They underscored that the foundation was divinely blessed well before the Hildesheim bishop, Wicbert, officially consecrated it, signaling Gandersheim’s autonomy through the divine origins of the convent. Gandersheim’s royal privileges had been confirmed under the late Carolingian kings, and had been renewed and the convent’s lands generously enriched by the Saxon emperors Otto I and Otto

80 Forsan ad hac illum mundo dues abstulit isto./Dum vix aetatis febres tetegit mediocris./Illustris domnae post haec ut plenius Odae/Mens intente deo posset tractare superna/Expers carnalis totius prorsus amoris,” *Primordia*, 317-318, tr. Head 247

81 Homeyer sees echoes of both Virgil and Walafrid of St. Gall in this episode; Homeyer, 446-447.

82 Nec mora, caelestem, quam quaerebat, pietatem/Sensit adesse sui votis promptam miserere; *Primordia*, 315; tr. Head, 247.

I,⁸³ but Hrotsvit nevertheless demonstrated an interest in asserting and preserving these privileges, perhaps in anticipation of, or response to, the incipient disputes that arose over episcopal jurisdiction and culminated in the “Gandersheimer Streit” of 1002-1028.

Beyond their undoubtedly useful function of confirming the convent’s blessed heritage and traditional privileges, the nature miracles also highlighted the visionary power and prudent care-taking of the three generations of Liudolfing women as essential to Gandersheim’s history. As in her dramas and legends, Hrotsvit joined medieval hagiography to a classicizing verse pattern (in this case, leonine hexameter, a meter appropriate for an epic history), and infused the whole with her singular philosophy of female virtue achieved through chastity and prayer.

Karl Leyser’s work on Ottonian women suggests that the demographics and social structure of the Saxon nobility virtually assured that women, especially widows, would be responsible for the maintenance of family piety and memory.⁸⁴ In Hrotsvit’s hands, the influence and pious efficacy of the Liudolfing noble matrons forged an elegant connection among the three generations of women (Aeda, Oda, and Oda’s daughters) through the miracles that marked the history of their convent, and the good deeds that sustained the foundation to the present.⁸⁵

In this trinity of women, Oda was undoubtedly the most significant figure. She instigated the foundation and carried it forward as the founding mother of the convent, surviving the death of its male patrons, her husband Liudolf and then her son Duke Otto of Saxony.⁸⁶ In contrast to Hucbald, who tended to use a series of heav-

83 Homeyer, 442-443; see also Götting, 87ff.

84 Karl Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in Early Medieval Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 72-73.

85 Interestingly, Hrotsvit elected to write only about Liudolfing abbesses, 852-919; her history ended with Oda’s daughters, after which non-Liudolfings filled that role until the accession Hrotsvit’s own abbess, Gerberga II, who was a niece of Otto I.

86 Whose death elicited Hrotsvit’s profound lamentation; Otto had, “in accord with the wishes of his dear mother, mercifully cherished and lovingly advanced the cause of the virginal band of Christ’s handmaids” (Concordando suae votis carae genitricis/Auxilio regum, quibus exhibuit famulatum/Ipsum virgineum coetum Christi famularum/Fovit cle-

ily interpreted vignettes rather than a narrative history of Rictrude to craft her *vita*, Hrotsvit used biography to organize her narrative, fusing Oda's literal widowhood with allusions to the spiritual duties of widows and virgins to the Gandersheim foundation and the souls in its care. Hrotsvit's characterization of the chaste spiritual lineage of Oda and her daughters is in many ways quite singular and original, but as Leyser has observed, the influence, authority, and longevity in widowhood of the significant women in the Ottonian dynasty was unprecedented in medieval history and may well have influenced their representation in history and historiography.⁸⁷ Hrotsvit's treatment of Oda was personal and familiar, especially compared to late Carolingian authors like Hucbald, or other Ottonian writers such as the Cluniac abbot, Odilo of Cluny (who consciously modeled his depiction of the Empress Adelheid on Jerome's writings to and about widows), or Theitmar of Merseberg, who adopted a rather conventional *catena* of Scriptural references to describe chaste widows such as Hathui.⁸⁸ Hrotsvit avoided the typical clichés about widowhood and virginity from patristic sources, and rather cut a figure of her female forbears out of whole cloth rather than creating a conventional patchwork of references to the Church Fathers.

At the consecration of the new Gandersheim monastery, Oda withdrew into the convent and, before her death in 913, lived to see *menter necnon provexit amanter*. *Primordia*, 326; Head, 251.

