Rediscovering Roswitha's *Sapientia* with Object Theatre

Stefano Muneroni and Mia van Leeuwen

The religious dramas of Roswitha of Gandersheim, a German canoness of the tenth century, are as daunting for theatre directors who stage them as they are intimidating for theatre history professors who would like to include them in their syllabi. While mystery and morality plays of the Middle Ages still receive the occasional production, the religious dramas of Roswitha are seldom seen on the professional stage.[1] Sue-Ellen Case, among the first scholars to cast Roswitha's Latin dramas through a feminist lens, attributes the scarcity of productions of her plays to 'the obscurity of her name and play titles' and 'the short playing time of her texts'.[2] While it is true that her name is little-known and the duration of her plays is often deemed too short, another reason that Roswitha's dramas are staged infrequently is that they are thought of as formulaic and lacking real artistic value due to their ideological and theological implications. Alternatively, they are often perceived as long outmoded and difficult to comprehend due to their characters' world-view, which relies on the certainty of divine grace, the promise of an afterlife, and the necessity to abide by Christian morality. The key objective of this essay is to probe how original theatrical adaptations might retool Roswitha's dramas for a contemporary audience by reframing the strength and resolution of her female characters in new ways and by dislocating and questioning the original theological foundations of her dramas. The real problem in staging Roswitha's plays today is not their subject matter, nor their embedded eschatological vision of the world, but rather the fact that directors often fail to adapt them using contemporary frames of

[1] Roswitha's name is also spelled as Hrotsvit, Hrotswitha, and Hrotsvitha. The anglicized version of Roswitha is used in this article to keep with the spelling used to support the marketing of the productions of *Sapientia* in Canada.
[2] Sue-Ellen Case, 'Re-Viewing Hrotsvit', *Theatre Journal*, 35.4 (December 1983), 533–42 (p. 540).

reference that resonate with modern audiences. The authors understand theatrical adaptation as a process that reactivates the form and content of the source text for modern spectators, and that entails, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, 'repetition without replication'.[3] The adaptation we study here may also be understood as an 'actualization' in that it 'relocates an old source (either written or set in the distant past) into more recent time'.[4] Drawing on adaptive strategies is essential for a play like *Sapientia*, which stages strong female characters but relies on anachronistic devotional tropes. The last of six plays written in Latin by Roswitha, *Sapientia* recounts the story of a Greek Christian woman, Sapientia, who travels to Rome to meet Emperor Hadrian and offer her daughters, Faith, Hope, and Charity, as martyrs to Christ. One by one each daughter dies happily in truly horrific ways, as their mother rejoices in the conviction that they are all going to heaven. Antiochus, the emperor's cruel henchman, concocts and carries out torture and death sentences that include burning, mutilation, and beheading. In the end, after burying the earthly remains of her children, Sapientia prepares herself to die and go to heaven.

Firstly, this essay considers the enduring relevance of Roswitha's religious dramas and her revolutionary portrayal of female characters; secondly, it sheds light on contemporary staging strategies for her work by drawing on a production of *Sapientia* that was staged at the 2014 Canoe Theatre Festival in Edmonton under the direction of Mia van Leeuwen, with dramaturgy by Stefano Muneroni, and an adaptation by Joseph Shragge.[5] This production of *Sapientia* was remounted by the director, with a different cast, in Winnipeg in 2015 (a co-production between Aztec Theatre and Theatre Incarnate) and saw a new production in Montreal in August 2018 (Scapegoat Carnivale Theatre). The fact that Roswitha's dramas are all driven by a strict

---

[3] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 7.
[4] *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat*, ed. by Margherita Laera (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.7.
[5] Roswitha's *Sapientia* is also known as *The Martyrdom of the Holy Virgins Fides, Spes, and Karitas.*

