



Powerful Female Voices in the Early Middle Ages: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Frau Ava, Héloïse, and Marie de France

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Abstract

Investigations of women's lives and culture have often demonstrated that history does not progress linearly. Women's influence on public life and politics could have been much stronger in the past than it is today, and *vice versa*. Differently put, Baroque women writers, for instance, might have faced much more opposition and restrictions than some of their predecessors in the pre-modern world. In fact, apart from Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg, we know virtually no other German woman poet from that period, whereas the situation in the Middle Ages looked quite differently. There are many reasons for these very uneven, at times regressive developments. This paper will thus illustrate the unexpected phenomenon of highly powerful female authors in the early and high Middle Ages, who more often than not were in strong positions to voice their concerns, to contribute to the literary discourse of their time, and to shape public opinions. None of the names to be presented here is new to medieval scholarship, but Women Studies, Gender Studies, and Literary History at large can certainly profit from the insights that we will gain in grouping together the works by these extraordinarily vocal and self-conscious female poets from the tenth through the late twelfth centuries.

Keywords

Early medieval literature; Gender studies; Hrotsvit of Gandersheim; Frau Ava; Héloïse; Marie de France

Introduction

Progress has never been guaranteed, neither in economic nor in political terms, neither for an individual or a community, for a tribe or for a nation. Technological advances do not signal automatically an improvement of social, moral, or ethical conditions. Environmental protection, for instance, proves to be an ongoing struggle, and when we believe to have cleaned up one problem, another one pops up. Racism, antisemitism, misogyny, xenophobia, islamophobia, and many other issues in the post-modern world continue to trouble us deeply, and they might even get worse at various times and in some locations.

Almost no one would have expected that post Holocaust hatred of Jews could regain in strength as it does at current times (2024). This observation also applies to the gender relations, particularly if we think of domestic and other violence against women, which seems to be on the rise (ca. 8.1% in the USA) instead of decline especially since the COVID-19 shut-down in 2020 for almost three years globally. However, one might stand on this and many other issues, there is no absolute certainty that women's health and freedom will gain more and more positive attention leading us ultimately to complete equality of the genders. The struggle for women's rights by many different activists

continues until today, if we think, for instance, of the critical issue of abortion (particularly in Western countries), the requirement for many women in Islamic countries to wear the hijab, or the right to drive a car. The public debate continues strongly, and progress, however defined, is certainly not guaranteed.

History thus reveals, once again, to be very unpredictable and certainly not steadily progressive, particularly regarding such a sensitive issue as abortion laws. As much as people in the West take it for granted that women deserve full equality and respect as fellow citizens, there are many detractors both in the USA (MAGA) and abroad, especially in some Muslim countries. The situation for women in present-day Afghanistan, for instance, is much worse than decades ago, and this despite twenty years of US military intervention and financial, social, cultural, and political investment in that country. Simply put, the Taliban take-over has thrown that poor country back at least several hundred years of development especially concerning women's rights and social status¹. But at the same time, women in the USA are suddenly facing greatest trouble regarding their physical health because the Supreme Court has reversed the old abortion law *Roe vs. Wade* from 1973 in 2022, allowing all states to issue their own laws. In a good number of states, the legislatures decided to ban virtually all abortions, taking women's rights back to the nineteenth century with catastrophic consequences for their health and lives².

1. The Early Middle Ages

This paper will take us back to the early Middle Ages and intends to demonstrate how much the very opposite could have been the case when we turn our attention to a good number of female intellectuals who took to the pen and successfully defended their rights to express themselves freely and to engage in the dominant literary discourse of their time irrespective of firmly patriarchal power structures. Each cultural period represents challenges, each society regularly goes through many changes, and those could have meant more liberation of women or more repression, all depending on the social, economic, religious, and political circumstances.

For instance, when we consider the situation of clerical women in the Byzantine Church until the tenth century, we can discover the existence of many women serving as deacons, an office which was nearly the same as that of bishops in the Western Church (Wijngaards, 2002; Taylor & Ramelli, ed., 2021). But when we turn to the political arena, the royal courts, and the literary sphere throughout the entire early Middle Ages, women do not seem to be really present, apart from some Anglo-Saxon nuns who had written letters to St. Boniface in the eighth century (Ennen, 1987, pp. 49-75; Ferrante, 1997; Scheck & Blanton, 2017).

Of course, over the last few decades, scholarship has dramatically changed our perspectives and understanding of the gender issue and has revealed that women were not simply repressed and muted, neither in the tenth nor in the fifteenth century. The existence of hundreds if not thousands of women's monasteries across medieval Europe, for instance, confirms that they enjoyed considerable independence and even freedom to pursue their own spiritual lives and quasi-professional careers in many different fields, and this as nuns highly educated and trained in the arts, theology, sciences, calligraphy, music, architecture, and so forth (Griffiths & Hotchin, eds., 2014; see now the contributions to Becker, Kimpel, Narchi, & Schneidmüller, 2024); see my review in *sehpunkte*, forthcoming). In fact, now we have available entire encyclopedias of medieval women, and the sheer quantity of known female individuals has also allowed us to recognize the true quality of women's writing already in the early Middle Ages (Wilson & Margolis, eds., 2004). Herrad of Landsberg (ca. 1130-1195)'s *Hortus deliciarum* documented, for instance, the high level of sophisticated learning women could achieve and command already at that time (Griffiths, 2007). This implies that we have already opened up many new perspectives in terms of gender history, as I myself have explored already in several book-length studies (Classen, 2016; Classen, 2007). What concerns me here, however, consists of the female self-awareness as we can observe it in the individual cases that I will discuss below. After all, as needs to be noted through a close examination of our four different cases, in contrast to traditional opinions, in the early Medieval Ages more women emerged as strong and highly eloquent individuals than we might have assumed. Learning and advanced studies were available to many nuns and canonesses, and it should not surprise us any longer that they hence also turned to writing and reflected on their own status as poets or authors of a variety of texts.