87 Leyser, *Rule and Conflict*, 50. Hrotsvit was not the only Ottonian historian who chose to organize her historical representation quite pointedly around her subject's personal biography: the model of the Empress Mathilda's sanctity established in her *vita posterior*—possibly female-authored—was also highly original and shaped less by hagiographical *topoi* than by the biography of the subject. Although they also drew on existing texts such as Biblical passages, venerable authorities such as Sulpicius Severus, and even on Hrotsvit's *Gesta*, Mathilda's hagiographers subtly worked the themes of Mathilda's ideal conduct in virginity, marriage, and widowhood into her role as a dynastic mother and wife, and fit examples of each stage of that triune division into the course of her life's events, rather than the other way around.

88 The best analysis of Ottonian models of female sanctity, with particular attention to the novel aspects of Mathilda's *vitae*, is Patrick Corbet's *Les saintes ottoniennes: Sainteté dynastique, sainteté royale, et sainteté féminine autour de l'an mil* (Sigmaringen: 1986). For Adelheid's *vita*, see Herbert Paulhart, ed., *Die Lebensbeschreibung der Kaiserin Adelheid von Abt Odilo von Cluny*. Graz and Cologne: Herman Böhlhaus Nachf., 1962; for Theitmar of Merseberg's characterization of the widowed abbess Hathui, see his *Chronicon* MGH. SRG VII.3, 400.

three of her daughters serve as abbess, acting as the moral compass of the foundation:

Then the esteemed lady Oda, dwelling within the enclosure of the monastery often scrutinized with vigorous care all the actions and devotion of the kindred sisters, their manners and their way of life, lest any woman contemptuous of following the law of the ancestors should presume to live unreprieved under her rule, nor lest there be any place for carrying out an illicit act, and by her example she showed how things were to be done. And, just as the sweet love of a prudent mother, now prohibiting, through fear, her daughters from error, now persuading to will the good through friendly counsel, so this holy woman instructed her dear pupils, now with the commanding law of a powerful lady, now with the soothing manner of a sweet mother, so that in one similar life they all together might serve the king, whom the stars of the sky celebrate.⁸⁹

Oda thus served the convent as a sort of arch-abbess, and her moral oversight and example functioned as the convent's rule. Though not a virgin or even explicitly consecrated as a nun herself (according to Hrotsvit's text),⁹⁰ Oda lived in widowed chastity among the nuns, and retained an organizational and spiritual seniority even when her daughters officially ruled as abbesses of the convent. Like Rictrude's spiritual lineage of virgin daughters, Oda's mentorship was significant to the foundation's history—but much more unequivocally positive than the troubled relationships in the *Vita Rictrudis*.

89 Domna tamen conversando venerabilis Oda/Intra claustra monasterii cura vigilant/Scrutatur coniunctarum persaepe sororum/Actus et studium, mores, vitae quoque cursum./Ne vel contempta maiorum lege sequenda/Vivere lege sua reprobe praesumeret ulla./Vel locus illiciti foret ullius peragendi./Exemploque suo praemonstravit facienda./Et, ceu prudentis dulcis dilectio matris/ Nunc terrore suas prohibet delinquere natas./ Nunc etiam monitis bona velle suadet amicis./Sic haec sancta suas caras instruxit alumnas./Nunc dominatricis mandando iure potentis./Nunc etiam matris mulcendo more suavis./Quo vita similis cunctae communiter uni/Servirent regi, iubilant cui sidera caeli, *Primordia*, 322.

90 Thomas Head interprets the text in this way, suggesting that it was common for Ottonian noblewomen to retire to their own foundations; Head, *Medieval Hagiography*, 254 n. 25. Hans Götting cites various contemporary sources that interpreted Oda's role: a copy or draft of a now-lost confirmation of the convent's privileges issued by Arnulf of Carinthia referred to the foundress Oda living "in the habit of a nun" (in sanctimoniali habitu), MGH *Diplomata* (Arnulf, D Arn. 107), 158-159. A Hildesheim *Denkschrift* from around this time referred to Oda simply as "domna," Götting, *Das Bistum Hildesheim*, 85.

