**Good King, Bad King: Roswitha “Spins”**

This paper will examine the treatment of questions of nobility in two works by Roswitha of Gandersheim, her epic *Gesta Ottonis* (or *Oddonis*, “the deeds of Otto [I, Holy Roman Emperor]”), and her comedy *Dulcitius.* The reader should understand at the outset that the conclusions of this study will not be clear-cut, because of unknowns and variables that will be pointed out as we proceed.

I should begin by pointing out a variable that I have just introduced: in the past I have called our poetess “Hrotsvit,” because that is the form of her name currently in fashion with Hrotsvitologists. It recently dawned on me, however, that I am not a member of that club. Since I share neither their premises nor their conclusions, I will stop sharing their nomenclature as well. Roswitha (her exact name is unknown) is the name by which she is known to modern German readers, not the least of whom are the inhabitants of her home town of Gandersheim (more fully, Bad Gandersheim), located in Lower Saxony, whose municipal website states with admirable enthusiasm that it is *Roswithastadt* (“Roswithaville”). The population of Bad Gandersheim is just over ten thousand; the number of Hrostvitologists is just over two dozen, so without repudiating the content of my earlier writing on the subject of this poetess, I hereby switch to Roswitha. The same goes for “Gerberga” from “Gerberg,” and while I’m at it, I also confess that sometimes I write “Vergil” and sometimes “Virgil.” Freedom is a noble thing.

I hope that the reader knows nothing about Roswitha, because there is nothing to be known. I have elsewhere[[1]](#footnote-1) tried to clear away the speculative biographical and interpretational underbrush that has grown up in the last few decades, but for now will simply ask the reader to *remember to forget* everything except for what Roswitha has left us on the page. The rest is clutter, and reveals more about the prejudices of modern critics than about the characteristics of the medieval poetess.

*Gesta Ottonis* (to be abbreviated *GO*) is in Latin, and consists of a prose preface addressed to Gerberga, the abbess of the convent of Gandersheim; a preface in verse (thirty-four lines) addressed to Otto, in which that emperor is compared to the emperors of Rome, although in the main part of the work Roswitha more frequently likens him to the Biblical King David; next, a similar preface (thirty-eight lines) addressed to Otto II, who is described as Solomon to his father’s David; and finally a poetic narrative, originally of 1,517 lines, but with two gaps in the poem as it survives. The narrative is chronologically ordered, congratulatory in tone and broadly accurate in its historicity. It consists of an account of Otto’s predecessors (lines 1-124), his fights to consolidate his reign in Germany (125-466), his exploits in Italy (467-734), and the actions of his son Liudulf.

It is important to understand a variable that stands in the way of *GO*’s historical accuracy. Except for the prose preface, *GO* is written in dactylic hexameter, that is, a rhythm with six beats (“feet”) per line, the syllables of each foot being either long-short-short (a dactyl) or long-long (a spondee). This meter produced Vergilian “music,” but it also had Vergilian vices, especially in the way it limited the medieval Latin poet’s vocabulary. Let us imagine that Roswitha was inspired to write a line with the word *civitas* (“community”) in it; she could not, because the syllables in *civitas* are long-short-long, so the word will not fit the rhythm. “Problem” words like this are too pervasive in Latin to make their exclusion a mere quibble; dactylic hexameter makes circumlocutions, and their subsequent distortions of meaning, practically unavoidable. That is the price one pays for Vergilian music. This means that no reader, ancient, medieval or modern could or can take poetry written in dactylic hexameter quite seriously: circumlocution is not the same as plain speaking. Roswitha had found ways to get around this difficulty[[2]](#footnote-2) and, as we shall see, found a new way in *GO*, but the fact remains that the medium was a barrier to the message.

*Dulcitius* (to be abbreviated *D*) is also in Latin, although not in dactylic hexameter. *D* is usually referred to as a comedy, but that term is too grand: it is a skit. More exactly, it is a farce, in the literal, non-judgmental sense of the term that modern commentators use when discussing, say, Aphra Behn’s *The Emperor of the Moon*. *D*’s entertainment value comes not from any sort of subtlety or urbanity, but from its unabashed buffoonery. The plot is easily summarized. The emperor Diocletian wants to marry one of three beautiful Christian girls, but they are contemptuous of his idol-worship. Diocletian remands the girls to his subordinate Dulcitius, who is instantly infatuated, and plans to visit them by night. In the darkness Dulcitius goes crashing through a kitchen, and emerges sooty and ridiculous. The girls are remanded to Sisinnius, another lieutenant, for execution. Miracles attend their departure from this life. Diocletian, Dulcitius and Sisinnius end up humiliated.