The first case will be the canoness Hrotsvit of Gandersheim who is famous today as the first medieval playwright, the first female author of religious narratives and plays, the first medieval Saxon poet, and the first female chronicle

¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/faqs-afghan-women-three-years-after-the-taliban-takeover>.

² <https://reproductiverights.org/roe-v-wade/#:~:text=In%20June%202022%2C%20in%20a,federal%20constitutional%20right%20to%20abortion;last%20accessed%20on%20Dec.%204,%202024>.

author, and all this in Latin. From here, I will turn to the first Austrian poet, Frau Ava, an anchorite who is known for her biblical paraphrases and yet, as I will argue, made her own position well known to her audience through her religious poetry in Middle High German. To expand on those very early examples, I will then reflect on the famous mistress, wife, and friend of the highly influential philosopher Peter Abélard, Héloïse, who, through her letters written in twelfth-century exquisite Latin, although their authenticity is questioned until today, made her voice heard and insisted on her own space as a writer and individual. Finally, I will round off the reflections with some comments on the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France who positioned herself just as self-consciously and proud as Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and set the stage for subsequent theoretical discussions of the role and value of literature since the late twelfth century.

Thankfully, each one of these four women writers has already been discussed from many different perspectives, which means that we have recognized their literary abilities and intellectual capacities. This has even led to major efforts by philologists to translate the original texts, which I have used here as much as possible for convenience's sake. What I want to offer as a new perspective, however, is an innovative effort to bring all of them into a conversation with each other at least through a critical reading of their personal statements and theoretical reflections in their texts, considering their strong self-awareness, their pride in their personal writing, and their carefully crafted reflections on writing as a self-fulfilling literary enterprise catapulting them into the public limelight. Even though they all had to fend with dominant male authorship and patriarchy, we will recognize the extent to which these four writers managed successfully to operate independently and self-consciously, demonstrating their pride in their narrative accomplishments, and this actually during the early period of the Middle Ages until the end of the twelfth century (see, for example, Leyser 1995, or the contributions to Bennett and Karras 2013. Those studies focus, however, mostly on social and historical aspects. It is not surprising that the late Middle Ages witnessed a growing number of strong female voices; see, for instance, Wallace, 2011, though those later faced increasing repressions as well. Mystics, for example, were no longer fully recognized, and male inquisitors made great strides in identifying unorthodox women as witches whom they could burn at the stake).

2. Hrotsvit of Gandersheim

In addition to the fact that this canoness (not a nun!) was highly learned and produced a wide range of literary texts in a very sophisticated Latin, we can recognize in Hrotsvit's comments about her own writing a stunning push forward to claim her stakes within the literary sphere of her time. Hrotsvit refers to herself by name a number of times in her various texts ("Maria" [The Virgin Mary], 18; "Himmelfahrt" [Christ's Ascension to Heaven], 148, "Gongolf," 3, "Pelagius," 3, and in the Prologue to her dramas). She was obviously very proud of her literary accomplishments since she called herself the 'strong voice from Gandersheim' ("ego Clamor validus Gandeshemensis"). Although she does not detail her biographical dates, we know that she lived in her convent during the reign of the Abbess Gerberg II (940-1001), who had received her education in the monastery of St. Emmeram in Regensburg (near Munich) before she settled in Gandersheim (northern Germany).

In the prologue to her religious narratives, Hrotsvit emphasizes that she was a number of years younger than Gerberg. In her historical poem about the foundation of Gandersheim she mentions that Duke Otto had died in 912, a long time prior to her own birth, perhaps around 933. The first book of her legendary narratives appeared after 962 when King Otto I was crowned emperor, as Hrotsvit indicates through identifying her teacher as the emperor's niece – she calls her a descendant of a royal family both in the prologue to "Maria" and to her biographical poem on Otto I ("Gesta Oddonis I" – this was her last work, probably commissioned by the imperial family). She also refers to another teacher in the convent, Rikkardis, and gives much credit to the schooling which she received there. The dedication here to Gerberga as her teacher, and not yet as her abbess (since 959) confirms that those religious narratives were completed before that date. Hrotsvit began writing her plays since 963, as we can tell on the basis of the sequence in which they appear in her collected works. Her last creation was a poem on the history of her convent, the "Primordia coenobii Gandeshemensis," which refers explicitly to the previous work, the "Gesta Oddonis I," and mentions that Otto was still alive at that time, who died in 973. We cannot tell how long Hrotsvit lived beyond that date, but we can assume that she died around 980 or a little later.

This poet was proud about her origin from the Saxons; and the fact that she lived in the Gandersheim convent affirms that she must have been of aristocratic descent because it was limited to female members of noble families. This was a convent for canonesses, not for nuns, meaning that she could have easily left and married if her parents or family had deemed it necessary for political reasons, for instance (Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, 1966; Hrotsvit of

Gandersheim, 1970; Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, 2001; Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, 1998). Importantly, as in the case of Marie de France, Hrotsvit belonged to the social elite of her time, closely related to the Ottonian dynasty. There is good reason to assume that Marie de France was King Henry II's half-sister and was hence closely associated with the English (Anglo-Norman) throne. Frau Ava's social status is, by contrast, rather unknown, and Héloïse gained fame and respect only because Peter Abélard had been appointed as her tutor, then became her lover, and finally married her.