As Katharina Wilson has argued concerning Hrotsvit's dramas, virtue and chastity were practically synonymous qualities in these texts, and thus maintaining chastity in the face of danger was a typical literary path for proving virtue in the lives of the virgin martyrs.⁹¹ This interpretation is relevant for the characterization of Hrotsvit's female 'heroines' of the verse history of Gandersheim not only as a literary formula but also from the perspective of Ottonian women's lived experience. Karl Leyser has commented on the real sexual dangers Saxon noblewomen indeed faced growing up in the homes of ambitious and incestuous kin, and remarks on the apparent "promiscuity crisis" decried in contemporary penitentials.⁹² Hrotsvit portrayed the Saxon convent of Gandersheim and its three generations of female leaders as the valiant products of chastity, and perhaps the unfortunately all-too-real social context indicated by Leyser sharpened and magnified Hrotsvit's valuation of the empowering nature of heroic virginity. Hrotsvit differed from most of her contemporaries in extending this heroism, despite the sexual perils of the world, to matrons living in widowed chastity: rather than portraying them as endangered by either human or demonic temptation outside the convent, Hrotsvit highlighted Oda's prudence and holiness throughout her life, and the particular contributions of her worldly knowledge and experience to the foundation's origins.

In Hrotsvit's narrative, the chastity of the virgin-abbess Hathumoda paired with the virtue and wisdom of the matron Oda created and nurtured the institution, both through miraculous events and daily leadership. Hrotsvit did, however, include an incident that reminded the reader of both the worldly challenges to female chastity and its rewards. After Hathumoda died of plague (nursed tenderly by her mother Oda), she was succeeded by her younger sister Gerberga, who unlike the elder Hathumoda, had not originally been

91 Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers*, 39. *Dulcitius* provides an excellent example: three virgins withstand a Roman governor's attempts to rape them through both divine intervention and their own fortitude, and Hrotsvit even admits some humor to the picture as the evil governor, bewitched, ends up embracing kitchen utensils instead of the girls, who ultimately do earn the crown of martyrdom without damage to their chastity.

92 Leyser, *Rule and Conflict*, 64.

destined for the convent but had been betrothed to a nobleman, Bernard.⁹³ Gerberga's release from the betrothal recalled the imperiled maiden saints in Hrotsvit's dramatic works: although betrothed to Bernard, Gerhard had secretly consecrated herself to virginity out of love for the heavenly spouse "by means of the sacred veil of Christ," though outwardly she maintained the betrothal and the requisite opulent secular dress of her class.⁹⁴ When Bernard heard rumors of Gerberga's vow, he threatened that when he came back from the current war, he would insist on "putting to naught" her "vain vow." Gerberga merely replied that she would trust in God's will for the outcome of their dispute and her vow.⁹⁵ With what reads almost like a humorous note of self-parody or even stage direction, Hrotsvit commented on how stupidly (*inania*) Bernard tested God's will in such a fashion, for of course Bernard fell in battle—not unlike the many pagan or otherwise evil men who threatened Hrotsvit's virgin martyrs in her dramas and legends and were struck down by divine intervention—while Gerberga, still virginal, protected by her vow, succeeded Hathumoda as abbess.⁹⁶

There are a few interesting issues surrounding this rather typical anecdote: first, Hrotsvit, like Hucbald, ignored the repeated prohibitions against self-veiling and secret vows in canon law, and did not even mitigate Gerberga's autonomous action through the approval of a bishop or other male authority figure; it was a matter settled within the family. Oda had in fact sided with Bernard concerning the betrothal: Oda had encouraged Gerberga to maintain the elaborate secular dress befitting her position as Bernard's betrothed

93 On the mother-daughter relationship between Oda and Hathumoda in Agius' *Vita*, see Smith, 26-8.

94 Sed sese Christo clam consecraverat ipsa/Caelesti fervens sponso velamine sacro, *Primordia*, 319; Head, 248.

95 Tui votum penitus pessumdabo vanum, *ibid.*

96 Ottonian authors favored such anecdotes in which God punished hubristic claims with a premature demise; cf. in Odilo's *Epitaphium Adelheidis* Theophanu's challenge to Adelheid's sovereignty, and the Byzantine empress' subsequent premature death, "Odilo of Cluny, Epitaph of the August Lady, Adelheid," translated by David A. Warner, in Head, *Medieval Hagiography*, 264-5.

(admittedly under some pressure from Bernard). Hrotsvit withheld comment on Oda's role in the affair, and instead praised Gerberga's resourceful preservation of her virginity and her achievements as abbess: she "carefully safeguarded the young flock and instructed it by frequent exhortations to observe those things that were in harmony with its life and to avoid every profane deed."⁹⁷

Throughout the anecdotes that characterized the female founders of Gandersheim, Hrotsvit noted the challenges to female chastity, but suggested that women's experience strengthened rather than endangered their continent profession. She identified a shared, rather than hierarchical, spirituality among the widows and virgins in the story. All of the founding women experienced visions or miracles and thus had access to the sacred, but their worldly experience informed their skillful and pragmatic stewardship of the convent. After the incident with Bernard, for example, Gerberga not only kept her flock pure from profane concerns, but managed the convent so successfully substantially increased the revenues of the convent and maintained highly favorable relationships with her royal relations, especially her sister, Queen Liutgard.

