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Laughter in Early Medieval Literature: 'Beowulf' and the Dramas by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. The Human Dimension Behind the Heroic Struggle and Christian Martyrdom

Laughter, comedy, and humor have been the subject of much philosophical, theological, literary, psychological, and sociological research, and scholars have explored those manifestations of human nature in many different cultural periods, genres, and media. In that process, the scholars have realized the extent to which laughter, to simplify the phenomenon in one word, reflects a wide gamut of human feelings, attitudes, ideas, strategies, values, and principles. Consequently, we have thereby understood that the study of laughter can also be pursued within the pre-modern world, both within the sphere of the Church and in secular society.

The question pursued here, however, pertains to the literary works of the early Middle Ages, especially the Old-English 'Beowulf' and the Latin plays and narratives by the German canoness Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. The close examination reveals significant narrative strategies and elements in both of them, which confirms the great relevance of both descriptive depictions of laughter and literary comedy already at that time, at least as expressed in literary terms. Despite the experience of life-threatening dangers ('Beowulf'), and despite the suffering of a fatal destiny of male and female martyr (Hrotsvit), significant scenes of ordinary life appear before our eyes, which make it possible to look into the background of these texts and to understand how they had their own *Sitz im Leben* and thus mirrored fundamental interests, attitudes, and habits of people at that time.

Keywords: 'Beowulf'; comedy; early Middle Ages; Hrotsvit of Gandersheim; humor; laughter

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Смех в раннесредневековой литературе. Беовульф и драмы Хротсвиты Гандерсгеймской: человеческое за эпическим героизмом и христианским мученичеством

Смех, юмор и комическое в целом не раз становились предметом философских, теологических, литературных, психологических и социологических исследований. Рассматривая природу этих явлений в контексте разных эпох, жанров и медиа, ученые пришли к выводу, что смех вобрал в себя целую гамму чувств, мнений, идей, стратегий, ценностей и принципов. Это и подтолкнуло нас к изучению смеха в доиндустриальную эпоху как в сфере религии, так и в светском отношении.

В данном исследовании мы обратимся к раннесредневековым текстам, а именно – к древнеанглийскому «Беовульфу» и латиноязычной драме и прозе преподобной Хротсвиты Гандерсгеймской. Не приходится сомневаться, что в этих ранних произведениях можно обнаружить по крайней мере формальные признаки комедии. Невзирая на череду угрожающих жизни опасностей (в «Беовульфе») и трагически неотвратимых событий в судьбах святых мучеников и мучениц (у Хротсвиты), перед читательским взором возникают картины быта, позволяющие понять *Sitz im Leben*, а также оценить взгляды, привычки и интересы современников исследуемых текстов.

Ключевые слова: «Беовульф»; комедия; раннее Средневековье; смех; Хротсвита Гандерсгеймская; юмор

ДЛЯ ЦИТИРОВАНИЯ

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Laughter in Early Medieval Literature: 'Beowulf' and the Dramas by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim

The Human Dimension Behind the Heroic Struggle and Christian Martyrdom



Introduction: Laughter as a Universal Human Feature

Maybe two or three decades ago, it still would have been impossible to imagine the scale to which laughter, humor, satire, irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like pertained to the medieval world. Although the historiography on medieval humor began in the 19th century, the second half of the 20th century, and particularly the last twenty or thirty years showed an incredible growth in the interest in all facetious aspects of medieval culture. Since the late 1990s, we have been witnessing the so-called 'emotional turn' in the study of history, which has greatly contributed to the attention that is given to the comical and the audiences' reactions to it, i.e., laughter, smiling, joy, happiness – or, sometimes, confusion. It has not been such a long time ago when the public and scholarship naively assumed that the Middle Ages were really 'dark' ('dark' compared to what, really?). But we have learned much since then, and, for instance, the contributors to the 'Handbook of Medieval Culture'¹ have richly confirmed that we can find countless examples of comedy also in the pre-modern world, that is, comedy of many different kinds, depending on the genre, the narrative circumstance, the intention, and the communicative function. And how else could it be, since we are talking about people, and human life has always been co-determined by the lighter side of all existence? Recent scholars have commonly addressed the universal feature of laughter both in antiquity and in the modern world, in East and West, etc.² Art historians have also confirmed that there is much evidence for comedy in church sculptures, though

1. Handbook of Medieval Culture: Fundamental Aspects and Conditions of the European Middle Ages / ed. Albrecht Classen. 3 vols. Berlin; Boston, 2015.

2. See the contributions to: Humour and Laughter in History: Transcultural Perspectives / eds. E. Cheauré, R. Nohejl. Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen, 15. Bielefeld, 2014; Histories of Laughter and Laughter in History / eds. R. Borysławski, J. Jajszczyk, J. Wolff. Newcastle upon Tyne, 2016.

there the angels and saints smile happily, whereas the infernal forces grin and mock in a nasty or desperate, foolish manner³.

To state the obvious, first, laughter belongs to some of the fundamental features of human beings, irrespective of the cultural-historical framework, irrespective of the worst possible external conditions, whether war or fires, whether hurricanes or earthquakes. Of course, in the direct face of a death experience, or in bitter political or legal exchanges, when one's own life is at stake, it might be highly unlikely that the individual would still have the guts to smile or laugh about an ordinary situation or about the opponents, especially when they serve as executors, killers, murderers, etc.

On January 6, 2021, certainly no one inside and outside of the Capitol in Washington D.C. felt like laughing. There was hostility, aggression, and a horrible mob mentality ready to break in, to destroy, and then also to take the lives of innocent civilians, policemen, guards, and politicians. It was one dramatic moment in a countless series of violent moments both today and throughout world history. We could easily pick any other event, and we would find overwhelming evidence for people's aggression, hostility, and violence, and yet also countless examples of humor, comedy, irony, satire, etc.

However, whenever there is a lull in war, when a prisoner is not yet taken to the death chamber, when life grants the individual some breathing space or a pause, and when there are enough resources to enjoy the free time and a certain degree of liberty, laughter sneaks back in, humor makes its presence felt, maybe as a release mechanism, maybe as a coping strategy. Johan Huizinga had already identified the human species as *homo ludens*, which we could expand to *homo risus*⁴. The phenomenon itself, however, laughter, has proven to be a highly complex one, erupting at many different times and under countless different circumstances, involving the own self and others, the body and the mind, learning and ignorance, conscious strategies to belittle others or to minimize dangers or situations.

Without going into any theoretical details here, we know that some of the greatest minds have already examined this manifestation of human sentiments, whether we think of Aristotle, Thomas

3. Seliges Lächeln und höllisches Gelächter: Das Lachen in Kunst und Kultur des Mittelalters / ed. W. Wilhelmy. Mainz, 2012.

4. Huizinga J. *Homo Ludens: proeve eener bepaling van het spelelement der cultuur*. Haarlem, 1938. This study has been republished and translated many times since then. See now: Prütting L. *Homo ridens: eine phänomenologische Studie über Wesen, Formen und Funktionen des Lachens*. Neue Phänomenologie, 21.2. Freiburg i. Br., 2013. For an excellent existentialist analysis of laughter as an essential aspect of human existence, see: Berger P.L. *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*. 2nd ed. Berlin; Boston, 1998.

Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Hobbs, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Émil Durckheim, Ewald Hecker, Anthony Ludovici, Mikhail Bakhtin, Konrad Lorenz, or Helmut Plessner, all of them contributing in their own ways to gelotology⁵. Laughter reflects various power structures, gender relationships, general concepts humans might have about animals and other elements in nature, and finds, for us most importantly, expression in virtually every literary art form. We would be hard pressed to identify a genre, whether in antiquity, the Middle Ages, or in the modern world, where we would not be able to identify at least some features of humor, comedy, satire, irony, etc.⁶ Even hagiographical authors did not shy away from presenting some scenes determined by laughter (e.g., childhood), as somber as the saints' lives turned out to be⁷.

Most interesting proves to be the question to what extent the Christian Church, or other religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) validated laughter or accepted the phenomenon that human beings were prone to embrace comedy, and this also in the Middle Ages, above all. Contrary to Bakhtinian assumptions about a stern, somber, and unemotional medieval clergy, at a close examination we can find many examples of humor also within pre-modern theology and church art⁸. Olle Ferm has compiled a number of insightful quotes from early medieval abbots who certainly agreed that laughter, especially if moderate in expression, was part of human life and should not be forbidden even to monks. Smaragdus of St. Mihiel near Verdun (ca. 760 – ca. 840), for instance, commented that it *is naturaliter est enim homini ridere <...> et ideo non potest hoc illi penitus prohiberi*. According to Hildemar of Corbie (Bishop of Beauvais), it would be quite natural for monks to smile, or even to laugh moderately for good purposes. In fact, laughter can be even appropriate and intellectually useful with respect to the use of specific words⁹.

No less significant, but then hardly surprising, would be the phenomenon that late medieval short verse narratives (*fabliaux*, *mæren*, *novelle*, *tales*, etc.) and prose tales teem with comedy, if they are not essentially predicated on the phenomenon of laughter with

5. See, for instance, the contributions to: *Laughter in Eastern and Western Philosophies: Proceedings of the Académie du Midi* / eds. H.-G. Moeller, G. Wohlfart. Freiburg i. Br.; Munich, 2010; *Prütting L. Homo ridens: Eine phänomenologische Studie über Wesen, Formen und Funktionen des Lachens*. 3 vols. Freiburg i. Br.; Munich, 2014; 4th ed. in 1 vol., 2016.

6. *Velten H.R. Scurrilitas: Das Lachen, die Komik und der Körper in Literatur und Kultur des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit*. Tübingen, 2017; see also my extensive introduction and the many contributions to: *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning, and Consequences* / ed. A. Classen. Berlin; New York, 2010. (*Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 5; and to: *Valenzen des Lachens in der Vormoderne (1250–1750)* / eds. C. Kuhn, S. Bießenecker. Bamberg, 2012.

7. *Darby K. Die 'Lachverständigen' im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen zu Darstellungen und Bewertungen des Lachens in Heiligenviten*. Vienna; Cologne; Weimar, 2021.

8. 'Risus sacer – sacrum risibile': *Interaktionsfelder von Sakralität und Gelächter im kulturellen und historischen Wandel* / eds. K. Gvozdeva, W. Röcke. Bern, Berlin, et al., 2009; see also: *Komische Gegenwelten: Lachen und Literatur in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* / eds. W. Röcke, H. Neumann. Paderborn, Munich, et al., 1999. As to the licence to laughter within the Church, whether in theological writings or in church art, see: *Seliges Lächeln...* (see note 1).

9. *Ferm O. Laughter and the Medieval Church // Tears, Sighs and Laughter: Expressions of Emotions in the Middle Ages* / eds. P. Förmegård, E. Kihlman, M. Ålestam, G. Engwall. Konferenser, 92. Stockholm, 2017. P. 167–168.

which the sheen of all authority and tradition is easily destroyed, or at least criticized and undermined.

One of the major strategies pursued by the many composers of Old French *fabliaux* or by such famous authors as Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, Heinrich Kaufringer, Franco Sacchetti, and Poggio Bracciolini was to make their audiences find a situation, an expression, a gesture, an idea, or a conversation simply funny, that is, to laugh about pretentious housefathers, domineering men, authoritative figures in the Church, hypocritical clerics, pompous women, or to smile with smart students, clever tricksters (see the collection of the ‘Pfaffe Amîs’ by Der Stricker, ca. 1240, or ‘Till Eulenspiegel’, anonymous, first printed in 1510), cunning wives, or intelligent servants¹⁰. Laughter exposes extreme attitudes, false claims, arrogance, pomposity, foolishness in words, gestures, mimicry, and especially in mind, and this both in the Middle Ages and today. Jokes might be difficult to translate from their medieval to their modern context, but hilarious responses to ridiculous human behavior or statements, ignorant assumptions, or absurd claims have reverberated throughout time and space and can be specifically detected in the surviving sources (written or visual)¹¹.

It seems unimaginable that any larger body of literature (or art) from any cultural period would be entirely bereft of comedy and humor. As much as the human being is often driven by aggression and hostility, as it is also determined by the need to laugh about situations, actions, and words. Already late antiquity and the early Middle Ages witnessed the emergence of many instances of humor in the contemporary literature which confirm the presence of this basic and universal human need, to laugh and to make jokes¹². Not surprisingly, when we turn to the works of the medieval intellectuals, theologians and philosophers, we observe numerous occasions when they express doubt, criticism, ridicule, objections, and opinions predicated on comedy¹³.

The evidence for laughter actually increases by the late Middle Ages and the early modern age, and turns into a ubiquitous phenomenon, especially if we think of Dante’s ‘Divina Commedia’ (completed in ca. 1320)¹⁴, the famous novels ‘Pantagruel King of the Dipsodes’ by François Rabelais (first volume of his ‘Gargantua’

10. Coxon S. *Laughter and Narrative in the Later Middle Ages: German Comic Tales 1350–1525*. London, 2008.

11. See, for instance, the contributions to: *The Languages of Humor: Verbal, Visual, and Physical Humor* / ed. A. Sover // *Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics*. London, New York, Oxford, et al., 2018; *Humor und Philosophie: eine ernste Angelegenheit?* / eds. T Gutknecht, H. Bennent-Vahle, Dietlinde Schmalfuß-Plicht. Münster, 2020 (*Jahrbuch der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Philosophische Praxis*, 8); *Berger A.A. Humor, Psyche, and Society: A Socio-Semiotic Analysis*. Series in Anthropology. Wilmington, DE; Malaga, 2020.

12. *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* / ed. G. Halsall. Cambridge, New York, 2002.

13. *Uncertain Knowledge: Scepticism, Relativism and Doubt in the Middle Ages* / ed. D.G. Denery II. Turnhout, 2014.

14. *Applauso N. Dante’s Comedy and the Ethics of Invective in Medieval Italy*. Studies in Medieval Literature. Lanham, Boulder, et al., 2020.

series, 1532, followed by subsequent volumes in 1534, 1546, 1552, and 1564), and ‘Don Quixote’ by Miguel de Cervantes (1605 and 1615)¹⁵. Countless Shrovetide plays by the Nuremberg cobbler Hans Sachs (1494–1576) contain many different elements of charming, biting, sarcastic, silly, or profound humor¹⁶. Similarly, many of the plays by William Shakespeare (1564–1616) are characterized by sharp, sarcastic, but also light and charming humor¹⁷. Altogether, as we can confirm in general terms, all human culture has been determined, among other aspects, by laughter¹⁸.