2.1 Hrotsvit's Self-Reflection as an Author

Undoubtedly, we can draw on all kinds of categories by which we would identify a writer's/poet's literary quality, and each time, Hrotsvit would meet those expectations. She wrote in a variety of genres, she offered rhetorically and theologically skilled narratives, she intriguingly drew from a range of classical and biblical sources and yet created her own works for which she continues to enjoy highest respect among scholars and general readers alike. Some of her plays are being performed until the present. Her texts have been translated into modern German, English (here I will use Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, 1998, in consultation with the critical editions and the other translations), Spanish (Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, 2005), and other languages, and researchers have intensively engaged with her texts. Most remarkably for our purposes, Hrotsvit left a number of theoretical comments about her intentions, approaches, choice of texts, and hence also about her educational background that made it possible for her to set herself to the task as a playwright and author (Phyllis R. Brown, McMillin, & Wilson, eds., 2004; cf. also Brown & Wailes, eds., 2013).

Like any smart author throughout time, Hrotsvit begins with a typical humility formula with which she submits under the authority of the wise and learned individuals. Then she refers to her admired teachers who helped her achieve the desired goal. At the same time, she refers to divine inspiration that promoted her writing (pp. 19-20). The more she submits under the judgment of those authority figures, however, the more she also gains her own footing and defies any possible criticism because she claims to be her own first critic.

Particularly in the Preface to her plays, Hrotsvit warns her readers/listeners to accept the Roman poet Terence for their literary entertainment because he based his texts only on erotic, sexual matter. She, by contrast, uses religious material, highlighting the worthy lives of late antique female martyrs and modeling her plays upon their suffering. Here we come across one of the most stunning statements of female self-confidence when she pronounces:

I, the Strong Voice of Gandersheim, have not refused to imitate him in writing whom others laud in reading,
/ so that in that selfsame form of composition in which the shameless acts of lascivious women were phrased
/ the laudable chastity of sacred virgins he praised / within the limits of my little talent. (p. 41)

Hrotsvit must have been regularly exposed to Terence's texts since she laments the shame she had felt studying them in her youth. Instead of presenting the lives of lovers and their depravities, she turned to pious and devout virgins who died in the name of their faith.

The poet regularly resorts to humility topoi, insists that she cannot compete with the really great poets, and experiments only with her irrelevant writings, but in that process, she manages intriguingly to move herself increasingly to the foreground, appealing to her audiences from the position of the submissive canoness who only attempts to replace the texts by Terence with her own compositions. And yet, we recognize her voice without fail and soon have to admit that she does not really hide behind a mask; instead, she demonstrates considerable pride in her work and presents it to her audience as more worthy than the classical Roman models.

Of course, Hrotsvit was a very religious person, but while she refers regularly to God as her source of inspiration and support (pp. 19-20), she does not hide completely behind that mask, emphasizing, for instance: "and I chose to sing them in the dactylic mode / so that my talent, however tiny, should not erode, / that it should not lie dormant in my heart's recesses and be destroyed by slothful neglect's corrosion" (p. 20). The poet's rhetorical strategies both hide herself and pronounce her personal accomplishments. Even though she describes herself as an instrument driven by divine powers, she still identifies herself as an agent of her own individuality: "struck by the mallet of eager devotion" (p. 20). Rather similar as many much later mystical authors such as Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Catherine of Siena, or Julian of Norwich, Hrotsvit casts herself as a medium of the divine power producing "a tiny little sound of divine praise" (p. 20), which gives her a sense of meaning and relevance within the divine universe. In her appeal to the audience, she resorts to the same strategy as modern authors do who thank the readers of the original manuscript and refer to themselves as those responsible for the remaining mistakes: "but for all the flaws, assign the blame to my poor crafting" (p. 20). However, she also insists that by means of her self-

censoring and critiquing, hence her self-humbling, she has guaranteed that her critics will not use extremely harsh words of condemnation. All those formulas hence underscore the actual pride she feels for her work, thinly veiled behind her use of the classical trope of humility (This humility or devotional formula has already been discussed at length since the early twentieth century; the most comprehensive treatment can be found in Curtius 1948; 1953; 973; 1988; 1990, pp. 407-13).

When we examine Hrotsvit's introductory comments in her various works, such as "Basilius," we discover more or less the same approach insofar as she humbles herself as an allegedly "untutored tongue" (21) who sings "small lines" to allow "the Lord's celestial grace" (21) to come through. In other words, as a poet she perceives herself as God's mouthpiece, again, the same phenomenon as we will later observe in the wide-spread mystical discourse. In "Pelagius," the poet appeals to the long-dead martyr saint and begs him to be "mindful of Hrotsvit thy maid and to her song, too, lend thy kind aid" (29). She openly 'admits' her own shortcomings as a poet and begs Pelagius to help her to pronounce the greatness of the divine force: "That I may worthily sing and the tale of thy marvel depict, / And that my pen may acclaim thy triumphs and also thy fame" (29) (I have discussed elsewhere more in detail how Hrotsvit learned about the story of this legendary martyr-saint and what this means in terms of cultural contacts between Muslim al-Andalus and Ottonian Christian Germany. More than anywhere else, the prologue to her dramas highlights this unique sense of self as a writer who was courageous enough to dismiss the works by the Roman poet Terence because of their lascivious nature and to replace them with her own texts for her monastic community (see above). Here we only need to underscore how much Hrotsvit identifies with her own characters who demonstrate the "victories of triumphant innocence . . . especially when female weakness triumphs in conclusion" (p. 41). Even though she freely acknowledges the high superiority of her role models, such as Terence, whom she cannot even aim to imitate, she perceives in herself a medium of God's grace: "that I may return the gift I received to its Giver again" (p. 42). It is Christ who "grants me the ability to do so" (p. 42). At the risk of boring her audience with her trifling words, she assures herself, after all, as a voice that serves to avoid "the dangerous allurements of pagan subject matter" (p. 42).