Gerberga died in 896, and the leadership of the convent passed to yet another sister, Christina, about whom Hrotsvit says little beyond the usual platitudes. Oda, however, remained the dominant presence throughout her daughters' abbacies until her death in 913.⁹⁸ With Oda's death, Hrotsvit brought the story full circle with

97 Et, licit abbatissa gregem Gerberga recentem/Caute servaret crebris monitisque doceret/Conservare, suae fuerant quae congrua vitae./Contra propositum nec quid patrare profanum; *Primordia*, 322; Head, 249. It is worth noting that like Oda, Gerberga tended to secular as well as spiritual matters: her sister Liutgard married Louis the Younger, the son of the Frankish king Louis the German, and as queen became a great patron of the convent, whose benevolent remembrance of the convent in lands and donations during Gerberga's rule earned Hrotsvit's frankly grateful and lavish praise in the *Primordia*.

98 The rather wan presentation of Christina's influence might correspond to an erosion of the convent's autonomy during her rule. Thomas Head suggests that from around this period "Gandersheim had little more independence than an episcopal proprietary church," but attempted to reassert its privileges in Hrotsvit's time, "Rara Avis in Saxonia," 151.

a comment that Oda had fulfilled the “happy promises” of a convent for nuns that John the Baptist had long ago entrusted to Aeda.⁹⁹

Hrotsvit’s poem developed the themes of the divine purpose of the foundation, its autonomy from local authority, and the literal and spiritual lineage of its members, principally its female founders and leaders, in an interesting fusion of classical epic verse, monastic history, and hagiography. While unquestionably valuable and useful for a variety of purposes to the Gandersheim community, its message concerning the vital role of holy women within the monastic foundations that keep peace in the Ottonian realm might have functioned not only as a ‘useable past’ for the convent’s nuns,¹⁰⁰ might even have reminded an external audience of the convent’s sacred, autonomous, and feminine history.

All of Hrotsvit’s women, although always acting in God’s service and through his will, displayed a remarkable amount of personal agency for any pre-modern period and particularly for the tenth century. Colleen Richmond has characterized Hrotsvit’s model of “female agency” across her written corpus as consisting of 1) proactive and virtuous behavior in a restricted environment; 2) verbal strength and power; and 3) physical and spiritual strength.¹⁰¹ Though Richmond applied these criteria to Hrotsvit’s dramatic works, they also obtain for Hrotsvit’s historical female figures as well. Indeed, while Hrotsvit paid due homage to her esteemed patrons, Liudolf and Duke Otto of Saxony, women held a special place in the fabric of the convent’s institutional history and liturgical practice. Geary’s notion that monastic history around the turn of the millennium at times employed icons of female memory—both women’s memories of the past, and women’s duties as rememberers—to express the process of recapturing lost history is particularly useful in understand-

99 In quo laeta procul dubio promissa repleta/Christi Baptistae creduntur primitus esse; *Primordia*, 328; Head, 252.

100 Head, “Rara Avis,” 154-155.

101 See Colleen Richmond, “Hrotsvit’s *Sapientia*: Rhetorical Power and Women of Wisdom” 55 (2003: 2) 133-145.

ing Hrotsvit's *Primorida*.¹⁰² Hrotsvit engaged female memory and experience to structure her narrative and to describe her institution's spiritual history. Her founders inhabited a monastic world in which women's contributions were not only essential to the convent's origins but also exemplary expressions of the monastic ideal and testimony to the wisdom of the secular rulers who fostered religious houses. Female agency contributed substantially to the monastic endeavor on all levels (material, communal, and spiritual), and was rooted in particular in the extraordinary spiritual and nurturing powers possible through female chastity. Indeed, Hrotsvit offered little comment either on the nuns' liturgical offices or of any monastic rule, but rather allowed the founding women's vigils and virtues to embody the liturgy and daily life of the Gandersheim nuns.