It is all well and good to talk in the abstract about medieval ideas of this or that, but it is worthwhile to come down from the clouds and take into account the effect of the complexities and complications of real-life situations on what would otherwise be straightforward writing.

Let me be specific, or at least as specific as I can be on matters that, in the absence of evidence, can only be approached by thought-experiments. Roswitha was opinionated. She was dogmatic. She was judgmental. I have elsewhere discussed her sermonizing in the saint’s-life epic *Pelagius*.[[3]](#footnote-3) In that work, Roswitha is outspoken in her contempt for the Moslem caliph of Cordova, and shows unflagging literary inventiveness in showing that contempt. Bad kings are bad. In *GO*, however, it is not enough to say that good kings are good, because in the Ottonian court good kings sometimes turned traitor, and bad kings were frequently forgiven and rehabilitated. Mary Bernardine Bergman, whose 1942 doctoral dissertation is an excellent analysis of *GO*, concludes from the internals of the work that it was written between 962 and 968.[[4]](#footnote-4) Otto I died in 973, which means that Roswitha was not fulminating over some depraved heathen potentate hundreds of miles away, but was writing the story of a man who was her sovereign, a man she might come face to face with, and a man who also happened to be the uncle of Gerberga, the abbess to whom the first preface in *GO* is addressed. In this preface she states that she was commissioned to write the epic by Gerberga, and that Gerberga had made documents (I assume official, court documents are meant) available to her. It is not likely that she would want to embarrass her abbess by writing anything tactless. Roswitha also relates that she had shown the manuscript of *GO* to an Archbishop Wilhelm, presumably to get his feedback on her treatment of this sensitive material. (If this Wilhelm was Wilhelm, Archbishop of Mainz, he would have been a good source of advice: he was Otto’s illegitimate son.) Roswitha’s caution is logical, because the history she recounts is one not only of royal triumphs, but also of betrayals and bereavement that must have brought a great deal of heartache to this king. With all these factors taken into account, just how outspoken could she have been?

How outspoken could she have been on the subject of Edith (910-946), Otto’s first wife, when *GO*’s audience must have included Adelaide (931-999), his second wife? Great tact was called for: Otto may have been mellowing in the 960’s, but Adelaide was just getting warmed up. She would not reach the zenith of her influence until the reign of her son Otto II and her regency of her grandson Otto III, but she had already shown her toughness in a series of adventures recounted at length (lines 467-676) in *GO*: she had survived a humiliating incarceration in Italy intended to coerce her into marrying the son of her husband’s assassin, Berengar of Ivrea (900-966, and therefore of recent memory); she had planned and successfully executed a jailbreak; she had led her pursuers a merry chase through rough country; and finally, she had checkmated her tormentors by inducing Otto to come to her rescue. “Walk wide of the Widow at Windsor,” Kipling would write of Victoria, and, except for the empress’s Italian adventures, Roswitha seems to have walked wide of Adelaide. The poetess tactfully focuses not on Edith’s charms, but her ancestry,

*Hanc tradunt ergo natam de stirpe beata* 95

*Oswaldi regis, laudem cujus canit orbis…*

(“Thus they brought her, born of blessed stock, of King Oswald, whose praises the world sings…”)

her piety,

*…Eadit veneranda*

*Jure placens cunctis habitu summae bonitatis,* 119

*Regali nato censetur congrue digna*

(“…the revered Edith, pleasing indeed to all by possessing unsurpassed goodness, she was thought worthy of being a prince’s consort.”)

and the people’s grief at her death.

*properata diecula tristis* 395

*Venerat, ingentem nostris augendo dolorem…*

*…magno quam denique luctu* 401

*Et non inmerito flevit plebecula cuncta…*

(“The sad day came – too soon! – for increasing our great grief… How the whole populace wept then with great mourning and not-unfitting grief …”)

Roswitha also walks wide of Adelaide on the subject of Willa of Tuscany, the wife of Berengar and Adelaide’s tormentor in prison. Liutprand of Cremona describes Willa as *secunda Jezebel*[[5]](#footnote-5)(“a second Jezebel”), but Roswitha gives her no more than a one-line “mention,” with nothing more insulting than the adjective *misera* (“wretched,” line 1493), perhaps to avoid setting Adelaide off.