In her "Letter to the Learned Patrons of this Book," Hrotsvit tackles the task from a different angle, singing a song of praise on her patron who, disregarding his high level of learning, found it worthwhile his time and effort to pay attention to her works. The more he praises him and belittles herself, the more she profiles herself as an independent and worthy author: "you . . . found the little work of a worthless woman worthy of your admiration, / and encouraging me with fraternal affection / you praised the Giver of the grace working through me" (p. 43). Whereas Hrotsvit had not dared to present her poetry to any people beyond a small circle of close friends, with the patron having given his approval and praise, she then felt urged "to continue as I had begun my ways . . . I will presume to continue my works / trusting in God and with His permission and to submit it to the examination of learned clerks" (p. 43). As much as she plays regularly with the humility topos, describing herself as simple-minded and a rustic, she then plays a powerful card identified with Boethius since she explains that she endeavored to learn as much as she could: "I have tried whenever I could probe, / to rip small patches from Philosophy's robe / and weave them into this little work of mine, / so that the worthlessness of my own ignorance may be ennobled by their interweaving of this nobler material's shine" (p. 44). In Boethius's *Consolatio philosophiae* (ca. 524), the major textbook in all schools throughout the entire Middle Ages and far beyond until at least the nineteenth century, Philosophy had appeared in Boethius's prison cell to provide him with consolation and to teach him the path to true happiness.

However, her robe had suffered from critics who had taken pieces out of it against her will, although she had been able to defend herself. Hrotsvit was certainly familiar with Boethius's work, but she changes the imagery here to her own advantage insofar as she claims to be trained in this discipline as well (Gibson, 1981; see also the contributions to Gleib, Kaminski, & Lebsanft, eds., 2010; cf. also the contributions to Kaylor & Phillips, 2016). Of course, she never forgets to be grateful to her Creator, "the Creator of my talent" (p. 44), but her devotion does not diminish her self-awareness and modest pride in her own accomplishments. Relying on a Socratic approach, Hrotsvit argues that she knows nothing, and yet by submitting her book to her patron asking for his corrections, she takes a rather strong stance vis-à-vis her own writing and insinuates that she is fully aware of her own accomplishments as a poet or writer.

Neither in her "Gesta Oddonis" nor in her "Primordia," both chronicle writings, does Hrotsvit reflect further on her position as an independent author, except for stressing her 'incompetence' and 'ignorance,' continuing the use of the humility topos. Nevertheless, in both texts we observe a clear strategy to come to terms with her task to provide, in poetic terms, a clear discussion of the historical events either at the imperial court or at her own monastery. As to her "Primordia," we recognize a striking parallel with the much later *Livre de la cité de dames* by the French feminist

Christine de Pizan (ca. 1405), although Hrotsvit does not pursue a particularly female perspective and simply pays respect to the founders of her monastery and the spiritual investment making the development of this institution possible in the first place.

3. Frau Ava

Ava, a Benedictine recluse who lived near Melk, Lower Austria, was the first German woman poet whom we know by name and who composed in the vernacular Middle High German. Her simple poems all deal with biblical themes, mainly from the New Testament, the best-known of her works being the *Leben Jesu* (*Life of Jesus*), which also reflects some feminine concerns. Frau Ava (Lady Ava) talks about herself only once at the end of *The Last Judgment*. We can imply from her statement that she had been married, presumably to a lesser lord, and had two sons. She probably turned to the religious life of an anchorite (voluntary enclosure in a cell directly attached to the Benedictine convent of Melk or Göttweig in Lower Austria, in the vicinity of the Danube, out of grief, perhaps after her husband's death, but she never mentions him by name and does not say anything about her previous married life. Frau Ava relates of her sons, whom she loved dearly (stanza 35, 5), that one had already died (probably as an adult), whereas the other continued in his career ("toils in earthly woes," 35, 12). Insofar as her sons had instructed her in the meaning of the Gospel, they seem to have joined a convent as monks and to have acquired a theological training there. Frau Ava died on February 6 or 7, 1127, as reflected in the necrologies of the convents of Melk, Klosterneuburg, Zwettl, Garsten, and St. Lambrecht. We can deduce from the multiple reference to her death that she enjoyed a high social status, either because of her family background, or because she had gained great notoriety for her German Bible poems. As much as we today might identify an anchorite as an individual who voluntarily accepted self-imprisonment, the contemporaries rather worshipped those anchorites as highly devout and pious persons who deserved the greatest respect, and this well into the late Middle Ages – cf., for instance, Julian of Norwich (ca. 1343–ca. 1416) (for more background of anchorites, see Jones, ed. 2019; McAvoy, 2005; Gunn & McAvoy, eds., 2017).