Vigils In the Temple: Widowhood and Gandersheim's Institutional Identity

Whereas Hucbald emphasized the devil's snares facing consecrated widowhood in the world, and tacitly invoked the precarious situation of the widow Judith in his characterization of Rictrude's consecrated widowhood, Hrotsvit infused her narrative of her convent's history with the secure spirituality of the widow Anna ensconced perpetually in devotion in the temple. In medieval exegesis, Anna was not only understood as a model of female chastity, self-sacrifice, and prophecy, but also represented the vigilance and steadfastness of Christ's widowed Church. Anna was a widow "of great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow until she was eighty-four," and "did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day."¹⁰³ Anna's prophetic powers were confirmed when she and the priest Simeon recognized the Christ child, brought to the temple by Mary and Joseph shortly after his birth, as the Messiah. The connections

102 Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 51-2.

103 Cf. Vulgate, Luke 2:36-38: Et erat Anna prophetissa filia Phanuhel de tribu Aser. Haec processerat in diebus multis et vixerat cum viro suo annis septem a virginitate sua. Et haec vidua usque ad annos octoginta quattuor quae non discedebat de templo ieiuniis et obsecrationis serviens nocte ac die. Et haec ipsa hora superveniens confitebatur Domino et loquebatur de illo omnibus qui expectabant redemptionem Hierusalem.

between the Biblical Anna and the medieval chaste widow were made explicit in the liturgy celebrating the widow's consecration, dating from the mid-eighth-century *Gallican Sacramentary*:

Almighty father, holy Lord, eternal God, who is so greatly near in your care for mercy for your human children, we ask that just as you embrace the devotion of virginity, may you likewise mercifully accept the profession of widowhood. Lord, imploring with prayers, we humble petitioners pray that you protect and defend with your aid this your servant who, out of fear of your name with chaste timidity is taking heed for herself, with your help, against the impurities of the flesh and the snares of the enemy. She desired to take up through our hands of humility the clothing of widowhood, so that this, your ready servant, may be like Anna the daughter of Fanuhel in vigils, in abstinence, in prayers, and in almsgiving.¹⁰⁴

This liturgy specifically combined the images of the Pauline *vere vidua* and Luke's prophetess Anna to latter-day consecrated widows, and emphasized how their distinctive dress and actions in imitation of Anna in the temple underscored the vowess's duties of chastity and the maintenance of a permanent state of asceticism and spiritual bereavement. A similar liturgy was retained in the *Romano-German Pontifical*, compiled in the latter half of the tenth century, and characterized the consecrated widow through her continence; her special clothing marked her conversion to a chaste profession:

Having been converted, just as Anna the prophetess abandoned [her old life] for a long time in fasting and prayer, clothed in the garments of widowhood to your glory in the temple...may this your daughter devote herself to you alone, God, in your church, with devoted mind.¹⁰⁵

104 Domine Sancte, Pater omnipotens, aeternae Deus, qui in tantum humano generi miserationis tuae curam inpendis, et ita virginitatis devotionem amplecteris, ut viduitatis professionem clementer accipies, te, quaesumus, Domine, precibus inplorans, te supplices deprecamur, ut famulam tuam ill[am] quae ob timorem tui nominis casto timore sibi prospiciens, viduitatis indumentum per nostrae humilitatis manus percipere postulavit, tuo auxilio contra inlecebras carnis atque insidias inimici munias praesidio ac defendas, ut sit famola tua ill[a] Anna filiae Fanuhelis similis in vigiliis, in abstinentia, in orationibus atque elemosynis prompta, "Benedictio super viduam veste mutandam," *Sacramentarium Gallicanum*, *PL* 72, 570. Mabillon thought this text described sixth-century Gallic practice, but printed it in the *PL* from an eighth-century manuscript found at Bobbio, Italy (now BNF lat. 13246, known as the *Bobbio Missal*). A complex manuscript that both contained traditions from Francia and also underwent many additions and changes, it probably was a Gallican sacramentary written in Burgundy and influenced by Irish tradition; see Cyrille Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy: An Introduction to the Sources* (Portland, Oregon: Pastoral Press, 1981), 108 and Yitzhak Hen, *The Bobbio Missal* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 1-4.