Christian orthodoxy does not diminish her importance in the development of Western drama. Her status can hardly be overstated: She has been claimed as the 'first poet of Saxony, first female German poet, first female German historian, first dramatist of Germany and of Christianity, and only female writer of extant Latin epic'.[6] In spite of her reputation, there have only been a few productions of Roswitha's plays on the contemporary stage. In 2005, on the occasion of the Southeast Medieval Association Conference in Daytona Beach, the English Department at Stetson University produced *The Fall and Repentance of Mary*, directed by Ken McCoy, as well as *Calimachus* and *Dulcitius*, both directed by Julie Schmitt.[7] In 1982, Sue-Ellen Case directed Roswitha's *Dulcitius*, *Paphnutius*, and *Callimachus* and staged them together in Seattle under the title *The Virgin, the Whore, and the Desperate One*.[8] *Sapientia* was also adapted in 1999 by theatre company Collapsable Giraffe as *3 Virgins* and staged in a porn cinema on Times Square. There have been two other productions of *Sapientia* in the United States, in 1955 and 1957, both directed by Sister Mary Marguerite Butler with the students of Mercy College of Detroit, that resulted from a collaboration with the Drama Institute of the University of Michigan. Butler opted for a purely reconstructive and archival rendition of the play and strived to achieve 'authenticity in costumes and stage settings'.[9] She collaborated with historians and art historians to reconstruct and bring to life what might have been the unique aesthetic and cultural circumstances of the play's original staging. However, this is inherently problematic because scholars still debate whether Roswitha's plays were ever staged during her lifetime. In engaging

---

[6] Barbara K. Gold, 'Hrotswitha Writes Herself: *Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis*', in *Sex and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Texts: The Latin Tradition*, ed. by Barbara K. Gold, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 41–70 (p. 42).

[7] Ken McCoy, 'The Fall and Repentance of Mary (Abraham)', *Ken McCoy* (2016) <http://www2.stetson.edu/~kmccoy/portfolio/portfolio/hrotsvit.htm> [accessed 25 November 2017].

[8] Case, 'Re-Viewing Hrotsvit', p. 540.

[9] *Hroswitha of Gandersheim: Her Life, Times, and Works, and a Comprehensive Bibliography*, ed. by Anne Lyon Haight (New York: Stechert-Hafner, 1965), pp. 40–41.

with the possible reception of Roswitha's play, Marla Carlson opts for the term 'reading' to describe 'any process of reception and interpretation', and considers 'reader and spectator as equivalent'.[10] David Wiles argues that Roswitha's dramas were most likely read, rather than performed; and if they were performed, it was probably by an all-male cast made up of 'Gandersheim employees, such as boys, lay brothers or labourers who doubled as semi-professionals entertainers'.[11] Butler's two productions did little to cast a new light on Roswitha's drama or to frame it for its new audience; instead, they simply tried to recreate the experience of watching the play as spectators might have in the tenth century. As museum pieces, they did not debunk biases against Roswitha's stageability, but rather reinforced them by confining *Sapientia* to assumptions about its original socio-cultural context.

Relegating Roswitha's plays to either appropriative adaptations or historically pseudo-accurate representations ultimately silences her enduring originality and does a disservice to her contributions to Western drama, one of which is her *ante litteram* conception of female agency. She writes strong female characters, drawing eclectically on both religious models and Terence's comedy. While her characters might be seeking death as the ultimate way to commune with God, they are more assertive and strong-willed than the male subjects. Barbara Gold argues that 'Hrotswitha's [Roswitha's] female characters are the true heroines, while most of her male characters are turned into buffoons (except the religious men)'.[12] Her female characters often succeed in stealing the focus from their male counterparts, as happens in *Paphnutius* where the prostitute Thaïs elicits more sympathy than Paphnutius, the priest who converts her. Thaïs is pure in spite of her profession because her soul is separate from her tainted body and in the final scene

[10] Marla Carlson, 'Impassive Bodies: Hrotsvit Stages Martyrdom', *Theatre Journal* 50.4 (1998), 473–87 (p. 482).
[11] David Wiles, 'Hrosvitha of Gandersheim: The Performance of her Plays in the Tenth Century', *Theatre History Studies* 19 (1999), 133–50.
[12] Gold, 'Hrotswitha Writes Herself: *Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis*', p. 55.