Ava's work, a sort of continuous devotional epic, comprises five books: *Johannes der Täufer* (*John the Baptist*, 30 stanzas), *Das Leben Jesu* (*Life of Jesus*, 221 stanzas); *Der Antichrist* (*The Antichrist*, 12 stanzas); *Das jüngsten Gericht* (*The Last Judgment*, 35 stanzas); and *Die sieben Gaben des heiligen Geistes* (*The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, which is actually a part of *Das Leben Jesu*) (Frau Ava, 1986; Frau Ava, 2003; here I draw, for convenience's sake from Rushing's translation, but in close consultation with the critical edition on the facing pages). In *The Seven Gifts* the author outlines the catalogue of virtues which Christ bestowed upon his disciples. *The Last Judgment* belongs to the genre of apocalyptic literature and concludes with the *Parousia*, the glorious return of Christ.

Ava demonstrates a noteworthy concern for women, reflected in her allusions to no less than nine New Testament stories in which women play a major role. In these she emphasizes, for example, the significant role women enjoyed in recognizing Christ as the Savior. She also places considerable emphasis on women as mothers who desperately appeal to Christ to help their children (e.g., *The Life of Jesus*, 71–2). The urgency of her plea for the redemption of all souls is vividly demonstrated in her eschatological vision (vision of the hereafter). When, in closing, she finally gives advice to her readers, whomever they might be, young or old, on how the good life can and should be lived, Ava believes that all who have followed the "good rule" would be granted salvation. By the grace of God, she asserts, this salvation will be given to all – and apparently she counts herself among the saved (Gutfleisch-Ziche, 1997; Hintz, 1995).

In strong contrast to Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Frau Ava barely comments on her writing and only begins her poem of "Johannes" (John) with the generic formula, "Now we should – in a clear and thoughtful way – / tell about things, / how the time began" (stanza 1/1–3). However, what she does not say explicitly becomes vividly expressed indirectly because she obviously felt empowered to embark on this innovative literary enterprise and render the Gospel text into her own Middle High German words. Ava points out that specific information can be confirmed through a close reading of Luke (stanza 2/8), and she herself claims enough authority to state as certainty that John's mother "was from the lineage of Aaron" (stanza 2/12).

She also underscores that she and others (women) had learned the history of Elisabeth: "as we are often told" (stanza 5/2). This reference to sermons presented by preachers to her and other people highlights that she felt empowered enough to translate what she had learned (in Latin) in Church into her own Middle High German narrative, and this although women were not allowed to assume any teaching or preaching position, which is being upheld until today in the Catholic Church according to the statement by Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34 (Amadi-Azuogu, 2007). In fact, all of Ava's works contradict this male concept, so we can recognize in her a very courageous female

individual who managed, already at that time, to break the glass ceiling for women, assuming biblical authority by rendering the holy narratives into the vernacular for her probably primarily female audience that did not know Latin.

Ava normally does not comment on her own text, but occasionally she does, after all, providing her listeners/readers with her opinion about the miraculous nature of little John's move to the desert: "That was a great miracle / in such a young child. / It was only because God's light enlightened him / that it could be thus" (stanza 13/5–8). We also recognize that she included explanations of the Gospel text, such as concerning the fact that John wore only cloths woven from camel hair: "My Lord gave him the strength for this" (stanza 13/16). Similarly, considering his spare food of locusts and wild honey, Ava remarks: "There was little flesh on his body: / he accepted that for the love of God" (stanza 14/9–10).

Almost unnoticeable, but yet still very distinctly, Ava concludes the poem with personal remarks: "Indeed, the worthy one of God is / truly, without question, / a helper to us" (stanza 30/18–20). Quite similarly, in "Das Leben Jesu," the narrator offers her own understanding of Christ having been prophesied already in the Old Testament: "When God wanted to be born / here on earth / he ordered it to be foretold / by Isaiah the prophet / and other prophets / that it was his will / that a virgin bear him" (stanza 1/1-7). When we look carefully, the text reveals here and there Ava's personal comments injected into the Scriptural account. For instance, once she has stated that the Virgin Mary conceived the child from God, her whole body shook "from her feet to the top of her head, / then heaven was married to the earth" (stanza 7/5-6).

Most importantly, Ava was the first writer to add the now so much embraced concept of the Holy Family finding refuge in a shed with animals: "There the donkey and the cow made room for him / and immediately honored the holy child" (stanza 13/11-12). The New Testament only refers to a manger, but not to the specific animals (<https://answersingenesis.org/christmas/born-in-a-barn-stable/> (last accessed on Oct. 28, 2024), which hence would mean that Ava made a major contribution to the popular culture centered on the Nativity scene. Of course, the poet leaves only subtle comments and does not issue explicit statements about herself, which would undermine her own ideal of humility, as expected from an anchorite. Nevertheless, if we combed through the narrative more in detail, we would come across many more indications of Ava's direct involvement not only as a translator or narrator paraphrasing the biblical text, but as a writer in her own terms, self-conscious and self-assured, certainly proud about her literary accomplishments. We discover those indications in small comments such as "Now I want to tell you / who want to hear it, / who they were / that went with her. / She herself was Mary / Magdalen" (stanza 168/1-6). Significantly, once Ava has reached the conclusion of her long poem about Christ and His Passion, she turns to her audience again and reminds them that Christ "freed us from the darkness / in his full grace. / Now let us say amen" (stanza 221/18-20). Although she was not a priest and could never have assumed that authority, through her poems she was powerful enough to subterfuge this patriarchal hegemony and make her own voice heard.

