

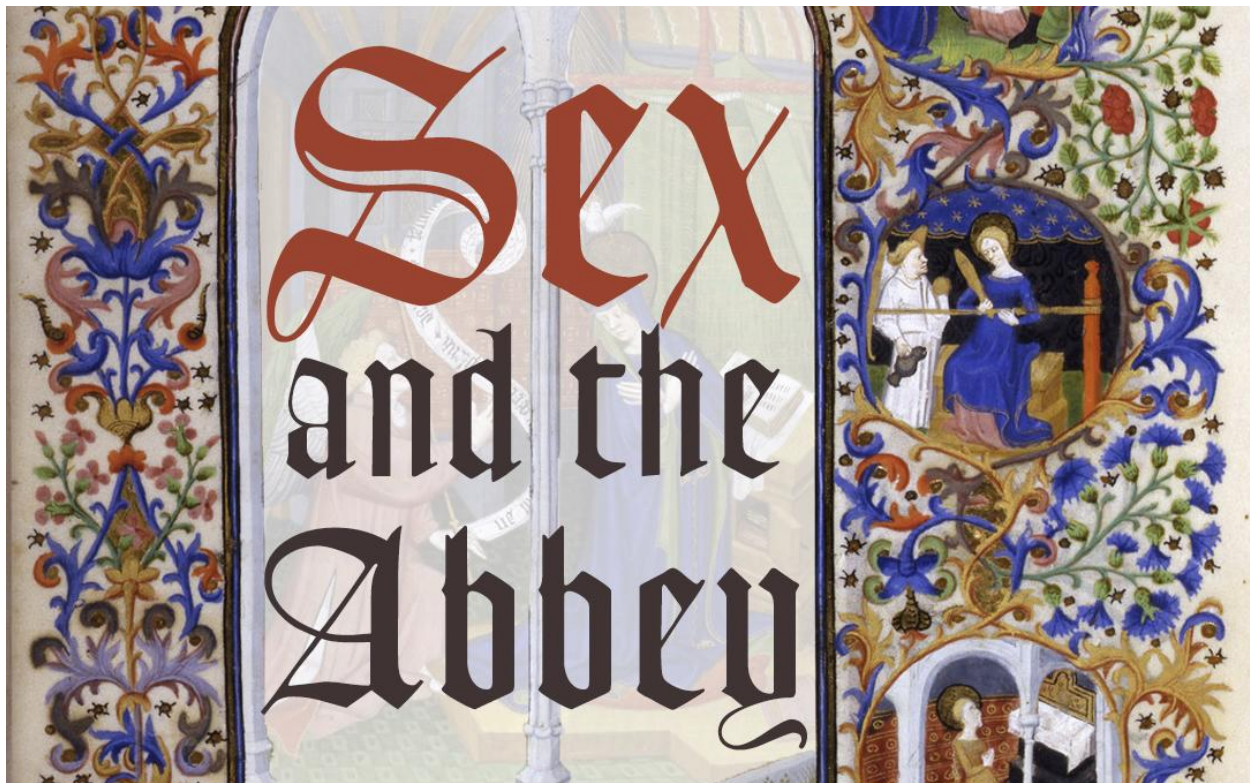


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Sex and the Abbey

Study Guide



Written by Diana Ly | Directed by Emily Lyon



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Gandersheim Abbey

Welcome to Gandersheim Abbey!

Bad Gandersheim -

Bad (“Bath”) Gandersheim, where Gandersheim Abbey is located, is a small town in Lower Saxony, Germany named for the purported healing qualities of the town’s mineral springs and considered a “spa town.”

Little Office of the Virgin Mary -

The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also known as the Hours of the Virgin, is a liturgical devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary consisting of a cycle of psalms, hymns, scripture, and other readings. In a monastic context, the hours would typically be prayed at their traditional times, beginning with the night and early morning. The prayer hours are divided between Major Hours (Matins, Lauds, and Vespers), Minor Hours (Prime, Terce, Sext, None) and Compline (evening prayer). Women congregants would be required to pray the Little Office of the Virgin Mary at their appointed times throughout the day, totaling between 7-8 hours daily.



Praying in Latin -

Latin is the principle language of Catholic prayer and is considered a sacred language, believed to be consecrated at the Passion by its mystic inscription on the Cross. Prayer in Latin is a prayer in union with the rest of the Church in the same universal language she has prayed in since her inception By praying in a sacred language, Latin is believed to have a unique ability to enable greater focus in meditation and deeper levels of mystical prayer.