she is described as ascending to heaven while the dumbfounded priest is left behind to witness her rapture and recount the event to the audience. Following in the footsteps of Katharina Wilson, who moved away from masculinist titles in her translation of Roswitha's dramas, Wiles used the title *The Conversion of Thaïs the Prostitute* to restore the agency and relevance the dramatist attributed to her heroine.[13] Roswitha portrays determined women who are not afraid to assert themselves, but she does so without attributing perceived masculine traits to them. She challenges modern misconceptions of early medieval representation of femininity by showing women who can win arguments, defend themselves, and ultimately be better than men. As Gold argues,

> Each kind of presentation of the female self reveals in a different way the traits, actions, and values that Hrotswitha wanted to promulgate in order to rescue women from the constrictions of the patriarchal tradition by presenting a vision of women triumphant over male power and demonic forces (frequently one and the same thing in Hrotswitha's plays).[14]

There are clear proto-feminist implications in re-centering Roswitha at the heart of medieval theatre and it is somewhat peculiar that directors have engaged so infrequently with the theatrical possibilities availed by her plays. This lack of interest might have to do with the fact that these plays are quite removed from our secular sensibility. Their emphasis on sacrifice as paradigm of salvation and their focus on religious doctrine allow for very little stage action and make them

---

[13] Katharina Wilson, *The Plays of Hrosvit of Gandersheim* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989); David Wiles, 'Theatre in Roman and Christian Europe', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, ed. by John Russell Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 49–92 (pp. 72–73).
[14] Gold, 'Hrotswitha Writes Herself: *Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis*, p. 51.

hard to produce. However, they can be quite adaptable when directors consider alternative staging aesthetics, or, as aptly put by Michael Zampelli, when there are 'sturdy enough bridges that would allow for extended traffic between this "essentially different world" and our own'.[15] An example of such an original undertaking was led by director Mia van Leeuwen in her 2014 production of *Sapientia* at the Canoe Theatre Festival and subsequent productions of the play, which employed object theatre to unearth and re-contextualize Roswitha's work through a cultural critique of religious ideology.

Object theatre, also known as performing objects, is a performance style that animates found objects (e.g., a shoe, a roll of toilet paper, a bottle of ketchup) rather than, as Richard Allen writes, 'those constructed for theatrical effect (such as the puppet). As a result, practitioners of "object theatre" commonly share […] the key principle of puppetry: the anthropomorphic transformation of an object into a subjectified character (a box of spoons becomes a village, a sieve the head of a girl)'.[16] For John Bell, a significant aspect of this unique genre is the relationship between the human performer and the object itself:

> There is a major dichotomy in our world between living beings and non-living matter. We arise from inert material, exist a brief moment, and then return to the larger body of dead matter from which we arose. The leap of faith that puppeteers, masked dancers, and other performers of objects make is to turn directly to this dead world for their

---

[15] Michael A. Zampelli, 'Playing with Hrotsvit: Adventures in Contemporary Performance', in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Contexts, Identities, Affinities, and Performances*, ed. by Phyllis R. Brown, Linda A. McMillin, and Katharina M. Wilson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 265–91 (p. 266).

[16] Richard Allen, quoted in Justin Cash, 'Object Theatre', *The Drama Teacher* (2017) <http://www.thedramateacher.com/object-theatre/> [accessed 25 November 2017].

> inspiration. Instead of turning inward, to the live body, they turn outward, to the external world, to discover its possibilities for life and play.[17]

This acute awareness of objects and the role they play in our lives deepens our appreciation and consideration of them and makes for a potent tool in the theatre. The possibilities in using objects as subjects create a theatrical distance and foster a critical discussion that invites a negotiation between the original text and its modern interpretations.

Van Leeuwen directed *Sapientia* using object theatre as a re-framing device for staging the medieval work. During rehearsal, she adopted a vocabulary that drew on Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's *The Viewpoints Book* along with principles of object theatre gleaned from her training with Grant Guy, the Artistic Director of Adhere & Deny, an avant-garde puppet/object company based in Winnipeg, Canada (1997-2015).