4. Heloise

It would be an understatement to identify Heloise as a remarkable female individual from the twelfth century. No other woman from the entire Middle Ages has provoked more attention than she did, and this for many reasons. Of course, there was the scandal with her marriage to Peter Abelard (d. 1142), but he was castrated as a punishment for trying to keep this relationship a secret. There were no real consequences for her, except that Peter forced her to enter a monastery. Heloise also had a son named Astrolabe, but we do not know anything about him (Minois, 2019; Cook, 2023). The real issue consists of the correspondence exchanged between her and her husband later in their lives, after she had gotten hold of a manuscript copy of his autobiographical lament narrative, his *Historia calamitatum*. The letters of their correspondence have been the subject of intensive scholarly debates concerning their authenticity. A majority of scholars accepts them as written by Heloise with her own pen; others have argued against it, suggesting either that Abelard, a master of dialectical thinking, had made them up himself or that a later author, such as the satirical poet Jean de Meun, might have authored them to satirize that (in)famous relationship (Marenbon, 2000, pp. 19-33. Here I draw from McLaughlin with Bonnie Wheeler, trans., 2009. Rüdiger Schnell now proposes that an anonymous poet created those letters to parody both Abelard and Heloise, but this argument does not prove to be convincing at all and appears to be based on sheer speculation and the futile attempt to carve out a new perspective. Schnell, 2022. Similarly ineffective proves to be Kauffman 2019. We can certainly agree with her that all letter writers discussed in her study, including Abelard and Heloise, drew from literary models, but this has no impact on the question regarding their authenticity. See also Fraioli, 1988; Fraioli, 2012).

Considering the boldness and courage with which Heloise responds to her husband's sorrowful writing, whereby

she underscores her intellectual independence and sophistication, it is not surprising that questions have been raised as to the letters' origin. But the minority opinion, dismissing Heloise's authorship, is commonly fed by the sexist concept (even today, and even by female scholars!) that this early or high medieval woman could not have expressed herself in such a strong and intellectual fashion.

For the purpose of this study, let us take a middle position and accept that either Heloise indeed wrote those letters or that another person composed them on her behalf. The argument that these texts allegedly written by her reveal a strong streak of satire and even sarcasm does not seem to have any particular weight. Whoever was responsible for them clearly signaled that Heloise was a competent and highly schooled author and thus would deserve our full respect. There is no implied sarcasm or satire directed against 'uppity' women, i.e., against this highly educated woman, Abelard's mistress and later wife. The burden of proof that she did not compose those letters rests on those critics who question the authenticity of those texts, and I do not think that the previous philological efforts concerning that issue have yielded the desired effect. I regard her thus as a direct descendent of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and Frau Ava, clearly expressing her opinion and demonstrating a highly impressive degree of intellect and eloquence.

While Heloise – and let us assume for the present purpose that it is her voice – responds to Abelard's writing, she pays most respect to his suffering, both physical and spiritual. In fact, Heloise appears to present a learned analysis of the autobiographical narrative, carefully dissecting her husband's sorrows and laments in a compassionate but also rational fashion, demonstrating thereby her extraordinary skill and internal strength to cope with pain and emotions: "after describing your intolerable persecutions at the hands of that cruel tyrant and those wicked monks whom you call sons, you bring your melancholy story to an end" (p. 51). She herself reveals the depth of her feelings once she had read his lines about himself, commenting: "all of us here are driven to despair of your life" (p. 51).

As much as Heloise puts herself on the backburner, focusing entirely on Abelard, her letter demonstrates her extraordinary rhetorical skills to formulate her compassion and deep concerns: "we beg you to give us frequent news of you, and the storms that still buffet you" (p. 52). All this would strengthen their friendship in the classical sense of the word, as reflected by a long quote from Seneca's writing to his friend Luciliu (Mäkinen and Knuuttila, ed., 2024). But Heloise then turns to her own feeling of loneliness and longing for her lover, appealing to Abelard to keep her in mind as well: "you are bound by a larger debt to us, whom you may rightly call not merely your friends, but your dearest friends, not simply comrades but daughters, or whatever sweeter and holier name, if any, can be imagined" (p. 52).

On the one hand, Heloise emphasizes the human connection between them; on the other, she highlights Abelard's obligation to take care of their monastic community which he had established in the first place taking on full responsibility. Heloise expresses her worries that the convent might not be strong enough to survive without Abelard's help, whatever she might have in mind. The letter, however, represents a strong voice who explicitly points out the founder's responsibilities and obligations. In fact, she charges him for wasting his efforts and skills on those who oppose him, whereas he would be warmly welcomed by Heloise and her fellow sisters with open arms (p. 53).

Moreover, she goes so far as to chastise him having disregarded the weak flock of their small community, and she reminds him of their bond of marriage which he ought to have observed in the past: "you are joined to me still more closely because, as everyone knows, I have always loved you with a boundless love" (p. 53). Heloise underscores repeatedly how much pain and sorrow she had to undergo because she had lost him although there was no barrier between them except his decision following the castration to move away from her. Almost resorting to an aggressive tone of voice, Heloise insists:

You alone can make me sad, and only you can make me happy and console me. You alone owe me this great debt, now above all, when I have done all that you demanded, even to the point where, unable to refuse you anything, I found the strength to give up my own life at your command. (p. 53)

Subsequently, Heloise insists that she had not wanted to get married; had preferred to remain his mistress, or, to be called rather Abelard's mistress than Emperor Augustus's wife (54). Then she lists all of her former teacher's, lover's, and husband's abilities and wonders out aloud why he has kept quiet since they both entered religious life, she upon his request and not out of her free will. All Heloise is asking him is to grant her some attention and to acknowledge her, which he could easily do by sharing his personal suffering also with her and not only with his friends (pp. 55–6).