Hrotsvit's Plays -

Hrotsvit wrote six plays, all in response to Terence's work (a clear indication that she had access to Terence). "Gallicanus", "Dulcitius", "Callimachus", "Abraham", "Paphnutius", and "Sapientia." It's important to note that it's possible she did not name these plays and that they were named by a male who was reinterpreting her work, hence why they're named after men, but seem to center on the women in those stories.



Hrosvitha at the Benedictine convent, reading from a book

Adelheid, Hadwig & Mathilda IRL -

These characters were named after Hrotsvit's contemporaries. An annotation in a manuscript for one of Terence's plays identified a group of friends, young noblewomen from the court of Otto 1 as Adelheit, Hedwich, and Matthilt respectively. The use of these names as inspiration for the characters in *Sex and the Abbey* is an attempt to use names based on people who were in Hrotsvit's world and hint at the wider world of women that surrounded the real Hrotsvit.



Bad Gandersheim with a view of the Abbey



About *Sex and the Abbey*

a. INTRODUCTION:

Hrotsvit, the first known Western female playwright, was a secular canoness in 10th Century Saxony who lived in Gandersheim Abbey. The Abbey was not a place for cloistered, solemn religious pursuit, as we might imagine nuns now, but rather a place where wealthy families sent their girls to be educated and socialized, even if they were destined for marriage. These abbeys were fertile communities of smart, well-to-do women, including younger girls who were grappling with their sexuality, their expectations of marriage, and their place in a broader society that saw them as merely tokens of transactional marriages. Likely, these were the only places that smart, independent women could be themselves. But that doesn't mean they were free.

b. CHARACTERS:

HROTSVIT: 34-year-old canoness at Gandersheim Abbey. Playwright, teacher, mentor to the younger canonesses

ADELHAID: 22-year-old canoness biding her time in the Abbey until marriage, in love with Hrotsvit

HADWIG: 18-year-old canoness, can't stand her family, hotheaded and frustrated by Hrotsvit

MATHILDA: 14-year-old canoness, the baby of the group, eager to learn Latin and read

c. SYNOPSIS:

The Abbey is in trouble -- and only Hrotsvit's play can save them! Canonesses Mathilda, Adelheid, and Hadwig need to impress Emperor Otto (who's visiting tonight!) with a performance... by Hrotsvit, the first Western woman who ever dared to write a play. The women are at turns in awe of Hrotsvit, in love with her, frustrated with her teachings, and in desperate need of her protection and care. The play follows them through a single day, visiting them at their required prayers, The Hours of the Virgin Mary



d. ABOUT THE CREATIVE TEAM:

i. Playwright



Diana Ly is a Vietnamese-American screenwriter and playwright based in New York. She grew up as an expat in the Philippines before studying Computer Science at Stanford and subsequently working at Google. She recently completed the Universal Writers Lab, a yearlong mentorship program to develop a feature under the guidance of Universal Pictures. She's currently a member of Orchard Project's Greenhouse Lab and BMP: Producer Academy. Her writing has been presented at LPAC+The Brick's Rough Draft Festival and Piper Theatre's Spotlight Series. Diana was previously a Women in Film|Black List Feature Resident, a Project Involve

Fellow at Film Independent, and a member of the Sóng Collective's inaugural Việt Writers Lab. She's been a finalist for Playwrights' Center's Core Apprenticeship and the DGF Fellows Program, and advanced for the Ground Floor at Berkeley Rep and NYTW's 2050 Fellowship. She received her MFA in Playwriting from Hunter College, under the guidance of Christine Scarfuto. Diana writes about women and people of color coming into their own power, agency and artistry.

ii. Director



Emily Lyon is a director and dramaturg creating witty, thoughtful theatre for social impact. As Artistic Director of Hedgepig Ensemble, she leads and curates Expand the Canon – a call to action to include a global intersection of historical women writers in the canon of classics. Over the past three years, she also created a Social Impact Writers Lab, founded Future Facing Films, helped develop the 2021 Hollywood Climate Summit, joined the first US cohort of the Creative Climate Leadership, and created an environmental justice card game with The Civilians R&D Group. With Hedgepig, she has directed 8 productions,

including All's Well That Ends Well, Mary Stuart, A Taste of Shakespeare, and Secret in the Wings. As a freelance director, Lyon has directed 8 world premiere plays, and worked with Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, Geva Theatre, The Old Globe, LaMaMa, Yale Rep, The Royal Shakespeare Company, The Folger, University of Michigan, and others. As a freelance dramaturg, she's worked with writers on shaping 25+ new plays, as well as editing classical texts, including the Expand the Canon plays, and The Tempest for Shakespeare in the Park. Find out more at EmilyALyon.com.