105 Induens novum conuerti fecisti, ut sicut Anna prophetissa multis temporibus vestibus viduitatis induta in templo gloriae tuae ieiuniis et orationibus fideliter deseruiuit, sic et haec

Hrotsvit's references to Anna's symbolism as a prophet and widow were both original and subtle. Hrotsvit never mentioned Anna explicitly in the *Primordia* but nevertheless described female devotion at Gandersheim from the very beginning of the narrative through allusions to the piety and prophecy of Anna and the significance of the Jerusalem temple. This reading of Hrotsvit's intentions is certainly interpretative, but Jay Lees' similar observation of Hrotsvit's oblique use of theme and image in other instances suggests that such subtlety was part of Hrotsvit's *modus operandi*. Lees noted, for example, that in the *Gesta Oddonis* Hrotsvit implicitly played on the etymology of the term "Saxon" as a synonym for "rock," signaling an implicit alliance between emperor and papacy, arguing "as usual, Hrotsvit does not spell things out for the reader but neither does she make difficult the leap."¹⁰⁶ Hrotsvit implicitly invoked the language associated with Anna in the temple to characterize the chaste heroines of her convent's history, particularly the term *templum*, to denote Gandersheim's most divine and significant moments.

The first miracle revealed to Aeda that initiated the foundation suggested that Aeda imitated Anna's prayerful vigils, as "this Aeda was frequently accustomed to resign herself and her whole life to the Lord in prayer."¹⁰⁷ Aeda thus received the vision of John the Baptist, in similar fashion to Anna's receiving the gift of prophecy through her many years of prayer and fasting in the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel. Hrotsvit reserved the use of the term *templum* only for certain crucial events in the convent's history, however; while Aeda was instructed to build a *claustrum*, and Oda persuaded Liudolf to erect a *coenobium*, Hrotsvit first introduced the idea that her monastery's church was a *templum* when Pope Sergius granted Odo and Liudolf the right to erect a religious house, and endowed it with the relics of Saints Anastasius and Innocent with the under-

filia tua tibi soli Deo in ecclesia tua deuota mente deseruiat, Cyrille Vogel, ed. *Romano-German Pontifical* Vol. I, 25, 60-1.

106 Lees, "Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and the Problem of Royal Succession," 17.

107 Haec igitur crebro precibus conseverat Aeda/Se totamque sua domino committere vitam, *Primordia*, 307; tr. Head, 243.

standing that they “will be perpetually venerated in a chapel of the aforesaid monastery [*templo*] built through your munificences with the chanting of sacred hymns there night and day with the constant illumination of a bright lighted taper.”¹⁰⁸ Sergius invoked the image of the temple as a sacred space where the saints’ relics would be venerated by the nuns day and night, *nocte dieque*, using the same words that described the perpetual vigils of Anna. In contrast, when Hrotsvit engaged more contemporary or mundane topics (such as the confirmation of lands, immunities, and privileges) she tended to describe the convent as *coenobium* and its church as *ecclesia*. Moreover, Hrotsvit frequently paired the term *templum* with the verb *coepere*, to begin, associating Gandersheim’s origins with Christ’s natal story, and the sacrality of the moment of his recognition in the ancient temple.¹⁰⁹ The association of the Ganderheim cloister’s chapel as a *templum*, i.e. as a place of duty, chastity, and vigilance, is striking not only because the central figure in Hrotsvit’s poem was a powerful widow whose chaste virtue was essential to the Ganderheim foundation, but also because it is likely that Hrotsvit was at the same time identifying her convent with a strong spirit of *renovatio* that looked to the pristine origins of the Church, and of Christ its founder, for its identity. The implication throughout the text that the Ottonian royal family shared their origins with the Liudolfing founders also promoted the sacral nature of Ottonian rule and its leadership in religious renewal and reform.¹¹⁰

108 Haec in coenobii venerare iam memorati/Finetenus templo vestri munimine facto/ Noctedieque sacris illic resonantibus hymnis necnon accesno praeclare lumine semper, *Primordia*, 313, tr. Head 245. The term *templum* was used in rather elevated circumstances to describe monastic foundations in Carolingian texts; see DuCange (1887), Vol. 8, 52, who finds the term used in the Glossar. Lat. Gall. ex Cod. Ref. 7692 to denote the nave of a monastery, and Niermayer, who notes that after the eleventh century *templum* was used with the connotation of the catholic *Ecclesia* as a whole, as well as both a cathedral and a collegial church. It is certainly possible that part of Hrotsvit’s use of the word *templum* also has to do with the relative ease, in hexameter, of employing a two-syllable rather than multi-syllabic word like *coenobium* or *ecclesia* to fit into the meter. Hrotsvit’s use of the term is not random, but quite oriented toward the most sacred and divine moments in her convent’s history.