It has seemed strange to many scholars that Heloise could turn so personal in her comments and demands, maybe because a woman writer at that time was not expected or assumed to be so self-assured: "Until now, I really believed

that I deserved better from you, since I have done everything for you and am still persevering in obedience to you” (p. 56). She goes so far as to insist that she would have followed Abelard into the fire of hell if he had ordered her to do so. However, her condition remains that he would help her to gain happiness. Heloise strongly objects to the charges that she had submitted to Abelard only out of lust, emphasizing instead her strong love for him: “In obedience to your will, I have forbidden myself every pleasure” (p. 56). Then she adds: “I have kept nothing for myself but only this, to become more than ever yours alone” (56). All she asks him to do is to respond to her in writing, which he then actually does, as the following epistolary exchange signals, whether any of those texts are authentic or not.

There is no doubt as to the high level of rhetorical skills demonstrated by Heloise. In response to those who have questioned the authenticity of the letters, we can now point out that this writer was not at all the first one to demonstrate this literary ability to express herself and to claim authority for her words and reflections. Of course, Hrotsvit and Frau Ava had resorted to different genres, and had focused on religious reflections exclusively. Nevertheless, here we simply observe a direct tradition from the centers of monastic learning by women to the cell of an abbess who used to be the philosopher’s mistress and then even wife. The circumstances are not very different, and the personal tone of all three writers did not vary really that much. Instead, we can easily put Heloise into conversation with her two predecessors and other female authors, such as the Anglo-Saxon letter writers (Leoba et al.).

Even Abelard acknowledges his great respect for Heloise’s intellectual abilities, even if only in a gesture toward her implying that he had trusted her in not having been in need of his spiritual assistance:

I did not consider my help necessary for one upon whom the divine grace has so lavishly bestowed all that she needs. By your words and your example you are able to teach those who are in error, to strengthen the fainthearted, to exhort the lukewarm as you have long been accustomed to do since you became prioress under the abbess. (Abelard to Heloise, p. 57)

Of course, Heloise was not so easily calmed down and put to rest, as the following letters clearly indicate, but the specific arguments do not concern us here more than necessary. Instead, as her response to Abelard’s letter then indicates, she was fully aware of the stylistic rules of epistolary literature and expresses her surprise that he did not closely follow them. She, in turn, demonstrates thereby what she knows, what she expects from him both as her lover and her correspondent, and she thus assumes the helm in this epistolary exchange, fully aware of her abilities and strengths as a writer, and also as a religious person. There is, hence, no doubt that Heloise represented, like her female predecessors, an amazingly strong voice reflecting on her intellectual and religious abilities. Much scholarship has already confirmed these observations, but by putting them into a larger context, they allow us to strengthen the overarching reflections on the power and authority which learned women from the early Middle Ages could exert. Peter the Venerable, for instance, had already expressed his great respect for Heloise as an admirable intellectual and religious person. It seems strange that she then encountered most serious detractors only since the late twentieth century (Mews, 1999, pp. 145-77).

5. Marie de France

Of course, we normally tend to identify the twelfth century already as part of the high Middle Ages, and when we finally turn to Marie de France, we find ourselves even further along and in the midst of fully developed courtly culture. But since the point here is to identify a tradition of powerful female voices from the tenth century onward, it seems justified to include the evidence from Heloise and then also Marie de France. The latter has attracted much attention particularly over the last few decades, and her works have deeply appealed to generations of (student) readers and scholars (for the most recent and actually best edition and translation, see Waters, 2018). I will quote from here. For the most seminal studies, see, for instance, Burgess, 1987; Bloch, 2003; Whalen, ed., 2011; Kinoshita & McCracken, 2012). More than most of her contemporaries, but rather similar as Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Marie de France offers detailed comments about her writings, explaining her choice of sources and moral and ethical intentions. She identifies herself as a person of high eloquence and considers it her responsibility not to hide it to the world since God had granted her that ability. However, she knows only too well that a good poet needs to observe the principle of obscurity, as the Roman grammarian Priscian (early sixth century) had already taught. Only if a literary work were to hide its messages somewhat would the future readers/listeners accept the task of probing its meaning more deeply. Moreover, the literary discourse serves to model one’s own behavior, to strengthen one’s ethical and moral principles, and one’s philosophical mind (p. 49).

Marie takes a different route in creating her poems than many if not most of her contemporaries. Instead of relying

on a classical Latin source, which she apparently could have done easily, without reaching new insights, she resorted to the world of Breton oral poetry. She herself had learned about it in her youth and knew it well, and since those ancient *lais* presented deep life lessons, she did not hesitate to take that unusual route. Marie dedicated her work to the English king (Henry II), begging him not to take this gesture as an expression of her arrogance. In the prologue to “Guigemar,” Marie warns about the many slanderers and wicked people who might try to undermine her rank as a poet. For her, those *lais* speak the truth and hence deserve to be preserved through her poetic rendering. But she does not go into further details as to what her further intentions might be, leaving us only with the rather vague statement: “I will show you an adventure / that happened in Brittany” (p. 53, vv. 24-5).