iii. Dramaturg



Christine Scarfuto is dramaturg, producer, and educator with over a decade of experience in new play development. She is the Director of the Rita and Burton Goldberg MFA Playwriting Program at Hunter College. She recently served as the Literary Manager/Dramaturg at Long Wharf Theatre, where she oversaw a robust new play development program, curated and produced an annual new play festival, and ran a commissioning program. Plays developed under her tenure include: METEOR SHOWER by Steve Martin, LEWISTON by Sam Hunter, DANCE NATION by Clare Barron, PASSAGE by Christopher Chen, NAPOLI,

BROOKLYN by Meghan Kennedy, and TABLE by Adam Gopnik and David Shire. She is also the Curator and Producer of the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's developmental theater lab HVSF2, which is designed to examine new adaptations and translations of classic work. HVSF2 has become a pipeline to production under her direction, and half of the plays developed in the lab have gone on to receive mainstage productions at the festival. Projects developed include: SENSE AND SENSIBILITY and PRIDE AND PREJUDICE by Kate Hamill, TEENAGE DICK by Mike Lew, and WITCH by Jen Silverman. Previously, she was the Producing Associate/Resident Dramaturg for Premiere Stages at Kean University, the Artistic Producer for the PEN World Voices International Play Festival, and an Associate Producer with New Georges JAM Festival. She has served as the Literary Associate at Williamstown Theatre Festival and the Literary Fellow at Signature Theatre. She has worked as a dramaturg with McCarter Theatre, the Playwrights Center, the Lark Play Development Center, Primary Stages, Kennedy Center, Clubbed Thumb, Goodman Theatre, and the Playwrights Realm. She has taught at Fordham University, Rutgers University, and the University of Iowa, where she received her MFA in Dramaturgy. She was educated entirely in public schools.



iv. Latin Consultant



Lauren Holmes is a playwright based in NYC, newly graduated from Hunter College's MFA playwriting program. She studied Liturgical Latin at Harvard College, where she employed it in her research on painting and literature in medieval Italy. As a playwright, she returned to her Classical Latin education to study the works of Plautus, Terence, and Seneca. She earned an MA at Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli in Rome, and has worked and lived in Italy for many years. Her plays include Zeus IV, Altenheim, Wilson, and Snowbirds (Bushwick Starr Reading Series finalist, Playwrights Realm Writing

Fellowship semi-finalist). She's a finalist for the Risk Theatre Playwriting Competition and a semi-finalist for The Next Forever fellowship and WP Lab.