By Contrast: Early Medieval Examples

My purpose here is not to review the entire world of medieval literature and arts as to its comedic elements once again, along with the rich body of older and more recent research focusing on this theme. Instead, the challenge here rests on examining the Old English heroic epic of ‘Beowulf’ (ca. 700) and the Latin dramas by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (10th century) as unlikely but just for that reason most interesting test cases regarding the presence of laughter already at that time. The guiding question will be whether early medieval poets already allowed images of laughter and laughter itself to enter their works, and if so, what their purpose and strategies might have been. In ‘Beowulf’ our examination will focus mainly on the descriptive images of laughter and rare scenes of joy, while in Hrotsvit’s plays we shall look for more explicit comedic narratives and their functions. Insofar as ‘Beowulf’ primarily deals with the hero’s three major battles, first against Grendel, then against Grendel’s mother, and finally, fifty years later, against the dragon, which then kills the protagonist just before the latter also dies from its battle wounds, it might seem strange to look for humor¹⁹. Similarly, Hrotsvit’s plays highlight and glorify most serious themes, that is, the efforts by most devout Christian women to preserve their faith against even the worst threats by Roman pagan rulers, which regularly concludes with their martyrdom. In both cases, of course, there is a sense of happiness because evil has been overcome, the monsters have been defeated, society can breathe a sigh of relief, and life continues

15. Robert-Nicoud V. *The World Upside Down in 16th Century French Literature and Visual Culture*. Faux titre: *Études de langue et littérature françaises*, 426. Leiden; Boston, 2018; see also: *Champfleury J. Histoire de la caricature au Moyen Âge et sous la Renaissance*. Paris, [1875].

16. Benedek T.G. *Medicine and Humor from the Writings of Hans Sachs and Hans Folz*, Meistersinger. New York, 2018.

17. Forster A.H. *Wit, Humor and the Comic in Shakespeare and Elsewhere: A Literary Analysis*. New York, 1956; Maslen R.W. *Shakespeare and Comedy*. London, 2005.

18. *Semiotik, Rhetorik und Soziologie des Lachens: Vergleichende Studien zum Funktionswandel des Lachens vom Mittelalter zur Gegenwart* / eds. L. Fietz, J.O. Fichte, H.-W. Ludwig. Tübingen, 1996.

19. Indeed, ‘Beowulf’ scholarship has not paid much attention to such cultural-historical and anthropological-psychological questions; for a solid examination and review, see: Cain C.M., Fulk R.D. *A History of Old English Literature*. Blackwell Histories of Literature. Malden, MA; Oxford; Victoria, Australia, 2003. P. 193–224.

(‘Beowulf’), or because female virtues have triumphed over male machinations to destroy the women’s chastity and unshakeable faith in Christ the Lord. But could we find here any real forms of laughter, a strong counter-force against the doomsday atmosphere which threatens to overshadow everything until triumph has been achieved?

If our assumption that laughter or humor pertains essentially to all human culture and identity, in fact co-defines both in a fundamental way, then there is a good reason to look for them also in the Anglo-Saxon epic poem and in the early medieval dramas. On both sides, the situation is mostly grim and tragic, Beowulf being involved in existential fights against monsters no other human being could overcome, and Hrotsvit’s female protagonists struggling for their dear lives, while trying at the same time to maintain their religious faith.

And yet, comedy comes to the surface, maybe at the least expected moment, which promises to shed light on the cultural conditions in the early Middle Ages bringing them much closer to our own world than the modern reader might have assumed. Our text examples have to be read as works of fiction, and not as military or religious documents. They were performed and presented to various audiences and were certainly intended both as illumination and entertainment, both for didactic purposes and literary delight²⁰. As performance pieces, those texts had to meet a variety of expectations, already then, combining the serious and the hilarious, since only then would the listeners have accepted them as full representations of their own imaginations and concepts directly connected to their lives²¹.

All this only makes sense, however, if we acknowledge right from the start that no laughter is the same, that there are countless possibilities of how humor finds its expression, and that in most cases laughter reveals rather profound, complex, and also troublesome features in human life. Laughter proves to be a small key for a huge hidden door into the human subconsciousness, mentality, and value system, and we can already find many key holes both in ‘Beowulf’ and in the dramas by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim.

20. See already the contributions to: *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature* / ed. J. Wilcox. Cambridge, 2000; *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond* / ed. M. Pfister. Amsterdam; Atlanta, 2002; *Words that Tear the Flesh: Essays on Sarcasm in Medieval and Early Modern Literature and Cultures* / eds. A. Baragona, E.L. Rambo. Berlin; Boston, 2018.

21. Wehrli M. *Literatur im deutschen Mittelalter: Eine poetologische Einführung*. Stuttgart, 1984. P. 163–181.

‘Beowulf’

The fact by itself that Grendel is furious about Hrothgar’s hall and avenges his feelings of being an outsider, an alien, or the like by turning into a cannibal carries great significance. Apart from the fact that we do not know what he was eating before the hall had been erected, Heorot itself represents the major challenge to him. We could easily identify it as the iconic representation of culture, of courtly values, of civilization, and hence also of entertainment and laughter²². We are not given such details, but a hall of that grandeur, luxurious and built larger than any other before could have served only one purpose, meeting of the court company, hence celebrations and festivities: ‘Thus the troopmen lived agreeably, at ease’ (93). It is a ‘mead-mansion’ (91), so people drink, probably to excess. And Hrothgar makes sure that he himself performs according to the highest ideals of a king, handing out rings as gifts, ‘a fortune at feast’ (91). Poor Grendel, we might almost say, ‘heard noisy pleasures in the hall. There was the music of the harp, the clear song of the performer’ (93), but he is not part of it and must content himself with his horrible existence in the fens, the swampy world of darkness, wetness, and cold.

Significantly, Grendel has apparently never attacked anyone before; he was an unknown entity, as far as we can tell from the introduction. Only once Heorot has been erected, i.e., as soon as courtly festivities begin and happiness permeates Hrothgar’s court as a sign of triumph and control, does the monster come out of its hiding place and attack, killing and devouring men, performing horrible deeds of cannibalism. On the one hand, the survivors bewail the loss of their friends once they realize the dastardly deed, on the other there might be a slight sense of guilt because they all had feasted: ‘after feasting, wailing was lifted up, a loud morning-song’ (95).

In fact, Grendel achieves exactly what he had intended, the celebrations, the joy and happiness associated with the hall come to an end; no one dares to spend the night there any longer: ‘Then there was no dearth of those who found themselves sleeping-quarters elsewhere, farther away, a bed among the private chambers, when the hall-thane’s malice was demonstrated to them’ (95).

22. The ‘Beowulf’ Manuscript: Complete Texts and ‘The Fight at Finnsburg’ / ed. and trans. R.D. Fulk. Cambridge, MA; London, 2010. (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library).

The narrator then reveals that Grendel had been involved in a long-term struggle against Hrothgar, but the full outbreak of the conflict only occurred after the hall had been finished and the celebrations had started (97). Although the narrator does not state it explicitly, the real conflict thus consisted of the clash of two different cultures, the one determined by happiness and delight, the other one by hatred, envy, brooding, and hostility.

We know what happens next and do not need to examine the battle with Grendel and the fight against Grendel's mother, both very grim and near fatal encounters for Beowulf, though he survives, both with the help of his super-human strength, and with the help of ancient swords made by giants one of which he grabs while struggling against the mother. For our interest here, what matters are the moments of respite, the celebrations, the feasts, which occupy the empty spaces between the deadly fights. As soon as Beowulf has received Hrothgar's permission, for instance, to take up the challenge posed by Grendel, he and his men turn to a happy fellowship:

Then there was cleared a bench for the Geatish fellows all together in a group in the drinking-hall; there the resolute ones went to sit, magnificent in their might. A courtier attended to his duty, who bore in hand an embellished ale-vessel, dispensed clear, sweet drink. Now and then the performer sang brightly in Heorot. There was heroes' enjoyment there, no small host of Danes and Weders. (119)

But even this social gathering does not run a smooth course, since Unferth begins to question Beowulf's qualifications and voices his doubts about his youthful competition with his fellow Breca, which Beowulf strongly rejects, initiating his remarks with mockery: 'Well, my friend Unferth, drunk with grog you have said quite a lot about Breca' (121). And with respect to Grendel, he goes even one step further and ridicules his opponent: 'Grendel would never have caused so much alarm, the terrifying troublemaker, to your ruler, humiliation in Heorot, if your mind, your spirit were as resolute as you yourself regard it' (125).