The last of the Ottonian noblewomen described by Roswitha is the emperor’s sister-in-law.

*Arnulfi natam, ducis egregii, generosam*, 157

*Nomine Juditam, vultus splendore coruscam*

*Ac fulgore magis cunctae nitidam bonitatis.*

(“The noble daughter of the distinguished Duke Arnulf, Judith by name, dazzling in the radiance of her face and glowing with the brightness of all goodness.”)

The reader need not be puzzled by the fervor of Roswitha’s praise; Judith (925-985) was not only a potential member of *GO*’s audience*,* but also a potential threat to the peace of Otto’s realm. At her husband Henry’s death is 955 she had become regent of their son, and therefore the de facto duke of Bavaria. I take Roswitha’s flattery to be “spin.” Roswitha will also be kind to Judith by praising her husband’s memory, but whatever effect her encomiums may have had on Judith, her son proved to be incorrigible. He is known to German history as *Heinrich der Zänker*: Henry the Quarrelsome, a pathological troublemaker.

(Duly set off in parentheses, there are two matters of style that need to be addressed. The reader may have noticed two oddities in the Edith passages cited: “sad day” is not *dies tristis*, but *diecula tristis*, and “populace” is not *plebs*, but *plebecula*. The -*ul-* infix is a diminutive in Latin, so what Roswitha actually wrote was “the sad little day” and “the itty-bitty populace.” We will shortly read that Otto’s brother Henry was abducted *sub nocte nigella*, “during a blacky-wacky night.” Bergman lists no fewer than twenty of these diminutives in *GO*,[[6]](#footnote-6) the majority of which are as awkward as the three cited above. I concur with Bergman’s opinion that the diminutives “are employed generally as necessary to the metrical scheme, seldom with the real diminutive force of tenderness or diminution.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Roswitha was simply struggling against the limitations of dactylic hexameter.

The second stylistic detail is particularly gratifying to me, since, against the consensus of the Hrostvitologists, I have argued that Roswitha’s model for her comedies is not Terence, but Plautus.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the preface to Otto I (line 20) Roswitha writes “the presumptuousness of my mind” as *mis* (not *mei*) *praesumptio mentis*, and in her preface to Otto II (line 11), she writes “If I were not motivated by your dread command” as *tis* (not *tui*) *praecepto non urgerer metuendo*. *Mis* and *tis* are more than just struggles against dactylic hexameter: they are Plautine “fingerprints,” evidence that Roswitha knew the works of Plautus firsthand.)

The mention of Henry the Quarrelsome leads us back to his father, who had just as much right to that epithet, since he was quite a *Zänker* himself in his younger days. Henry repeatedly revolted against his older brother, and may have even been involved in the plot to assassinate Otto at Eastertide in 948. The plot failed, and Henry threw himself on the mercy of the emperor at Christmastide of that year, evidently promising to be a *Zänker* no more. Otto forgave the scamp, and even entrusted him with important diplomatic missions like escorting Adelaide to the imperial court (lines 654ff) and with important military missions like fighting Hungarians. Roswitha’s finesse in showing Henry in a good light is remarkable: she makes excuses for his waywardness up to the Easter plot, and glorifies his loyalty after the Christmas reconciliation. She blames his treason on evil advisors.

*Hujus causa mali fuerat non parva dolendi*

*Denique conflictus quorundam non moderatos,*

*Ex quibus Henrico quaedam pars mente benigna*

*Devovit regis fratri jus verunulatis,* 175

(“The reason for this regrettable evil was weighty, a conflict stemming from certain out-of-control individuals, some of whom promised fealty to Henry in a kindly way...”)

She implies that duress was involved.

*Ex improviso mittens sub nocte nigella*

*Duxit captivum fratrem regis generosum,*

*Henricum, vinclis palmas stringendo cruentis*

*Ejus candidolas, ornamentis magis aptas* 185

(“Suddenly making his move, in the blackness of night, he [Eberhard, yet another *Zänker* ] took Henry captive, his lily-white hands, more fit for jewelry, bound by pitiless chains.”)

I believe that *candidolas* is a genuine diminutive, with no extenuating metical exigencies involved, and so unapologetically translate it “lily-white,” as above; I also believe that Roswitha overdoes it here, with her description of Henry as not only naïve, but helpless. *Candidolas*, indeed!

Otto ransomed his brother and put down the revolt, but before long another started, and the naïve, helpless Henry was again approached by the rebels.