In van Leeuwen's approach to object theatre, establishing a connection between the performer and the object is the first step. This relationship is explored though a combination of breath (breathing into the object) along with aligning the spine of the object with that of the handler. When this connection is found, performers can then probe the range of possible motions. The next level is focusing the performer's eye through the perceived head of their object. For example, when one object comes in contact with another object, the handler relates to the encounter through the perceived eyes of their object. This rule can be broken when performers look at each other to comment or add subtext to the performance. The performer's hands are actively used to frame the object with gestures, which highlights the tension between the liveness of the performer and the inertia of the object. Choreography is therefore an important element, as object theatre is a dance between the performers and their corresponding

---

[17] John Bell, 'Death and Performing Objects', *P-Form: A Journal of Interdisciplinary and Performance Art*, 41 (Fall 1996), 16–19 (p. 16).

objects, between objects and other objects, and between performers and other performers. This language can be further broken down into spatial relationships between objects onstage via groupings, angles, diagonals, and grids, as well as the proxemics of the space.[18] Kinesthetic response is developed when a spontaneous reaction of the performer and object impacts other performers and objects to create external events of movement and sound.[19] This is further demonstrated by the tempo of the performer and object — how fast or slow they move in response to stimuli occurring onstage.[20] Another important element is topography, which applies on two levels: the stage that the objects are moving on, and the performer, moving with the objects.[21] Finally, facial expressions are important, as audiences will be drawn to the performer's face to receive additional information about how an object/character is thinking or feeling.

The 2014 production of *Sapientia* began with a resounding bell that summoned forth four darkly lit figures holding objects: a red plastic flashlight (Antiochus), a silver metal kettle (Hadrian), a brass-plated vanity mirror (Sapientia), and three floral porcelain teacups (Faith, Hope, and Charity). The performers walked in ritualistic unison towards an altar/stage draped in black fabric while presenting the objects/characters with great reverence. The altar, framed by flickering candles, provided a symmetrical stage for the character-objects and stood in close proximity to the audience. On either side of the altar there were low matching tables that displayed an array of placed objects. From stage right, the spectators could see a velvet casing that held large gardening shears, a metal mixing bowl full of water, a white dish towel, a metal handheld grater, a kitchen knife, and a candelabra. On stage left, a mesh metal wastebasket, a

---

[18] Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005), p. 11.
[19] Ibid., p. 8.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., p. 11.

white porcelain mixing bowl full of red liquid, an antique floral bowl full of what appeared to be dirt with three skewers sticking out of it, a lone pomegranate, and a large metal serving spoon. The set bridged domestic and religious realms, allowing the spectators the chance to move in and out of both realities and perceive the stage picture as both familiar and unfamiliar.

A final bell tolled and light revealed Roswitha's cast of characters. With hands positioned on the flashlight, the actor playing Antiochus revealed the conventions of the object theatre form, moving his body in unison with the body of the flashlight, lining up his head and spine with the 'head' and 'spine' of the object. He placed his eye focus on the 'head' or top of his object and his voice spoke (as if) through the flashlight. The metallic presence of Hadrian, the emperor, provided a contrast to the red plasticity of his 'sidekick'. Antiochus, who in the play explains the risks of having Sapientia profess freely her Christian faith, cast light on what lay ahead, warning Hadrian of any potential troubles that could harm the state. The flashlight exemplified his surveillance duty and investigative abilities. The actor playing Hadrian handled a metal kettle whose strong and potentially 'heated' presence was further characterized by forceful, expressive hand gestures. The domestic objects chosen for Hadrian and Antiochus reinforced their masculine gender that became even more evident when the character-objects of Sapientia and her three daughters appeared.

Sapientia's mirror stood one and a half feet tall and was handled by a performer who predominantly framed her object with two hands resting on either side of the base, suggesting hands in a state of constant prayer. The mirror acted as a reflective eye that bore witness to the various tortures that her daughters underwent. As the visage of Sapientia was a mirror that faced the audience, the audience was drawn into the head of her reflection. Also, the oval-shaped mirror could move up and down, providing the character-object with the opportunity not only to

witness the sacrifice of her children, but also to point her attention upwards toward heaven and ultimately God. The young daughters Faith, Hope, and Charity, were represented by three teacups of descending sizes, representing their different ages. All three vessels were operated by one performer who worked with the convention of placing a hand onto a teacup whenever the character-object spoke.