Though we are not told quite explicitly so, the response to Beowulf's speech must have been much amusement and mockery and teasing of Unferth, as indicated by the roaring laughter: 'There was laughter of heroes, the noise resonated, conversation was cheery' (127). The Geats do not display any fear, knowing only too well that they are under good protection by their leader. When Hrothgar's wife, Queen Wealtheo, enters the room, a very serious tone sets in again since she honors the hero and praises him as the savior she had been praying for to God. But subsequently, after Beowulf has accepted the cup offered by her and having vowed to carry out his proclaimed pledge to kill Grendel, joyfulness and laughter return, as if there were no concerns: 'Then again as before brave words were spoken in the hall, the folk in contentment, the noise of triumphant people' (129). Of course, they are not the ones to be in charge of the fight against the monster, a fact which will be repeated several times casting an odd shadow on the Geats, that is, Beowulf's retainers. They celebrate, they enjoy the feast, but they are not presented as actual fighters; everything is up to the hero. But that would be the topic of another paper²³.

More important might be that Beowulf voices in a mocking tone the morning after the fight that Grendel was defeated, and 'to save his life he left his hand guarding his retreat, arm and shoulder' (151)²⁴. This sarcasm is probably justified in that case, the battle could have easily ended the other way around, but the protagonist survived and defeated the monster, providing much relief for Hrothgar's company. The hand stuck in the rafters speaks a facetious, but also an iconic language.

Subsequently, the hall is decked out again with garlands and prepared for yet another feast, and merriment is allowed to return, apparently the most important element in the world of those heroes, who either fight or entertain themselves with mead, joking, and laughter. After Beowulf and his retainers are richly rewarded, the celebration begins once again: 'There was singing joined with music in the presence of Healfdene's battle-leader, entertainment-wood touched, a narrative often related, when Healgamen, Hrothgar's singer, was to tell from the mead-bench of Finn's son' (157).

23. See, for instance, *Bazelmans J. By Weapons Made Worthy: Lords, Retainers and Their Relationship in 'Beowulf'*. Amsterdam, 1999; *Cronan D. Narrative Disjunctions in Beowulf // English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*. 2018. Vol. 99.5–6. P. 459–478.

24. *Pigg D.F. Who is Grendel in 'Beowulf'? Ambiguity, Allegory, and Meaning // Imagination and Fantasy in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Projections, Dreams, Monsters, and Illusions / ed. A. Classen. Berlin; Boston, 2020. P. 303–321. He offers this insightful conclusion: 'Scenes of feasting are normative in "Beowulf"; and the warriors' merriment sets up a kind of melancholy tone as the poet is always aware of the fate that awaits, especially for those fated to die on the evening of the Grendels' attacks on Heorot. That even the feasting scenes in Heorot contain the seeds of chaos represented by Grendel is apparent' (p. 318–319).*

As scholarship has long recognized, this heroic epic is deeply characterized by a form of heteroglossia as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin since there are constantly moments of fights and moments of story-telling, and those latter moments are enriched with ballad singing and drinking²⁵. There are many narrative interludes between Beowulf's defeat of Grendel and the new attack by Grendel's mother, and those combine a variety of features, elements, and strategies to relate historical events, to reflect on funny situations, and to explain political conditions. In fact, tragedy is deeply ingrained here together with comedy; the stories of the past, as somber as they mostly are, though certainly tinged with great heroism, also lead over to laughter and joy.

And yet, destiny awaits them all, whether they eat and drink and enjoy their time, in the form of Grendel's mother. Nevertheless, the feast must go on: 'It was the choicest of banquets there; the men drank wine. They did not know the course of events, relentless destiny, such as had come to pass for many men' (167). Even Hrothgar's best friend and advisor, Æschere, is killed by the monstrous woman, which causes enormous grief among them all, an indication of the great friendship they all had enjoyed with him²⁶. In fact, the entire account in 'Beowulf' swings back and forth, highlighting heroic accomplishments, then pointing out devastating defeat, which then is replaced by joy, happiness, feasting, and laughter. In other words, this heroic epic displays the entire gamut of human emotions and is not at all a woodcut-like poetic creation dealing only with somber, military aspects.

Most dramatically, when Beowulf reappears from the depth of the water, after having killed Grendel's mother and decapitated her son, his retainers are overjoyed and express greatest happiness to see their lord alive again, after they all had virtually abandoned all hope because blood had oozed to the surface: 'They came to meet him then, thanked God, that powerful throng of thanes, rejoiced in their lord, that they were permitted to see him again safe and sound' (193).

Beowulf carries Grendel's head with him to display it to Hrothgar and his court. He encounters them, oddly, to say the least, spending their time drinking back in the hall, as if nothing would

25. Bakhtin M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* / ed. M. Holquist. Austin, TX, 1981; for the phenomenon of heteroglossia in medieval literature, see, for instance, Groos A. *Romancing the Grail: Genre, Science, and Quest in Wolfram's Parzival*. Ithaca, NY; London, 1995. P. 17–20.

26. Classen A. *Friends and Friendship in Heroic Epics: With a Focus on 'Beowulf', 'Chanson de Roland', the 'Nibelungenlied', and 'Njal's Saga' // Neohelicon*. 2011. Vol. 38 (1). P. 121–139.

bother them: ‘Grendel’s head was then carried by the hair into the hall where men were drinking, gruesome for the men and lady among them, a beautiful, treasured sight; the men looked on’ (195). Several hundreds of years later, a similar scene appears before our eyes in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’, when the Green Knight carries his own head which Gawain had cut off as part of their Christmas game, and disappears as if nothing had happened. Although the court is stunned, King Arthur then voices with a shocking glee:

Dear lady, never be alarmed today;
Such games are customary during Christmas time,
Staging of interludes, laughing and singing,
Among these classic carols of courtiers and laydies.
Nevertheless, to my meal I may well direct myself,
For I have witnessed a wonder I willingly admit²⁷.

Both in ‘Beowulf’ and in this late medieval alliterative romance, grotesque forms of humor underscore the otherwise sometimes rather gruesome account, which alerts us to the complexity of medieval literary accounts at large which tend to incorporate many more times than we might have assumed such elements characteristic of humor or comedy at large. This motif matters significantly for our discussion despite the vast differences in genre, language, and narrative setting because it is predicated on the sense of shock, surprise, and transgression, triggering laughter at the end. Most strikingly, both here and in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’, but then also in numerous other heroic epics (‘Nibelungenlied’, ‘Njál’s Saga’, ‘El Poema de Mío Cid’ etc.), terrifying battle scenes are oddly framed by hilarious episodes, or scenes determined by laughter, story-telling, singing, joking, and always drinking, of course. This comes to the fore even in small dimensions, often only hinted at, and yet significant, so when Hrothgar concludes his long speech addressing Beowulf after he has returned from his battle with Grendel’s mother: ‘Now go to your seat, take pleasure in the feast, distinguished in battle; there shall be a great many treasures shared between us after it is morning’ (203).

27. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Dual-Language Version / ed. and trans. by W. Vantuono. New York; London, 1991. P. 470–475. See: Classen A. Laughter as an Expression of Human Nature in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period: Literary, Historical, Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Reflections // Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning, and Consequences / ed. A. Classen. Berlin; New York, 2010. P. 1–140. Cf. also: Röcke W. Grotteske, Parodie, Didaxe: Aspekte einer Literaturgeschichte des Lachens im Mittelalter // Neohelicon. 1996. Vol. 23.2. P. 145–166.

After all, laughter and making jests are expressions of personal sentiments, they reflect a specific realm of emotions, and although ‘Beowulf’ constitutes a heroic epic, the poet certainly addressed also feelings of sadness and sorrow, especially when the protagonist and his retainers have to leave to return home (209). Those tears shed by Hrothgar are simply the other side of the same coin, so even this seemingly cold-blooded heroic poem also reflects the interiority of the individual figures²⁸. Laughter, jokes, or humor at large are hence not aberrations, but simply indications of the human side of the various heroes.

This allows us to refocus on Grendel and the famous hall Heorot. When Beowulf has returned to his lord and relates his adventures, he specifically emphasizes the joy and festivities the members of Hrothgar’s court experienced there: ‘The company was in contentment, never in all my life have I seen under heaven’s vault greater mead-revelry of hall-occupants’ (219). Revealingly, Beowulf then characterizes Grendel as follows: ‘the angry demon, terrible and twilight-fierce, came looking for us where we inhabited the hall unmolested’ (223). We could thus argue that the monster was particularly incensed over the happiness of the courtly company and regarded the hall itself as a most painful challenge for himself. Envy, jealousy, hatred, and utter disconnect from Hrothgar’s world dominate this creature, so he resorts to the only means available to him to squash the delights, the joy, and the communal entertainment by turning to gruesome cannibalism. But Beowulf stopped him, overpowered him, and caused such a wound — the loss of his arm — that he eventually dies.

Subsequently, however, as we also learn from the protagonist’s account, the happiness of the courtly company returned, at least until Grendel’s mother showed up at night:

There was story-telling and entertainment: the ancient Scylding, well informed, recounted from far back; at times the battle-bold man touched the lyre with pleasure, the diverting wood; at times he pursued a tale, true and tragic; at times the big-hearted king duly offered an unusual account; at times, in turn, hobbled by age, the old war-maker sang dirges to his youth, his war

²⁸ For the study of emotions in the Middle Ages, see, for a comprehensive examination, *Cristiani R., Rosenwein B.H. What is the History of Emotions // What is History?* Cambridge, 2018; cf. also the contributions to *Emotions and Medieval Textual Media* / ed. M.C. Flannery. Turnhout, 2018; *Boquet D., Nagy P. Medieval Sensibilities: A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages*. New York, 2018.

powers; the breast welled up inside him when, made wise by the years, he called many things to mind. Thus we took our diversions indoors the entire day, until another night came to mortals. (225)

Happiness and joy thus intermingle; past events are recounted there in order to entertain, songs are performed, the people drink, and no one has any concern, until the next slaughter begins. 'Beowulf' presents a rich tapestry of events as he witnessed them in Denmark, and we thus become vivid observers of a highly complex social framework where the wide range of emotions is given free reign.

In short, laughter as an expression of human nature is represented in 'Beowulf' alongside with sorrow, fear, and tragedy. Particularly this considerable range of emotional experiences, behind, after, through, and despite the heroic events, highlight the true literary quality of this early medieval heroic poem. The poet was much more interested also in the human dimensions of his protagonists, including their sense of comedy, than we might have thought, especially in light of the monstrous events with Grendel and his mother, and later during the court festivals. Significantly, however, we would look in vain for such happy moments, some delightful pauses amidst all the horror coming forth from the dragon, and the reason seems to be that by that time Beowulf has reached an old age and is no longer assured the victory. Instead, even though he can kill the dragon, he himself dies from its bite in his neck, or rather from the poison injected into his body. While the early parts of the epic poem were determined by a considerable degree of comedy, the later parts reflect doom and gloom, with only little sense of hope for the future. The dragon has been killed, but the leader of the Geats has been killed, which spells major trouble for the people.

Hrotsvit of Gandersheim

The works of the tenth-century canoness Hrotsvit of Gandersheim have already been examined and studied from many different perspectives, and this for good reasons because she emerged at her

time as the most prominent playwrights since antiquity — maybe unmatched until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — author of religious narratives, and of short historical epic poems. No other woman in the early Middle Ages could be identified as a match in her intellectual and literary accomplishments²⁹. Although her works belong to completely different genres than ‘Beowulf’, she can serve us well to widen the perspective on the history of laughter in the culture of that age, well before the rise of courtly literature in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Whereas the heroic epic poem reflects the secular pagan world in Anglo-Saxon England, Hrotsvit lived during the era of the Ottonian emperors in northern Germany. But she was not a nun, only a canoness, and enjoyed high privileges as a distant member of the imperial family. As a canoness, she had not taken vows and thus could have left her convent any time when she would have been needed or when she might have wanted. More important, though, Hrotsvit received an extraordinary degree of education in her convent and soon turned against the primary reading material, especially the plays by the Roman poet Terence (d. 159 BC). Those were, as she explicitly opined, too erotic, sensuous, or, as we would say, too graphic to be good as reading material in a women’s convent. In the preface to her plays she comments: ‘Not infrequently this caused me to blush / and brought to my cheeks a scarlet flush, / because being forced by the conventions of this composition / I had to contemplate and give a rendition / of that detestable madness of unlawful lovers and of their evil flattery, / which we are not permitted even to hear’ (41). Hence, she had to come up with her own plays, and she succeeded in her efforts in a brilliant fashion. In fact, her plays continue to be performed even today because they are highly effective in theatrical terms.³⁰

Whatever the plot of her plays or narratives entails, there is always a clear message that the pious and devout person will always overcome external threats and achieve spiritual triumph. While this theological issue is straightforward and becomes manifested throughout her entire oeuvre, there are regularly short episodes in which the protagonists burst out laughing or

29. *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*. Sämtliche Dichtungen / trans. from the Latin by O. Baumhauer, J. Bendixen, T.G. Pfund, intro. by B. Nagel. Munich, 1966; *Hrotsvithae Opera* / ed. H. Homeyer. Munich; Paderborn; Vienna, 1970; *Hrotsvit. Opera omnia* / ed. W. Berschin. Munich, 2001. For an English translation of a selection of her texts, see *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. A Florilegium of Her Works* / trans. with intro., interpretive essay and notes by K.M. Wilson. Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1998; for a comprehensive discussion of her works, see: *Classen A. Reading Medieval European Women Writers: Strong Literary Witnesses from the Past*. Frankfurt a. M., 2016. P. 51–82; see now also: *Idem*. Roswith von Gandersheim // *Literary Encyclopedia*. URL: <https://www.litencyc.com/php/people.php?rec=true&UID=5891> (дата обращения: 29.05.2022).

30. For a solid body of relevant research on her plays, see the contributions to: *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Rara Avis in Saxonia?* / ed. K.M. Wilson. Ann Arbor, MI, 1987; *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Contexts, Identities, Affinities, and Performances* / eds. P.R. Brown, L.A. McMillin, K.M. Wilson. Toronto; Buffalo; London, 2004; and to *A Companion to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* (fl. 960): *Contextual and Interpretive Approaches* / eds. P.R. Brown, S.L. Wailes. Leiden; Boston, 2013. It seems as if virtually every possible angle in Hrotsvit’s plays might have been examined thoroughly by now, but I hope to add a new perspective by examining her approach to humor within the context of early medieval literature at large.

invite, through their behavior, the audience to laugh about foolish characters on the stage. In this regard, Hrotsvit proves to be a surprisingly accomplished playwright who successfully operated with elements which she was certainly familiar with drawn from everyday-life experiences³¹.