*Hoc quoque consilium perversa mente repertum*

*Henrico regis fratri suasere fideles,* 215

*Mulcentes nimium verbis ipsum male blandis,*

*Quo prius illatum nollet jam reddere damnum,*

*Ipsorum votis sed plus parendo nefandis,*

*Susciperet regnum, depulso fratre, regendum.*

(“Also they approached the king’s brother, Henry, with a plan that came from a sick mind, professing to be loyal, cajoling him with words that were all too smooth, to the effect that he should not try to avenge the wrongs he had suffered earlier, but by going along with their dastardly suggestions, he should come to rule the realm, once his brother had been deposed.”)

Henry took the bait again. I can only imagine opinionated, dogmatic, judgmental Roswitha’s chagrin as *Realpolitik* required her to put a good “spin” on Henry’s treachery. After all, even the caliph of Cordova had never brought the horrors of civil war to Germany just because of sibling rivalry. Roswitha throws up her hands and settles for a perfunctory platitude.

*Sed spero certe, non se sic corde tenere* 223

*Illis consensum sed vi praebere coactum.*

(“But I sincerely hope that this did not come from his heart, but that he was coerced by force to go along with them.”)

Otto seems to have been above sibling rivalry, pardoning Henry again and again. Other foes found him less forgiving.

*Suspendens quosdam ligno reprobis reparato,* 200

*Quosdam de patria mandans discedere cara.*

(“…hanging some from the gallows, banishing others from their dear fatherland.”)

Other troublemakers could expect death in battle (or, given Otto’s efficiency as a general, in the flight after the battle).

*Nec mora, percussus periit gladiis Evurhardus,* 236

*Gislberhtus saevis fugiens quoque mergitur undis.*

(“Eberhard died immediately, riddled with sword-thrusts, and the fleeing Gilbert drowned in churning waves.”)

As noted above, Henry eventually got over his sibling rivalry. He was at Ottos’s side in the campaign against the Hungarians that led to victory at the Battle of Lechfeld in 955.

In the third preface of *GO*, Roswitha portrays Otto II as Solomon to Otto I’s David; her greatest challenge must have been the matter of Otto’s Absalom, his son Liudulf. Henry’s transformation from youthful renegade to loyal companion probably brought Otto great joy; his son’s transformation from ally to traitor must have brought him agony. After the failure of Liudulf’s revolt in 954, Otto was characteristically forgiving, and his clemency seemed justified as Liudulf embarked on an invasion of Italy under the imperial flag; Otto’s fatherly pride in his son’s subsequent victories must have made Liudulf’s sudden death there (in 957) especially bitter. Roswitha writes that Liudulf had a happy childhood (lines 450ff), that his intelligence and courage led to a “bloodless” triumph in Italy (613ff), that he brought Adelaide to Otto (625), that Otto on occasion followed his son’s lead (668), and that he was a good son (735). She describes him as

*patris amor verus spes et gentis* 609

(“his father’s true love and the hope of the nation”)

Then come the two gaps in the text. If we assume that *GO* is consistent in its chronological order, then the lost lines must have dealt with Liudulf’s falling-out with his father.

We can never know what was lost, nor why these lines were lost. It is tempting to imagine Wilhelm, Archbishop of Mainz, shaking his head and gravely warning Roswitha to cut them because the emperor would find them too “hot,” but this is not likely, because it is hard to imagine anything hotter than one passage that survives. The reader will recall Roswitha’s claim that Gerberga had made documents available to her. What document could be more private than a father’s letter to his reformed prodigal son? What document should be more private? Yet in lines 1145ff we find just that, a letter from Otto to Liudulf, for all the world to see, in buffed-up and brassy dactylic hexameter! It is a matter of opinion as to whether this makes Roswitha the first of the paparazzi, but it is clear that she felt no need to walk wide of Otto. It could be argued that the lines are missing because Roswitha did not walk wide enough of somebody else at court, but pursuing that hypothesis would lead to nothing but endless and fruitless speculation. All that can be said is that the lines are gone, and that without them we will never know how Roswitha dealt with this important part of Ottonian history.

However circumspect Roswitha had to have been with *GO*, with *D* she could let herself go: the bad guys are bad and the good guys are good. She was once again the “hearty noise” (*clamor validus*) of Gandersheim, and was working with a subject that lent itself to her unique blend of moralizing and slapstick.