In the play, Sapientia, whose name in Latin means 'wisdom', claims to have descended from a noble Greek lineage, thus situating herself in the civilizing context of humanism, but she immediately claims that she takes no pride in it, suggesting that knowledge is not enough without God's grace. The startling declaration to Hadrian that she came to Rome to consecrate her daughters to Christ inscribes her unwavering faith at the core of her characterization and, conversely, subordinates her embodied philosophical knowledge, as represented by her name, to the supreme knowledge that only God can engender. Knowing God, as well as being known by God, enriches Sapientia's own human knowledge and gives her the courage to stand up to state power. This is clear in the scene where she shames Hadrian and Antiochus with her learned reading of numerology, which leaves the Romans completely humiliated. In the 2014 production, Hadrian and Antiochus used an abacus to keep up with Sapientia's mathematical argumentation, and in the subsequent 2015 staging they used rocks as a method of counting. In shaming the Roman authorities with her wisdom, Sapientia proves the superiority of her knowledge, which overcomes academic scholarship because it finds its core in the Church doctrine where personal sacrifice and martyrdom are means of knowing the world and God. In the 2018 production of the play in Montreal, designed by Robert Leveroos, as Sapientia won her mathematical challenge, she climbed up wooden boxes, physically towering over the male figures and metaphorically ascending to heaven. Meanwhile, Antiochus desperately tried to keep up with her mounting

mathematical formulas, counting sugar cubes and cutting up carrots as she spoke, trying to add them up. Defeated, the performer cleared the carrots and sugar cubes into a garbage and returned with his hand on the flashlight with a great air of humiliation.

The *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ) that inspires many martyriological narratives in the Middle Ages drives Sapientia to the divine. It is the only path available for her, and this became an important theme in the *mise en scène* of the play. The emphasis on pain and death as channels to God were questioned in the production through the depiction of the daughters' violent deaths. Roswitha's female characters exist in a world where self-affirmation meets self-consummation. The very fact that they are tortured and sacrificed makes their lives worthy of having been lived. Sapientia and her daughters follow the exemplary behavior of Christ and in doing so they are embodying the transformative power of sacrifice. Daniel T. Kline explains Sapientia's fascination with the immolation of her daughters as 'parenting toward death', and argues that 'Sapientia desires her daughter's deaths as fervently as Hadrian and Antiochus'.[22] Her parental guidance over Faith, Hope, and Charity informs every aspect of the children's lives including how they should die. Sapientia sees the sacrifice of her daughters as their marriage to Christ as well as a channel for her own salvation: 'It was for this that I nursed you with my milk flowing free; it was for this that I carefully reared you three; that I may espouse you to a heavenly, not an earthly bridegroom and may deserve to be called the mother-in-law of the Eternal King thereby'.[23]

---

[22] Daniel T. Kline, 'Kids Say the Darndest Things: Irascible Children in Hrotsvit's Sapientia', in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Contexts, Identities, Affinities, and Performances*, ed. by Brown, McMillin, and Wilson, pp. 77–95 (pp. 83, 90).

[23] Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, 'Sapientia', in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of Her Works*, ed. and trans. by Katharina Wilson (Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 81–97 (p. 87).

Sapientia's twofold fantasy of filicide and self-annihilation was staged as the delusion of a woman who is quite possibly unstable, a mother who misguidedly brings unfathomable destruction on her daughters. Her motherly love elicited a feeling of the uncanny in the audience because it confounded the familiarity and expectations that one would associate with loving and protecting one's children. Sigmund Freud described the uncanny as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well-known and had long been familiar' in his attempt to qualify the intellectual uncertainty that is brought about by objects, people, and experiences that are at the same time both familiar and unfamiliar, reassuring and frightening, close to and far from the observer's frames of reference.[24] Sapientia's frequent expressions of love and devotion to Faith, Hope, and Charity seemed strangely at odds with the ecstasy she feels for their gruesome deaths. Lines in the text, such as those spoken by Sapientia as she says goodbye to Hope ('I do rejoice, but my joy will be full only when your little sister has followed you, slain in the same way'),[25] became commentaries on what happens when ideology becomes maniacal and strips people of their humanity. In more than one way, Sapientia became the symbol of an excess of belief, the palimpsestic representation of those who even today continue to justify inhuman behaviors through their religion. While the devotional atmosphere of Roswitha's text was still there, the modern framing and the use of objects fostered multiple interpretive readings. Those frames, made possible by couching the objects in familiar scenarios of individual and collective destruction, allowed the audience to experience *Sapientia* simultaneously as close to, and distant from, their own experience. In showing the diachronic continuity of religious violence in our own culture, this production of *Sapientia* aspired to