As serious, spiritual, and ultimately even deadly many of her literary accounts prove to be because the protagonists often face their certain death when they try to defend their faith or endeavor to return to their previous status as virtuous, chaste, and pious individuals after an interval of sinfulness and lust, laughter still peels throughout her work. One simple reason for this phenomenon can be easily identified: plays only work well if they are intense, evoke feelings, either sorrow or happiness, when they are tragedies or comedies, and reflect on critical moments and issues in human life. Hrotsvit obviously understood not only the theory of the classical theater as represented by Terence, she also appears to have a good sense of humor and knew intimately well how to appeal to her audience. Laughter is not a trivial matter on the stage, irrespective of the circumstances. The same, however, also applies to Hrotsvit's religious narratives, where we similarly observe the breaking out of laughter, either by the figures themselves, or by us as the readers/listeners upon the poet's encouragement. As we will observe, although a canoness, hence a person contained in her convent by rather strict measures, there was much of basic human emotions, especially laughter, delight about the victory of devout, pious people in the past³².

But let us begin with the religious narrative 'Gongolf' which presents to us a biographical sketch of this saint who lived in the time of the Frankish King Pippin. Hrotsvit drew from a prose *vita* composed at the end of the ninth or the early tenth century, but she vastly changed the composition and narrative elements, which underscores once again her high literary qualities³³.

For the most part, we learn about Gongolf's saintly life, his dedication to his own people, and especially to the poor, but after he has married, the devil seduces his wife, who takes a cleric as her lover, who later murders Gongolf. But miracles then occur at his grave, which manifest the divine grace bestowed upon him by God.

31. Not surprisingly, due to her own status as a canoness, she had no children and could describe maternity, motherhood, and childcare only through a rather theoretical lens; see: *Membrives E.P. Mutterliebe aus weiblicher Perspektive: Zur Bedeutung von Affektivität in Frau Avas Leben Jesu // Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality / ed. A. Classen. Berlin; New York, 2005. P. 101–102.*

32. See the excellent introduction: *Nagel B. Einführung // Hrotsvit von Gandersheim. Sämtliche Dichtungen. Munich, 1966. P. 5–35; see also the detailed discussion: Martos J., Moreno Soldevila R. Introducción // Rosvita de Gandersheim. Obras Completas / intro., trans., and notes by J. Martos, R. Moreno Soldevila. Huelva, 2005. P. XIII–XLVI. Although we hear much about the question whether her plays were actually performed or whether they only served for reading, the issue of their potency in theatrical terms, specifically predicated on comedy, is not addressed adequately, if at all.*

33. The history of this saint and the hagiographies (there are two saint's lives) are dealt with by H. Homeyer: *Hrotsvithae Opera / intro. and commentary by H. Homeyer. Munich; Paderborn; Vienn, 1970. P. 90–98.*

His wife, however, furious about what she hears from the people, utters the blasphemous statement that the reported miracles that happen as his grave would certainly not be any different than those which her body produces when it would fart. The narrator makes every possible effort to avoid spelling out exactly the meaning of her word, but she clearly means to refer to the woman's rear, although in a very tactful and delicate fashion: *Non desint signa illius ut tumulo, / Haut alias, quam mira mei miracula dorsi / Proferat extrema denique particular* (570–2).

The punishment then follows immediately because from that time on whenever she utters a word, she is forced to release some wind, which makes her to the laughing stock of all people: *Sit risus causa omnibus inmodica* (580), and this for the rest of her life. As much as the entire narrative is focused on offering a glorifying image of the saintly man and his highest ethical ideals, as much the account surprisingly concludes with this hilarious, rather transgressive element, which must have guaranteed Hrotsvit much praise by her audience. After the gruesome murder, and after the deeply moving developments at Gongolf's grave, the conclusion suddenly takes us back to the mundane banalities of human life, as bashfully as the narrator formulates the sudden turn of events. Gongolf's widow, responsible for his murder, thus becomes the butt of endless jokes because she cannot speak without farting clearly noticeably³⁴.

Ernst Robert Curtius had already observed the significant role of humor in early medieval hagiography, but he refrained from further comments on the details and specific functions of laughter, and he also did not include any remarks on Hrotsvit's contribution to this theme³⁵. But there are numerous scenes scattered throughout her work which prove to be hilarious, and this until today, or which evoke the people within the literary setting to burst out in laughing. In 'Pelagius', for instance, a young Christian man, the future martyr, is liberated from his incarceration in the caliph's dungeon in Córdoba because he commands such a beautiful physical appearance and impressive eloquence, which certainly appeal to the homosexual ruler, here identified as a king. Everyone knows about the caliph's sexual inclination and his willingness

34. See: Allen V. On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages. New York; Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2007. However, she does not seem to be familiar with Hrotsvit's *Gongolf*.

35. Curtius E.R. European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages / trans. from the German by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, NJ, 1990. P. 425–428 (published in German in 1948; first English translation published in 1953). See also: Wehrli M. Literatur im deutschen Mittelalter... P. 280–281 (see note 12), but he only mentions the humor in Hrotsvit's work in passing. Helpful in this context also proves to be: Maaz W. Das Lachen der Frauen vor des Teufels Küche: Ridicula bei Hrotsvit von Gandersheim // Komische Gegenwelten: Lachen und Literatur in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit / eds. W. Röcke, H. Neumann. Paderborn; Munich; Vienna; Zürich, 1999. P. 133–154, who already notices some of those scenes of laughter.

to bend the own rule if he can gain thereby a male prostitute, such as Pelagius.

The older man immediately approaches the youth, whom has been ordered to sit next to him on the throne, embraces him, and tries to kiss him, which Pelagius finds abhorrent, so he turns his head away and offers only his ear as a place for the caliph's lips. Everyone observes this scene, and they find Pelagius's gesture most entertaining, bursting out in laughter. They had all urged the ruler to liberate the youth and to use him for his sexual desires, since they were aware of the caliph's gayness. Consequently, the young man's rejection is interpreted as nothing but shyness, or bashfulness, insofar as they cannot imagine that this hostage, who suffered in the prison on behalf of his father, the prince of Galicia, would oppose to the pleasant treatment at court after his horrible time in the dungeon.

The caliph assumes more or less the same, he does not demonstrate any signs of irritation, and calmly, and seductively attempts to flirt with the young man, exerting slight pressure by warning him of the possible consequence of his rejection, the death penalty. Next, the ruler applies some force, trying to place at least one kiss on the youth's face, who resolutely fights back and hits him so hard in his face that his nose begins to bleed. This then changes the caliph's mood, he is done with this prisoner, who does not want to submit to his lustful flattering, so he orders him to be executed, by means of a catapult with which Pelagius is thrown over the city wall. He does not die, however, and hence must be decapitated with a sword to end his life.

There is thus no more laughter, no comedy, as the martyrdom begins which ultimately translates into Pelagius's body parts being worshipped as relics³⁶. Nevertheless, Hrotsvit, fully in tune with what her readers would need from time to time, incorporates this hilarious scene as a comic relief, especially because this enlivens the account, dramatizing it considerably, presenting various perspectives, and illustrating particularly Pelagius's character strength and resolute defense of his faith.