We cannot discuss the moralizing, however, until we discuss the slapstick. “Closet drama” is a term that constantly flits though Hrotsvitologists’ analyses of Roswitha’s theatrical works. My dictionary defines “closet drama” as plays that are to be read rather than performed, which must mean plays that cannot hold an audience. A closet comedy must be a play that is not very funny. I parted company with the Hrotsvitologists on this matter long ago, since I find Roswitha’s comedies an entirely stageworthy mix of highbrow comedy, lowbrow comedy, drama, pathos and inspiration. As a thought experiment, I invite the reader to consider Scene 4 and the action just before it and just after it, warning him that the comedy in *D* is exclusively lowbrow. I believe that these lines were meant for live performance; if the reader thinks that the passage belongs in the mind’s eye, then I admit defeat and commend him to the Hrotsvitologists.

At the end of Scene 3, the infatuated Dulcitius, accompanied by soldiers, hopes for a nocturnal adventure with the girls; he enters the kitchen next to their room by himself. In Scene 4, the girls hear a noise, and the leading lady peeks out through a crack in the door.

Hirena: *ecce, iste stultus, mente alienatus, aestimat se nostris uti amplexibus.*

Agapes: *quid facit?*

Hirena: *nunc ollas molli fovet gremio, nunc sartagines et caccabos amplectitur, mitia libans oscula.*

Chionia:  *ridiculum.*

Hirena: *nam facies, manus ac vestimenta adeo sordidata…*

(“Irene: Look! That idiot, out of his mind, thinks he’s embracing us. Agape: What’s he doing? Irene: Now he’s hugging the pots, now the kettles and pans, kissing them fiercely. Chionia: It’s ridiculous. Irene: So his face, hands and clothes are filthy…”)

Dulcitius reenters, looking so frightful that the soldiers run away in terror.

Rather than focusing on how lowbrow these shticks are, let us stick to questions of genre: Dulcitius’s ridiculous reappearance is a visual effect, a sight–gag; soldiers running away from their commander because they think he is the devil is a sight-gag. We may take it as axiomatic that sight-gags do not exist in the mind’s eye, but onstage, which should put an end to the idea that *D* is a closet drama.

*D*, then, is a piece to be performed. This does not mean that Roswitha will abandon her habit of moralizing, but it is worthwhile to dwell on the entertainment value of *D*, both to evaluate the stagecraft and to distinguish the stagecraft from the sermonizing. This is not a matter of action versus dialogue: true, in the opening scene it is the sisters’ sharp tongues and bluntness that humiliate Diocletian, and Sisennius’s humiliation in the last scene is verbal, and not nearly as outrageous as Dulcitius’s (there are martyrdoms going on, after all, so Roswitha is right to tone the comedy down here); but at times the dialogue is simply a set-up for the stage business. I take the girls’ dialogue in Scene 4 to be not urbane closet banter, but dialogue designed to kill time: a vamp. The content of Scene 4 could just as well have been presented as a dumbshow, and doubtless the actor playing Dulcitius could have gotten some laughs by onstage banging around in an onstage kitchen, kissing and hugging real pots and pans. For the sight-gag of Dulcitius’s reappearance to be effective, however, there must be a costume change and a makeup change, which, to be done right, must take place offstage. I timed myself reading Scene 4; the dialogue takes just over sixty seconds to perform, which is ample time for a quick backstage change from official silks and satins to grimy rags and tatters, and to slap some black makeup on the villain’s face and hands. If I am right, then Roswitha’s expertise in stagecraft is worthy of her classical model, Plautus.

Exuberant echoes of Plautus abound in the dialogue, like the interjections *vae!*, *hem!* and *papae!* (“alas,” “hum” and “ay-ay-ay”) insults like *di vos perdant!* (“may the gods destroy you”) and diminutives like *tenellae…virgunculae* (“of a little-bitty girlie”), and a *nigellus* that makes sense: *scissis et nigellis panniculis* (“in torn and blackish tatters”).

The stagecraft is sophisticated, but it is a means to an end, which is Roswitha’s moralizing. What is the moral of *D*? Roswitha does not tell, she shows: the sisters comport themselves with dignity and are protected by the hand of God up until the moment they leave the world; the evil emperor is humiliated by being out-talked, the lecherous official is made as dirty on the outside as he is on the inside; and the emperor’s murderous henchman is powerless to do the girls harm. The good guys win, even if they seem to be helpless; the bad guys lose, even if they are kings.

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1. Skupin 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Skupin 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Skupin 51ff [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bergman 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Liutprand 3:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bergman 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bergman 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Skupin 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)