[24] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 124.
[25] Roswitha, *Sapientia* (unpublished adaptation by Joseph Shragge), p. 9.

integrate and articulate Roswitha's work within the frame of reference of its contemporary audience, and to locate it at the 'intersection between a vertical line that cuts into the past and a horizontal line that reaches sideways to the diversity of the present'.[26]

The use of objects challenged the dominant anthropocentrism of conventional theatre and treated 'physical materials not as inert human possessions but instead as *actants*, with particular frequencies, energies, and potentials to affect human and non-human'.[27] This involved a new aesthetic that, as argued by Benjamin Gillespie, 'recognizes objects as life-forms that function in both material and immaterial ways, making humans and objects co-creators with infinite capacities for performances'.[28] The objects were vital in shaping the ecology of the 2014 production of *Sapientia* because they 'acted' as much as the actors did. They distanced and displaced the characters, and enabled the spectators to reflect on the representation of torture and violence without being bogged down by the voyeuristic and potentially morbid representation of pain and death. For instance, when Faith died, Antiochus smashed with a hammer the teacup that represented her. He then passed the broken pieces back to the performer playing Faith, who without sentiment threw them away. This prevented the audience from empathizing with the sufferings inflicted onto the body of Sapientia's daughter as well as from projecting any kind of cathartic value on pain and death. While Roswitha's play espouses a sacrificial paradigm, van Leeuwen's *mise en scène* aimed at critiquing sacrifice as the result of ideological perversion and human aberration. The objects paved the way for such critical analysis by problematizing any identification with the characters and encouraging instead an evaluation of their actions. The

---

[26] David Wiles, 'Why Theatre History?', in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, ed. by David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 3–6 (p. 4).
[27] Marlis Schweitzer and Joanna Zerdy (eds.), *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), p. 2.
[28] Benjamin Gillespie, 'Que(e)rying Theatrical Objects', in *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*, ed. by Schweitzer and Zerdy, pp. 149–60 (p. 149).

actors were there to support the objects, not to compete with them for the audience's attention. Even when a more realistic acting style was adopted, the performers kept a necessary balance between endowing human qualities onto the objects and their role as external handlers who were simply telling the story. This choice contributed to a deconstruction of the sacrificial paradigm of Roswitha's drama, because the objects metaphorized the real bodies of the character-actors and re-centered the audience's perception of the real.

During the torture and death scenes, Faith, Hope, and Charity transformed into food that was spilled, crushed, and cooked. The teacup representing Faith had milk in it that poured onto the table when Antiochus cut the child's nipples; Hope's teacup contained half a pomegranate that was first grated and then brutally crushed to pieces; and Charity's teacup held a piece of chicken breast that was cooked on a portable table grill. As a framing technique, the food commented on the consumption/destruction of bodies by an all-powerful and despotic state, but it also brought about the familiar context of preparing food and eating it, something that located the performance in the realm of the audience's experience of the domestic. Ultimately, the representation of characters as food made them more resonant and impactful. The fact that each daughter had a dual nature, the teacup as container/shell and the essence it contained (milk, pomegranate, and chicken), played with the duality of body/soul which Sapientia discusses with Hadrian: 'It is in your power to kill the body, but you will not harm the soul.'[29] In order to question the belief of a soul that survives the body and lives eternally, the staging of *Sapientia* showed the indistinguishable quality of the teacups and the food they contained: Antiochus efficiently cleaned up the daughters' remains, throwing both the teacups and the foods into the trash bin. The children's upward movement to heaven was rendered impossible, and their final

[29] Roswitha, *Sapientia* (unpublished adaptation by Joseph Shragge), p. 3.