The same phenomenon can be observed in the truly famous and play *Dulcitius* much discussed by modern scholarship³⁷, where

36. Wailes S.L. Spirituality and Politics in the Works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. Selinsgrove, PA, 2006; Classen A. Die iberische Halbinsel im frühen Mittelalter: Ausgangspunkt für interkulturelle Kontakte zwischen den Ottonen und den andalusischen Muslimen. Kulturhistorische Betrachtungen aus literarischer (Hrotsvit von Gandersheim) und chronikalischer Sicht (Johannes von Gorze) // Arcadia. 2018. 53.2. P. 397–418.

37. See, for example, the heretofore completely ignored (at least in the west) Hungarian translation: Három körösztyén leány: az elso magyar nyelvü dráma / közreadja Dömötör Adrienne; a magyar nyelvü átiratokat készítette, és a tanulmányt írta Dömötör Adrienne; a latin szöveget átirta, fordította, és a latin nyelvü változatokkal kapcsolatos jegyzeteket írta / eds. A. Dömötör, R. Szentgyörgyi. Budapest, 2018. It contains the facsimile of the Latin manuscript, the Hungarian translation from the first quarter of the sixteenth century, the first printed variant from 1501, a literal transcription with annotations, a translation into modern English, and a German summary. This Hungarian version demonstrates the huge impact which the discovery of Hrotsvit's texts by Conrad Celtis in the monastic library of St. Emmeram in Regensburg in 1493 had on European humanists.

three virgins are threatened with terrible tortures and execution because they defend their faith. The emperor Diocletian is deeply upset about their recalcitrance, refusing to submit under his orders to worship his, that is, the pagan gods, and so he hands them over to his governor Dulcitius, who, delighted by their physical attractiveness, decides to rape them. They are kept locked away next to the kitchen, which proves to be the ideal setting for the playwright to inject a most hilarious scene of confusion.

The three virgins are suddenly alerted by considerable noise from the neighboring room. In their curiosity — even saintly virgins demonstrate the basic human sense of curiosity! — they peak through a crack in the wall and become witnesses of Dulcitius, having been confused by God, mistakes the sooty pots and pans for the three women. In a form of *teichoscopy*, they relate to each other that he embraces the pots, holds them on his lap, then takes the pans, jugs, and other utensils in the kitchen. Modern readers might immediately think further and imagine that this could amount to a perverse form of fetishism, but it is God's working that Dulcitius firmly believes to enjoy sexual pleasures with the three virgins. Those, however, are safe in their own room and only observe his actions, the result of which consists in him becoming completely black. If that were not funny enough, when Dulcitius then leaves the kitchen, obviously having satisfied himself with the objects — also sexually? — the guards become terrified believing that he is the devil, so they run away, and when he approaches the gate to the emperor's palace, the guards reject him and throw him down the stairs. Only in the seventh scene, when he encounters his wife, does it dawn upon him how he has been fooled, especially because she laments the fact that he has been the object of outrageous mockery by the Christian virgins.

But the three women continue to enjoy God's protection, and when Dulcitius orders that they be disrobed and thus exposed naked to the public, he falls asleep on his throne, while the soldiers try in vain to rip off the women's clothing, another sign of God's protection for these three martyrs. The emperor himself voices great irritation about the women's presumed power to mock his governor, so he orders his servant Sisinnius to carry out the execution.

So, the play continues focusing on the women's suffering and their spiritual strength.

Again, as in *Gongolf*, once the playwright has completed this entertaining interlude, she no longer allows comic elements to enter and pursues only the martyrdom of the three sisters to their end. After all, Hrotsvit had no intention to compose comedies; but she delighted in offering brief moments of reprieve because she obviously understood the great significance of laughter which allowed the audience to return to their attention and to remember that the literary presentation served to provide a religious ideal and to strengthen particularly the female audience's resolve to pursue a pious and devout life, trying to follow the role model of those three martyrs.

Another remarkable example proves to be the play *Abraham*, which Hrotsvit based on the vita of the hermit Abraham (d. 366) composed in the sixth century, first in Syriac and Greek, and then also in Latin³⁸. As in the previous cases, the poet allowed only one brief scene to become a source for entertainment and laughter, whereas the rest is deeply determined by religious aspects, that is, falling into sin, repentance, and redemption, all this focusing on Abraham and his niece Maria. The latter grows up as a pious young woman, living in complete isolation with her uncle until one day a cleric seduces her, upon which she leaves her home and moves to the city, where she becomes a famous prostitute³⁹. The entire situation represents a huge pain for the old hermit, having lost his most cherished disciple, his own blood relative, to the devil and worldly sinfulness.

But Abraham does not simply give up; instead, he has someone search for her to learn of her new location and profession. As soon as he has learned what he needs to know, he endeavors with all his might, his skill, and wit to confront Maria and to make her repent her fall into the abyss of sexual transgression. He dresses as a warrior and follows her, is welcomed by her pimp, who runs a guesthouse or tavern, and requests that Maria joins them at dinner because her physical beauty has been praised far and wide. Abraham has some money available, despite his life as a hermit, with which he wants to pay for Maria's presence. Abraham is obviously an old man,

38. Hrotsvithae Opera... P. 298–302. (See note 28.) This play was the first to be translated into German by Adam Werner von Themar in 1503; see: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim... P. 66. (See note 24.) For more details, see: Zaenker K.A. 'Eyn hübsche Comedia Abraham genant' – Hrotsvits von Gandersheim Abraham in der Übersetzung des Adam Werner von Themar // *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 17. 1982. P. 217–229. See also: Gäbe S. Interaktion im Heil: die Binnenkommunikation im 'Abraham' Hrotsvits von Gandersheim // *Norm und Krise von Kommunikation: Inszenierungen literarischer und sozialer Interaktion im Mittelalter*; für Peter von Moos / eds. A. Hahn, G. Melville, W. Röcke. Berlin; Münster, 2006. P. 7–34; Meyer R. Incest Disguised: Ottonian Influence at Gandersheim and Hrotsvit's Abraham // *Comparative Drama*. 2007. Vol. 41. P. 349–369.

39. Classen A. *Prostitution in Medieval and Early Modern Literature: The Dark Side of Sex and Love in the Premodern Era*. Lanham, 2019. P. 49–67.

and the inn-keeper expresses his surprise that even at his advanced age he desires the love of a young woman: *Miror, te in decrepita senectute iuenculae mulieris amorem spirare* (313). But he formulates his exceeding happiness because he now assumes that not only young men, but also old ones would seek out her service, which thus would bring in even more money.

Curiously, however, Maria suddenly feels guilt and shame, laments about her low status, her sinfulness, which the pimp comments with criticism, and even Abraham plays along, complaining that he did not come to hear a litany of sorrows. Maria collects herself quickly and agrees with her new customer that the current situation is the wrong moment to voice laments and desire for repentance. After their shared meal, Abraham gets up to seek out his bedroom, and he is accompanied by Maria, which enormously increases the dramatic tension since the audience knows, of course, that the old man does not have the slightest interest in or desire to have sex with the prostitute. His masquerading and role-playing serve only one purpose, to rescue the young woman and to take her back to his cell. But at first, he continues with his acting, which must have caused roars of laughter or comic tension to the extreme, especially because Abraham is not a simple cleric or monk; instead, he has just come from his remote cell in the desert and suddenly assumes the role of an amorous customer, but only as a cover for himself in order to gain the opportunity to be alone with his niece and to shock her with his sudden appearance and thus to break her free from her life as a prostitute.