Rather similar as Frau Ava, Marie mostly relates her stories without further remarks of her own, but at times she injects her personal perspectives, so when she notes about Guigemar and his beloved, “But Fortune, who does not forget her task, / spins her wheel in a moment; / she puts one down, another up” (p. 81, vv. 538-40) (as is easily recognizable, Marie here draws directly from Boethius’s teachings in his *De consolazione philosophiae* (ca. 524). Otherwise, however, the poet refrains from injecting herself more than absolutely necessary as a narrator. Only at the end, as is to be expected, does she finally comment on the outcome: “it is pleasant to hear the tune” (p. 99, v. 886).

In “Equitain,” by contrast, Marie intervenes more directly, warning her audience about lovers who are not trustworthy or constant in their loyalty: “Those who are fickle in love / and who set themselves up to deceive, / they are mocked and tricked; / we have seen many cases of it” (109, vv. 163-6). Once the two lovers have died as a result of their wickedness, the narrator concludes: “Whoever might wish to listen to reason / could learn by example here: / one who pursues another’s harm / may find the wrong rebounds on him” (p. 115, vv. 307-10). Overall, however, Marie holds back with her personal comments and only highlights the importance of listening to her stories, such as at the end of “Eliduc”: “The old Bretons of old / made the lai to call to mind / the story of these three, / for no one should forget it” (p. 359, vv. 1181-4).

6. Conclusion

If we scan literary history from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, we would have a fairly difficult time to identify major female voices, except, for instance, those by Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg (1633-1694) or Aphra Behn (1640-1689). There are many reasons for that phenomenon, but we can be content with the observation itself that women’s literature did not simply emerge and consistently grew over time into full bloom. We have identified four major female voices from the early Middle Ages, including the twelfth century, who demonstrated an astounding degree of independence, self-assuredness, and character strength, quite apart from their impressive stylistic and rhetorical skills. Hrotsvit herself might not find any equal as a female dramatist and chronicler until the twentieth century. But Frau Ava, Heloise, and Marie de France equally emerge as powerful voices. We would have to wait until the early fifteenth century to encounter similarly strong female writers (e.g., Christine de Pizan, or, again ca. 140 years later, Marguerite de Navarre).

To return to our initial reflections, we can thus conclude that history is not at all progressive out of necessity. Social, political, religious, and economic conditions changed throughout time, and there is no guarantee at all that the situation in the early Middle Ages was worse, i.e., more repressive, than in the high and the late Middle Ages. In fact, the early modern age was not at all a supportive period during which women enjoyed many more opportunities to express themselves and to participate in the public literary discourse. After all, most women monasteries in northern Europe had to close and in urban centers women had barely any professional opportunity to shape their own lives outside of marriage. By contrast, for which there are many reasons, the early Middle Ages offered, so it seems, almost more opportunities for learned women within the Church and at court to step up to the plate and express themselves in a highly learned, eloquent fashion through their plays, religious narratives, sophisticated letters, and *lais* (or *fales*, as in Marie de France’s case).

These circumstances were, not to forget, quite unique, though not completely different compared to those in the modern age. Hrotsvit lived in a *Stift*, i.e., a monastery for canonesses, enjoying an excellent education and strong support by her teachers and superiors. Moreover, she was a member of the imperial family, and commanded extraordinary intellectual abilities. Frau Ava, as an anchorite, was apparently also well-schooled, hence capable in an impressively poetic fashion, to render the Vulgate version of Christ’s life and Passion into Middle High German verse, adding her personal perspectives here and there.

Heloise confirms, above all, what we have noticed before several times; if women had the opportunity to receive advanced education, many lived up to that chance and excelled extraordinarily, or rather, as to be expected because

they had the intellectual capacity. Although the authenticity of her letters remains debated – actually without any good arguments to the contrary, especially because she speaks from her personal position as Abelard’s student, mistress, and then as his wife and mother of their son Astrolabe, and presents her points of view toward his behavior regarding her as a nun/abbess in a straightforward and highly eloquent manner. Finally, Marie de France, member of the royal family in England, only needed to make a decision as to what sources to use for her own work and then boldly proceeded producing an astonishing literary work consisting of various genres. Remarkably, she was not daunted by the high esteem of classical Latin literature; instead, she resorted to the ancient oral poetry by the Bretons and utilized it impressively to her own advantage and that of her audiences.

Altogether, we can thus conclude that depending on the circumstances, women could discover and conquer their own agency, and this already and strongly in the early Middle Ages. The subsequent centuries did not look very good for female poets, if not for women at large. As stated at the beginning, history is not automatically progressive, and to gain an objective idea of when what female writers could take to the pen and participate in the public discourse depended very much on the specific conditions they found themselves in. In many ways, early medieval women appear to have enjoyed considerably better cultural conditions than their descendants in the following centuries.

Of course, this also depends on the progress we can make in terms of archival research, as we have been able to discover many more female poets from the fifteenth and also sixteenth centuries than we have thought possible in previous decades (Classen, 1999). Some of the earliest known individuals such as Hrotsvit deserve our greatest respect because of their detailed theoretical reflections on their own writings. Frau Ava did not develop those extensively, but we find them again strongly in the prologues by Marie de France. Heloise was apparently so fully aware of the power of her written words that she did not see a need to examine the creative process by itself. If we want to discover similar voices, we have to wait for Christine de Pizan (early fifteenth century), Argula von Grumbach, and Marguerite de Navarre (both sixteenth century). To reconfirm our initial observation, now supported by plenty of evidence, history, especially that of women, is not necessarily progressive and can take curious twists and turns. It is the result of people’s actions and ideologies, but as scholars, we have also the great opportunity to uncover older and often forgotten voices which thus allows us to rewrite (literary) history by way of pursuing different perspectives, applying alternative research methods, formulating different questions, and examining other sources.

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