disposal proved that their sacrifice was useless. Furthermore, Faith, Hope, and Charity were denied any sacramental value in that their essential nature, that of being edible and drinkable foods, did not come to fruition because they were never literally consumed by the actors on stage. The eating, or cannibalization, of the children's bodies would have framed the representation as partaking of the Eucharistic sacrament where the transubstantiated body of the divine offers itself freely to transform and purify the physical body of the faithful community. Discarding the remains of the pomegranate and the chicken, wiping away the spilled milk, and discarding the teacups suggested instead the complete obliteration of both the physical body and

Staging the torture and death scenes with objects and food as characters, instead of actors, established a necessary distance between the spectators and the story being told. When going to the theatre, people expect to side with characters and regularly do so by empathizing with their predicaments, even responding physically to their situations. Marla Carlson describes this natural attitude as 'sympathetic imagination', and argues that 'we cannot know what it feels like to die; however, we do know what it feels like to be hurt, and we extend ourselves imaginatively, drawing upon our own store of embodied experiences, to share the pain of an actor, of an effigy, of a corpse'.[30] Van Leeuwen's *Sapientia* aimed to problematize this empathetic response by projecting pain and death onto inanimate objects, thus curbing potential emotional reactions from individual spectators as well as any form of 'emotional contagion' affecting the entire audience.[31] Pain was never expressed by the actors handling the objects and the food. They maintained an impassible voice and tranquil demeanor when the milk was spilled, the pomegranate was crushed, and the chicken was grilled. Those moments were highly engrossing

[30] Marla Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), p. 68.
[31] Bruce McConachie, *Theatre & Mind* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2013), p. 67.

and deeply affecting without ever obfuscating the critical analysis of themes and concerns emerging from the play: mainly the aberrant and coercive nature of state power, the catastrophic consequences of blind belief, and the limits of religious and ideological narratives. The use of food and objects framed the world of the play as both close to and far from the audience's experience; the abstraction and reframing of every-day items led to a meaningful familiarization and de-familiarization that allowed for a critical response. The audience was asked to make decisions about what they were watching, instead of simply being immersed in the emotional qualities engendered by the characters.

Sapientia's final monologue, which reads in the original text as a conversation between a faithful woman and God, whom she addresses directly, turned into a much darker moment in both the 2014 and 2015 productions of the play. The audience was encouraged to look at the sacrificial bloodletting of Sapientia's daughters not as a conduit to heaven but rather as sheer brutality. Sapientia's final words did not elevate her actions, as is suggested in Roswitha's work, but instead they haunted and incriminated her. Rather than inscribing the protagonist in a medieval eschatology of salvation, the final monologue read as 'internal speech', the reasoning of a woman who is trying to come to terms with fated choices that cannot be reversed. Sapientia's final monologue reads:

> O Earth,
> I commit my little flowers to your keeping
> cherish them until they spring up
> more glorious and fair.

O Christ,

fill their souls with light,

and give rest to their bones.

O Adonai Emmanuel,

born of the Divine Creator

Who in your dual nature remains one Christ,

Who did not shrink from tasting death

but destroyed it by Resurrection

I call you.

I won’t forget your promise.

You promised us who renounced

our earthly possessions

that we’d receive the gift of eternal life.

Inspired by that promise,

you see I’ve done

what I could

of my own free will.

I sacrificed the children I bore.

Oh, in your goodness don’t delay

free me from my bonds of flesh

that I may see my children and rejoice

hearing them sing as they follow you.