Following, the play takes a radical turn, with Maria submitting under her uncle, begging for forgiveness, accepting the demand to return to the hermit's cell, and to begin a new life of repentance. There is no more reason to laugh about this; the matter has become extremely serious, with the former prostitute turning into a strong repentant, following all of her uncle's requirements, which thus quickly concludes the play because another female soul has been rescued, and now the audience is invited to partake in the joy and happiness about the good outcome for Maria, and hence all other women who might be liable to become preys of sexual seduction, as Abraham's friend Effrem formulates: *laudantes*

glorificemus (320), a very refined, subtle, but still clearly identifiable form of happiness and joy.

A very similar plot makes up the play ‘Pafnutius’, only that here the hermit learns about the famous prostitute Thais and successfully manages to pry her out of her sordid business and to take her to his own abode where she assumes a life of repentance like an anchoress. Here as well, the hermit dares to put on the facade of a sex-driven old man who wants to hire the prostitute, which works actually quite well because Thais does not suspect anything and responds to his presumed sexual desires by offering her service. Nothing could be further from the truth when Pafnutius introduces himself to her: *Amator tuus* (337), but her response exactly reflects her business practice, satisfying her customers in return for money: *Quicumque me amore colit, aequam vicem amoris a me recipit* (337).

Since the audience knows the hermit’s true intention, his role-playing is completely apparent, so this scene specifically serves to include as much irony as possible, especially because Thais’s conversion happens soon after Pafnutius has revealed his true intentions. We can assume that the playwright intended here to achieve a sigh of relief, if not smiles and giggles, as would be expected for any good theater play. Thais throws all her jewelry and valuables into the flames, follows the hermit to a women’s convent, where she then enters a dark cell where she performs her repentance for five years, after which she soon passes away as a God-fearing woman who has been rescued from her sinfulness.

In the play *Sapientia* we come across yet another form of comedy, this one predicated on sophisticated math. The allegorical figure Sapientia (lat. *knowledge*) is taken to the Roman Emperor Hadrian who wants to force her to worship his own gods and to abandon her Christian faith – the central and most common theme in Hrotsvit’s entire oeuvre. But first he wants to find out the names and then the ages of her daughters, which sets the stage for the mother to make a fool of the emperor, confronting him with a mathematical problem which he cannot figure out. Indeed, Hadrian is not capable of deciphering her riddle, as serious as it proves to be, and yet he is forced to listen to Sapientia’s extra-

ordinary mathematical sophistication for a long time, without ever fully comprehending what she means⁴⁰.

Since he has demonstrated much patience with her fancy mathematics, without having figured it out at all, he then demands that she submits under his will and worship his gods, which she refuses, as her three daughters do as well, which then leads over the martyrdom of the latter. This short moment, the exploration of the number configuration and formulas, must have triggered considerable laughter among the fellow students in Hrotsvit's convent, though the ordinary listener, especially today, might not understand much of that at all. The poet thus pursues a very subtle form of comedy, in which the emperor can only marvel at Sapientia's profound knowledge: *O quam scrupulosa et plexilis quaestio ex istarum aetate infantularum est orta!* (363). She, however, thus proves that he has not the faintest idea about God's creation which is determined by numerical categories available only to a highly educated mind: *et in aetatibus hominum miram dedit inveniri posse scientiam artium* (363). The laughter at this moment must have been guaranteed, but only by those who had studied Boethian mathematics and would have been able to follow the esoteric explanation.

This now allows us to observe that Hrotsvit operated a variety of humorous scenes, either predicated on religious conversion and repentance, on the danger of sexual seduction, or on mathematical concepts too difficult to be understandable to the ordinary people, including the Roman emperor. Even though her plays and religious narratives cannot be identified as comedies as such, laughter and humor are not simply excluded and matter significantly at decisive moments.

Conclusion

Choosing the oldest Anglo-Saxon heroic epic poem and the earliest representative of a medieval woman's writing in Latin, we faced huge hurdles to come to terms with the task set for this article. Can we find examples of laughter, humor, or comedy even in the early Middle Ages, a cultural period certainly far away from the cultural

40. Hrotsvithae Opera... P. 350–356. (See note 28.) Esp. regarding the numbers, 352–354. See also: *Elizabeth J. Dramatic Convergence in Times Square: Hrotsvit's 'Sapientia' and Collapsible Giraffe's '3 Virgins' // Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Contexts, Identities, Affinities, and Performances...* P. 251–264.

refinements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴¹ But such an evaluative standpoint crediting the high Middle Ages with a considerable degree of superiority in every respect does not do justice to our two cases, which could easily be expanded to include a variety of other texts, such as the most remarkable *Walthariuslied* (tenth century) with its almost grotesque humor⁴².

Particularly because ‘Beowulf’ and the works by Hrotsvit differ so fundamentally in language, genre, concept, and values, they intriguingly support, each on its own, our global argument that laughter is fundamental for human life and culture under all kinds of circumstances. Even in an existential context as in the Anglo-Saxon poem or in such a highly religious framework as in Hrotsvit’s texts, the human dimension is certainly still there, and despite fear of death, fear of God, and fear of sinfulness, both the anonymous, probably male Old English and the early medieval German female poet endeavored to inject, even if ever so slightly, narrative moments of laughter, humor, and comedy. Thereby, they made sure that the basic human dimension was not ignored, without which neither the heroic element nor the supremely religious orientation in the plays and narratives would have become meaningful and understandable.

Without laughter, there is no human culture, and hence no literature, and this also in the Middle Ages. Laughing does not have to signal the coming of the end, in an apocalyptic sense, as Daniel F. Pigg has suggested, referring to ‘Beowulf’⁴³. He brings to our attention Grendel’s silent laughter before he has carried out his first deadly attack, and it is a laughter of sheer evilness which is not shared by anyone, another clear sign of the monster’s complete social isolation and ostracism. But I agree strongly with him that laughter by Beowulf, his retainers, Hrothgar and his men signals the expression of human culture and identity, particularly according to medieval sign theory; so what happens both in ‘Beowulf’ and in Hrotsvit’s text is that a human dimension makes itself known which builds bridges between the esoteric aspects examined in these literary works and the ordinary situation in people’s lives. Grendel can laugh only on the inside and remains completely isolated, an asocial being of greatest misery. Beowulf and the other warriors laugh in company and thus create sociability, the triumph

41. Dinzelbacher P. Structures and Origins of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance. Stuttgart, 2017. He examines, for instance, the rise of secular society, but he does not address laughter and humor, irrespective of his great interest in a psychological interpretation of medieval history.

42. Waltharius / ed., trans., and intro. by A. Ring. Leuven, Paris, Bristol, CT, 2016; cf. Ziolkowski J.M. Waltharius // The Virgil Encyclopedia / eds. J.M. Ziolkowski, R.F. Thomas. Vol. 3. New York, 2014; Händl C. Il Waltharius – un poema eroico germanico in lingua latina? // Il ruolo delle lingue e delle letterature germaniche nella formazione dell’Europa medievale / ed. by Dagmar Gottschall. Lecce, 2018. P. 119–132.

43. Pigg D.F. Laughter in ‘Beowulf’: Ambiguity, Ambivalence, and Group Identity Formation // Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning, and Consequences / ed. A. Classen. Berlin; New York, 2010. P. 212–213.

over evil as represented by the monster. In Hrotsvit's cases, the laughing saints and martyrs confirm their human dimension and facilitate a process of the audience's getting familiar with these protagonists. Laughing, that is, all kinds of humor, brings about social bonds, either intradiegetically or extradiegetically.

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