109 Cf. *Primordia*, 313 l. 212, 323 l. 446.

110 On Hrotsvit’s works within the context of *renovatio*, see Dronke, *Women Writers*, 59; on this spirit of reform among the literary lights of the Ottonian court, including the bishoprics of Hildesheim and Mainz, see Forse, 52-4.

With Sergius' papal privilege and blessing secured, Hrotsvit continued the parallels between the image of the Biblical widow Anna and the founding women's vigilant devotion in the Ganderheim "temple" to chart the convent's spiritual history. The place where the church (*templum*) was to be established was determined by a miracle that invoked both vigils and beginnings: like the shepherds in Luke's gospel who *in illo tempore*, i.e. Christmas night, received an angelic sign from the heavens, some of Liudolf's swineherds keeping watch over their animals on All Saints eve saw miraculous lights in the sky. They summoned Liudolf and reported the miracle. When Liudolf himself observed the lights again the next day, he ordered "with the approval of his beloved wife, Oda," that the land should be cleared, and construction of the monastery begun.¹¹¹ The couple's recognition of the miracle echoed Anna and Simeon's recognition of Christ as the Messiah in the temple.¹¹²

Likewise, Hrotsvit strongly invoked the language associated with Anna in the temple to describe the fasting and vigils of Hathumoda as the convent's first abbess. Dedicated to fasting and prayer at the church's altar, Hathumoda received a miracle that allowed her to discover a miraculous source of stone for the monastery's construction:

A delay therefore ensued in the completion of the church [*templi*], but the abbess Hathumoda, hoping that those who believe can obtain through faith all things in the Lord, wearied herself with continuous and unstinting labor, serving God night and day with holy ardor. She gave herself to fasting and holy prayers, when one day as she lay prostrate before the altar, a pleasing voice ordered her to rise and follow a bird...she proceeded rapidly where the Holy Spirit had led, until she arrived at the site of the notable temple now begun.¹¹³

111 In qua fundandum fuerat praenobile templum/Ordine dispositio cernuntur lumina plura...Consensusque suae dilectae coniugis Oda...coenobia sub honore dei constructio nostri; *Primordia*, ed. Berschin, 314-15.

112 Anna and Simeon were not a married couple, but Christian exegesis understood them as parallel representatives of the two sexes, indicating that the message of Christ was revealed to both man and woman together; see Ben Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 208.

113 Unde moram templi partitur perfectio coepti/Abatissa sed a domino sperans Hathumoda/Impetraro fide credentes omnia posse/Frangebat sese nimio persaepe labores/Noctedieque deo sacris studiis famulando...Nam ieiundando sacris precibusque vacando/Cum prostrato die quadam iacuit secus aram...Perrexit citius, quo duxit spiritus almus/Donec ad coeptum pervenit nobile templum, *Primordia*, 315-316, tr. Head 247.

Through Hathumoda's miracle, the walls of the monastery and church [*monasterio cum templo*] could be finished because the dove had revealed a quarry with a sufficient amount of stone.¹¹⁴ The episodes in the narrative were further affirmed when, upon the dedication of the convent church at All Saints in 880 (a date which Oda herself had chosen), the miraculous lights returned to mark the divinely-designated site for Gandersheim.¹¹⁵ Hrotsvit described the monastery as a temple on one other instance, at Liudolf's death, when the sisters sadly buried him in the original church [*antiquo corpus venerabile templo*], though his grave was later moved to the new church.¹¹⁶ This point in the text marked the beginning of Oda's widowhood as part of Gandersheim's divine plan, permitting her leadership in the convent as a kind of ex-officio abbess, now devoted "more fully to the things of God."¹¹⁷

As Karl Leyser has argued, "the Ottonian historians played a part in the sacral ascent of the *stirps regia*. They interpreted the historical process as a manifestation of divine justice and in it successful kings were bearers of the divine will," including Hrotsvit's first historical epic poem, *The Deeds of Otto*, in this characterization.¹¹⁸ Hrotsvit's concept of sacred history in the *Primordia* involved a skillful interweaving of biblical and literary *topoi* with the authority of both genealogical and spiritual lineage. Working within a political framework that was often fraught with conflict, Hrotsvit nevertheless maintained important relationships across rival factions, handling the internal strife within the Ottonian line and tensions between competing bishoprics. Like Hucbald, Hrotsvit drew on a variety of genres in the construction of her monastic history. She infused the masculine Liudolfing lineage history associated with Gan-

114 Unde monasterio cum templo moenia coepti/Omnia materiam possent traxisse petri-
nam, Berschin, 317.

115 *Ibid.*, 321.

116 *Ibid.*, 317.