> Let me praise you,
> Who are one Lord of the whole world,
> of all things upon the earth
> and in the heights above
> and the deeps below,
> who reign and rule for ever and ever, and ever and ever …
>
> AMEN.[32]

The epilogue was effective because the director staged the end of the play such that Sapientia does not die, as happens in the original, but lives on, with the traumatic memory of her daughters' deaths and the haunting and unanswered questions she asked of God. Her monologue echoed Norbert Wiley's notions of 'interior speech' and 'dialogical self', two defining aspects of the semiotics of self. Commenting on Charles Pierce's theory of selfhood, Wiley describes two distinct and foundational moments of internal speech, one of negotiation that precedes the decision-making process, and one of intervention or ingression into the world, where the individual makes a decision based on his/her internal thinking. Wiley writes,

> One has to do with modeling our options, internally, so we can visualize the choices that lie before us. The critical self, which is more or less the conscience, may not give us detailed instructions on how to act. But if we attempt to foresee the various paths along which we might go, we can more clearly see what is right for us. Then we are faced with two distinct acts of choice. One is to choose the internal model, the inner

[32] Roswitha, *Sapientia* (unpublished adaptation by Joseph Shragge), pp. 12–13.

> speech scenario that looks best to us. This is already a pre-choice or a preparation for action. Then we choose which action to follow in the world of external behavior. This is choice in the usual sense of the word. But the prochoice of the inner speech selection is a causal factor in how we eventually choose to act.[33]

Considering the production offered itself as a commentary on the issues of religion and self-sacrifice, and that the inquiring nature of modern audiences differs greatly from the medieval mindset, Sapientia's words shed doubt on the morality and humanity of her decisions. Sapientia never moved to the second step described by Wiley, where thoughts become actions; instead, her speech remained bogged down in self-reasoning, as that of someone who is unsure as to what course of action she should take. The self-doubting tone of the actor playing Sapientia created an uncomfortable atmosphere at the end of the monologue. The audience might have considered the hesitation and uncertainty of the character as remorse or shame for the irreparable destruction she caused. In this final scene, the hands of the performer playing Sapientia were ritualistically dipped into a red liquid to signify her culpability. The liquid spilled onto the mirror representing her, so that the reflecting quality showed at the beginning was now compromised at the end of the play.

Katharina Wilson identifies Roswitha's vision of the world as grounded in binary oppositions, which 'include good versus evil, Christ versus the devil, heaven versus hell, female versus male, wisdom versus fraud, spiritual versus physical, life versus death, good-tempered versus savage, pride versus humility, salvation versus perdition, and chaste versus unchaste'.[34]

---

[33] Norbert Wiley, 'Pragmatism and the Dialogical Self', *International Journal for Dialogical Science* 1 (Spring 2006), 5–21 (p. 9).

[34] Katharina M. Wilson, 'The Saxon Canoness: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim', in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. by Katharina M. Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), pp. 30–62 (p. 37).

The staging of *Sapientia* aimed to deconstruct these binaries by showing the dangers implicit in religious orthodoxy and ideology. This was a necessary choice because contemporary audiences, unlike the medieval ones that were comprised of religious women who were doctrinally close to Roswitha's characters, would find it difficult to accept the world of Sapientia at face value. Audiences now can afford diverse forms of entertainment and are used to questioning hierarchies of knowledge and systems of belief. The performance of *Sapientia* through the technique of object theatre offered the director and the creative team the possibility to tell a story written in the Middle Ages while also providing a critical lens to address the problematic nature of the characters' actions. By questioning the protagonist's fatal choices and severing any pathway to catharsis, the staging of *Sapientia* provided a critique of Roswitha's own view that 'conformity to the male-defined Christian culture of the tenth century is a woman's only recourse for achieving social respect and spiritual redemption'.[35] Sapientia came across as a victim of her beliefs and of a religious culture that contains and constraints women, coaxing them to embrace self-denial as a form of empowerment.

The critical value of these productions extended beyond the runs of the play through video-recordings of each performance which have become a didactic tool in undergraduate theatre history classes and graduate seminars on Adaptation Theory and Dramaturgy taught at the University of Alberta and at the University of Lethbridge. The videos will help address issues of framing and contextualizing old plays for contemporary audiences; it will root the discussion of Roswitha's plays in a visual and dramaturgical culture; and it will contribute to the cultural

[35] Jane E. Jeffrey, 'Dramatic Convergence in Times Square: Hrotsvit's Sapientia and Collapsable Giraffe's 3 Virgins', in *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Contexts, Identities, Affinities, and Performances*, ed. by Brown, McMillin, and Wilson, pp. 251–64 (p. 264).

emancipation of this important dramatist from a footnote in medieval drama to a central figure of her time.