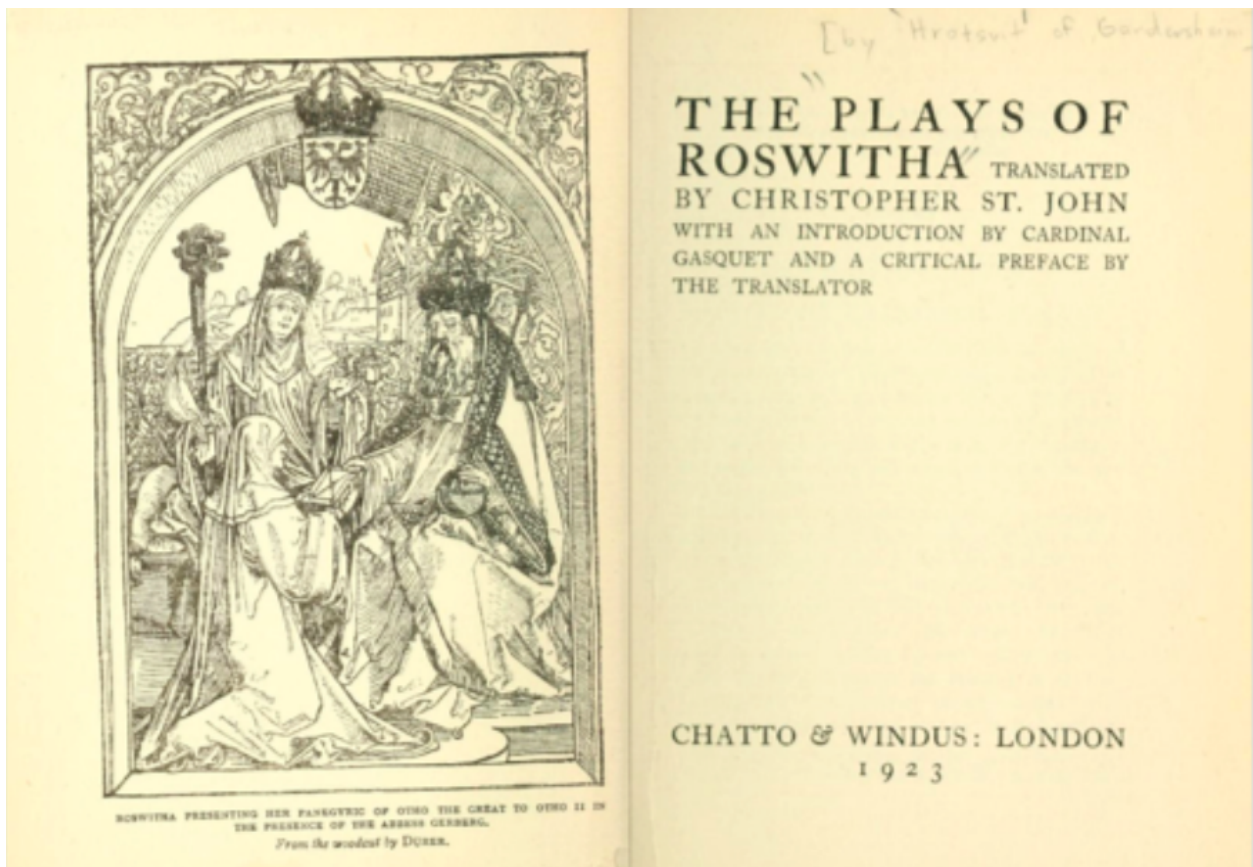
“ I’m drawn to examining history, especially the forgotten history of marginalized peoples, with our current eyes, and what it can tell us about this time in our society. Women, even (or especially) great women, are often dismissed by the patriarchy we live in, where mostly men decide what’s worth documenting and remembering. Hrotsvit’s work was largely ignored for over five hundred years until she was rediscovered by Conrad Celtis in the 1500s. Sex and the Abbey is not meant to be a history lesson, but rather an intimate and joyful exploration of what her life and community might have been like, and what might have inspired her to write.

It took me a long time to become an artist and find my voice, so I’m always exploring how marginalized people become artists; how one goes about finding their voice and using it. I love imagining how female creative pioneers came into their vocations. How was Hrotsvit able to become a playwright when she didn’t see any other women around her doing it? How were these female artists able to be trailblazers from such limited positions? How might they have flourished if society had been more welcoming to them?



While Hrotsvit's work has found some life in theatrical adaptations and feminist studies, there have been few attempts to understand Hrotsvit as a person, because so little is known of her personal life. Instead of putting her on a pedestal and highlighting the distance between modern audiences and Gandersheim Abbey, *Sex and the Abbey* seeks to close the gap, and help us remember that these women likely had much more in common with us than male historians would have us believe. The characters are played by a BIPOC cast to emphasize their marginalization, and also breathe more humanity and diverse perspectives into our conceptions of historical narratives."

- Playwright Diana Ly



Questions for Consideration:

1. In what ways are all four of these women trapped? In what ways do they enjoy a level of freedom that other women at the time may not have experienced?
2. What do you think it might take to be the first of a kind (in this case, the first Western female playwright.) How difficult or easy do you think it was for Hrotsvit to become a playwright?
3. What would it take for you to attempt something that you had never seen done by someone like you? What are you trying to do now that you think hasn't been done by anyone before you?
4. What's the role of sexual trauma and sexual assault in this play? Do you think it's undersized or oversized relative to the character's circumstances or the scope of the play?
5. How does religion function in these women's lives and this play?
6. Based on what you've learned in the play, how do you think being a woman affected Hrotsvit's legacy?



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