117 See above, n. 80.

118 Leyser, *Rule and Conflict*, 84.

dersheim with feminized themes, structuring the narrative around a veneration of heroic chastity that so profoundly shaped her dramas and legends, and drew on images of Anna and the unswerving devotion of the widowed *Ecclesia* to characterize her foundation. In the *stirps regia* tradition, Hrotsvit employed all of these elements to underpin a narrative of an unbroken female spiritual lineage colored by varieties of virginal and widowed chastity that was transmitted from Oda and her mother Aeda through Oda's three Liudolfing daughters who served as abbesses, implying also that their traditions prevailed among the present inhabitants of the house.

Conclusion

Women who sought the religious life after marriage followed a trajectory of spiritual development toward the cloister; a recognized, even ritualized form of widowed piety enabled the transition from one state of life to the next. As a nun, the widow's previous married status was theoretically effaced as she merged with her new community, and her status as a married woman and widow theoretically blurred with that of the nuns who had entered the convent as virgins. Practically speaking, however, a widow who entered into a religious community brought with her a proven maturity and experience that colored her spirituality in positive ways. Hrotsvit integrated this notion of widowhood through Oda's personal history and a topological use of Anna's chaste vigilance in the temple to express a devotional history of her convent.

In many respects, this literary synthesis paralleled the 'double life' of the widow in medieval representations: the construct of "widow" often represented real persons with social rank and influence, yet at the same time, the hagiographies of such women translated their experiences into conventional models of female holiness that were dominated by a larger discourses concerning female chastity and spirituality. In monastic histories and hagiographies concerning widows, representations of widowhood on a spiritual level paralleled the practical concerns of a widowed or repudiated spouse.

Widowhood formalized the period of mourning and organized the chaos of spousal loss into a cogent state with consistent expectations and rules. Following the death of a spouse, a widow needed to make important choices: whether or not to remarry (which was discouraged by Church authorities); whether to enter a convent, if she chose not to remarry; and how to protect her reputation, personal autonomy and perhaps her physical well-being and that of her children, if she elected neither of the above actions.

Rictrude's life best expressed the medieval understanding of widowhood as a threshold that facilitated a new phase of a woman's spirituality, often crucial to monastic memory because it was the event that joined Rictrude's personal history to a monastery's institutional history as she transitioned into convent life. Hrotsvit's epic history also linked Oda's widowhood to the convent's origins story, but it was original and unique in its situation of widowed and virginal chastity as equally meritorious, with both modes of female chastity and experience lending strong leadership to the convent's worldly concerns as well as facilitating a profound connection with the divine. Hucbald's model was doubtless the more conventional expression of medieval understandings of the "profession" of widowhood in early medieval prescriptive texts and hagiography, in which widowhood served as an essentially transitional phase between marriage and the convent, yet there is also evidence that widows like Oda, who proposed to live in permanent chastity without explicitly becoming a nun occupied a particular—if unusual and sometimes fragile—niche in society. Pious widows seeking the structured devotion and proximity to religious community still engaged in secular life, often to the benefit of the monastic community that claimed them as founders, benefactors, and spiritual ancestors. Unlike many authors of the Carolingian age and her own, Hrotsvit seemed completely comfortable with Oda's interstitial role in this respect, and was one of the few authors of the period who did not express caution about the threats to chastity that widows faced in the world, or mistrust of uncloistered vowesses who abused their

freedom to pursue secular pleasures. Rather, the widow Oda was the real heroine of the epic poem, and the Scriptural widow Anna provided the template for the depth and sincerity of the canonesses of Gandersheim's spiritual life.

In both Hucbald's and Hrotsvit's texts, the widow's role invites reflection upon the complex elements in play that created medieval images of female chastity: spiritual ideals, institutional identity, and individual agency all contributed to the creation of texts that defined the chaste widow in prescriptive and historical texts. Whereas Hucbald tended to shape his widow, Rictrude, to conform to theological and monastic norms, Hrotsvit's holy founders provide communal leadership that superseded the nuns' general obedience to Church authority or the specific tenets of monastic discipline. Steeped in a cross-hatching of learned traditions, Hrotsvit's shaping of her convent's history suggested in certain respects a radical in Saxonia. In composing a strongly matriarchal history and hagiography of the Liudolfing/Ottonian patrons of Gandersheim, Hrotsvit provided a vision of widowed spirituality as an integral part of her convent's formidable history.

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Albrecht Dürer: woodcut from the Roswitha editio princeps (1501)